

This will be the first time I launch my canoe in Florida Bay from Flamingo. I've been in Flamingo and have ventured into other areas; West Lake Canoe Trail, Buttonwood Canal leading into Whitewater Bay and the backcountry and the Hells Bay Canoe Trail leading into the backcountry. But I've never been on the bay itself in a canoe. Florida Bay is an estuary, mixture of salt and fresh water. It is the end point of the river of grass. It is here where several bird rookeries can be found. Last winter, a portion of the park was closed to all boat traffic so that the roseate spoonbills could nest in peace. In the summer, the bird numbers are relatively low, but in August, the shorebirds are starting to come in as are the egrets and herons. Near the marina and channel is an island that is home to several birds and that's where I would be heading this morning. The low tide should also reveal a very large sand bar near the channel where shore birds may be found.

My kayak/canoe fishing buddies and I launched from the campground area, south of the marina. The marina is an easier put-in but the reason for the additional trekking to the water was to avoid the marina boat traffic as much as possible. Once in the water, I would still have to cross the marina channel to get to the sandbar and bird island. Today, it would not be a problem. There was a storm on the southwestern horizon and I suspect it was those notorious summer storm clouds that kept the boat traffic to a minimum. Needless to say, as the sky darkened in the horizon, we pretty much had the bay to ourselves, me and 3 kayak/canoe fishermen.

I headed in the direction of the birds, which gave me a direct view of the rising sun. The sun was coming up behind a band of towering cumulus clouds, commonly formed during the summer months in south Florida due to the warm currents that increase the condensation levels in the atmosphere. I hoped to see the sun peek out above the clouds by the time I reached the birds. In the meantime, I got some hazy shots of the water with a kayak or two in the distance with my telephoto lens. By the way, I had a new Minolta 1.4X teleconverter to use for the first time today. This meant that all my shots today would be at focal length of 420mm. With a telephoto lens, I can more easily capture a distant kayaker or mangrove tree above the waterline. Here's one of those early morning shots while the sun was still hiding behind the clouds. I converted it to black and white.



Along the way to the sand bar, I spotted a few herons and willets along the shoreline. Tarpon were stewing in the water causing my kayak fishing friends to get very excited. I would love to get a shot of those tarpon fins coming out of the water, but they are fast and unpredictable, at least to my eye. I was lucky to capture some dolphins feeding in the shallows on Chokoloskee Bay last weekend; they at least make their presence known in a boisterous way. Tarpon, bonefish and permit fish are elusive and require patience from both the photographer and the fishermen.

Near the channel in front of the marina I came upon the large sand bar that spanned about 250 ft at low tide. Today, there were dozens of shorebirds skittering around the sand. I'll admit, I have a difficult time distinguishing various shore birds. After perusing my field guide book to Florida birds at the end of

the day, I believe there were the following: dowitchers, greater yellowlegs, willets, plovers of some sort and laughing gulls. The laughing gulls appeared to be in their winter plumage or may have been immatures because they did not have the black head and red bill. Here are 2 shots, one of the laughing gulls and the other of a willet.



When shooting birds, one of the golden rules I learned (and knew intuitively) is to shoot at eye level. From my boat, I lean forward and get as low as I can. The greater the distance between you and the bird, the lower the angle between you and the bird and the more eye-level you will be. If you have the advantage of getting within a 10-20 feet from a bird, you must get yourself to the ground. And to get closer, you drag along the ground, inch by inch. The birds seem to get use to you, almost as if you become one of them. From a boat, it's a bit more difficult to get down that low; further, the boat is much larger and more difficult to hide. I approach birds very slowly and quietly and watch how they react. As soon as they seem troubled by your presence I slow down, stop and wait. When possible, I anchor in one spot and stay put. Today, I would be able to approach the sand bar and get into shallow enough water where I anchored with my stake out pole on one side and my foot in the water on the other. This kept the water current from spinning my boat around the anchor.

Lighting is everything and I waited for that sun to peek out over the clouds before taking any photos. Soon, the sun came out and at last I had excellent morning light. The warm glow on the birds was a nice touch. Here is one shot of what I thought was a dowitcher taken at that time. Later, I learned that this is a marbled godwit. I have two bird books at home and even after studying the photos and mulling over it for some time, I still did not identify this bird correctly at first. It took someone on myparkphotos to point it out to me. Here's a good lesson, if you post a photo of a bird or any animal, identify it correctly or post it to find out what it is. Nevertheless, here is the marbled godwit in soft morning light.



Among the various shorebirds were a couple of reddish egrets and a couple little blue herons. This is the first time I've seen the reddish egrets in the Everglades. I've seen them up north on the gulf coast, but never down here. I was informed by Aida Villaronga, Everglades photographer, that you can find them on Eco and Mzarek ponds. The two reddish egrets stayed over on the distant side of the sandbar, they would prove to be very elusive today. To capture these birds is a lot of fun. When catching fish, they dance around and fluff up their feathers before fanning their wings as they spear the water with their bill. It's beautiful and comical. On a photo workshop with Jack Rogers last April we came across a white morph reddish egret on the beach of Fort DeSoto near Tampa. The bird was impressive and I was able to capture several of his poses. I have a series of those shots in my pbase gallery.

Today, I would have to work harder to get a good shot of one of these birds. To get closer to them, I began padding around the eastside of the sand bar toward the sun. I then turned back north by northwest toward the egrets to get the best light. By then, one of the egrets had come closer to me and to my delight was only 100 ft or so away and right where I wanted it to be as far as the morning light was concerned. He immediately started his feeding dance, with the wings fanning over the water as he intently stabbed at the water. I was able to rifle off a few shots before he became wary of my presence and stopped his antics. I never saw the bird do that again that morning, rather, it would try to get as far away from me as possible all morning. Here is one shot I managed to get before he caught on to me.



By now, the western sky was getting black and we could hear the thunder and see the lightning off in the distance, and it was getting closer. If that isn't enough to scare someone off the water I don't know what is. Taking advantage of the beautiful back light from the morning sun, I captured a few shots of my friends with the dark sky behind them. Most of the time, my fishing companion is wearing white and using the same technique as the one I use with white birds, I stop down about 2/3, meter on the white, and

let the background go dark. Here is one shot like that. The darkening effect on the background gives the sky a more dramatic look I believe.



So what lessons did I learn? Identify your birds correctly or ask an expert before posting with a title!

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