

# The Birds Are Back

by Angela Minor

**F**all migration is concluding and our winter bird visitors are settling in for the season. Diverse ecosystems, plentiful resources and protected areas make southwest Florida a favorite destination on the Atlantic Flyway. Millions of birds wing their way two times a year along this “skyway” from the arctic tundra to South America – and some stop here for the winter months.

So, grab the binoculars, scope, camera and field guide, and let’s visit six birding hotspots recommended by our local experts.

## CHARLOTTE COUNTY

“Birding is a great family activity that appeals to all ages,” says Brenda Curtis, President of Peace River Audubon. “It also provides individuals with physical and mental fitness as well as a sense of community.” In addition to watching birds and listening for what Curtis calls “the language of birds,” the whole experience “is important because it can initiate a primordial connection between humans and their natural

Winter  
Birding  
Hotspots

in  
Charlotte  
and  
Collier  
counties

broad winged hawk

# “Birdwatching is the fastest growing outdoor recreation in the country.”



sandhill crane

environment. People who connect with nature and spend more time observing and relating to wildlife enhance their mindsets to a more open egalitarianism of all life forms.”

She continues, “Birds and humans share the same planet. People have a stake in ensuring their preservation and [their] wildlife habitats.

Ecologically birds are essential as pollinators and for seed dispersal of many plants, especially native plants. Birds also feed on a variety of insects, rodents, and other small animals, naturally keeping those populations in check and ensuring a proper balance in our ecosystem. Scientifically, birds teach us about climate and are key to indicating environmental changes.”

Curtis states that “birdwatching is the fastest growing outdoor recreation in the country.” So, let’s visit the top county locations below — “all [with] over 200 species documented on eBird.”

## Fred C. Babcock - Cecil Webb State Wildlife Management Area

Explore “the finest intermixed pine flatwoods and freshwater marsh in the state” interspersed

with dry prairies, ponds and hardwood hammocks. The diverse ecosystem at this location makes this a top birding destination.

Curtis tells us that “migrating coastal kettles of hawks are usually seen after the weather straightens [following] a cold front.” She also shares that this “vast natural setting” welcomes many other species including the King Rail, the continent’s singular Northern Harrier and a multitude of “visiting woodland warblers.” Keep the binoculars handy for spotting residents like the Wild Turkey and the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker while listening for the beautiful song of the secretive Bachman’s Sparrow, whose numbers are declining.

Over 65,000 acres in this Wildlife Management Area are accessible via roads (drive or bring your bike), trails and waterways. Other amenities include camping sites, horseback riding and restrooms. For a community birding experience to good viewing spots, take an early morning guided field trip with Peace River Audubon Society.

## Stump Pass Beach State Park

Retreat to the secluded southernmost mile of Manasota

Key for a quiet birding day. The 245-acre protected area includes the peninsula, nearby Peterson and Whidden islands and the channels flowing between them. Ample parking at the northern end accesses the 1.3-mile hiking trail. This walk will take you through five distinct natural communities.

“Expect to see wintering shorebirds,” says Curtis, “such as Snowy and Wilson’s Plovers along with gulls, Red-breasted Mergansers, Short-billed Dowitchers and Common Loons. Also, migrating warblers are sighted along the

wooded path.” The coastal dunes and strands, beach areas, maritime hammocks and tidal swamps are favorite winter bird habitats.

Take a ranger-led winter nature walk; enjoy an interpretive exhibit at the visitor center; bring a picnic; snorkel and scuba; or go treasure hunting for shells and shark’s teeth at this park.

## Ollie’s Pond Park

Bird like a local at this small 41-acre stormwater retention pond nestled inside a pine flatwoods

habitat. An oasis of nature, this spot was named to honor the skills and volunteer work of one of Peace River Audubon’s best birders. Dr. Oliver Hewitt, a celebrated wildlife management professor at Cornell University, retired to Port Charlotte. He then spent the next 27 years contributing to the knowledge of avian life via his fieldbook, advocating for habitat conservation and inspiring a love of birds in this community.

“This past winter,” Curtis reports, “[we had] rarer sightings like Merlin, Cedar Waxwing and Cinnamon Teal.” She says that we might expect to see the Ovenbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Swainson’s Thrush, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and wetland species like the delicate Black-necked Stilt, sandpipers and more.

An unpaved path around the pond with strategically placed benches creates a relaxed and friendly atmosphere for visitors.



magnolia warbler

PRAS offers walk-about at this location. All are welcome – beginners and experts alike – to view and photograph the many species at this location.

## COLLIER COUNTY

“Some birds are traveling from as far north as the Arctic and may continue down to the bottom tip of South America!” says Brittany Piersma, field biologist for Audubon Western Everglades. “Currently we are seeing a huge influx of different species traveling to our area. I am always excited to see American Avocets, American Oystercatchers, Red Knots, and Piping Plovers. We are all awaiting the return of the American White Pelicans.”

Winter avian visitors and the birders who flock to see them receive special attention. “Our winter shorebird stewardship program has been essential in educating the public about the large number of migratory birds that come to and through our area,” states Piersma. “We encourage people to walk around the flocks of resting and feeding birds... [and we share] the use of our spotting scopes and binoculars with citizens and tourists on the beach [which] is eye opening for them to view the detail of these birds up close.”

She shares, “There are dozens of incredible locations in Collier County, but I would recommend the following.”

### Clam Pass Park

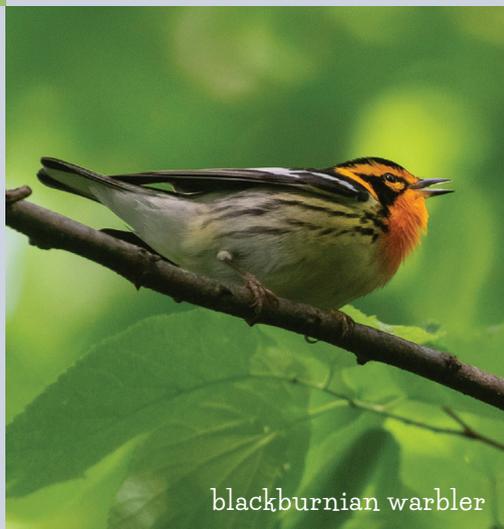
Enjoy a day with the birds at this popular beach shielded from urban life by 35 acres of protected mangroves and estuaries. Launch your journey with a stroll above the coastal habitats on a three-quarter-mile boardwalk. From the parking lot to the beach the city fades away – replaced by the sights and sounds of nature.

“It is known for being one of the largest congregating areas for wintering Black Skimmers in the state of Florida and the entire coast of the U.S.! They travel from New York down the coastline and also from Mississippi,” says Piersma. “At times we have thousands of

Skimmers, terns, gulls, and mixed shorebirds using the beach and sandbars to rest.”

She adds, “You can kayak throughout the estuary and view other wading birds and marine life. Last year we had the highest number of Red Knots ever seen at this location due to the healthy mudflats [where they feed].”

Full facilities are located at the boardwalk beachside terminus (which you can also reach via the free tram). At this park you can also join guided walks; amble along sandy trails with informational signage; and, learn about this location from the Audubon Western Everglades stewards.



blackburnian warbler

## Tigertail Lagoon & Beach Park, Marco Island

Plan a visit to “one of the best all-around birding spots in southwest Florida” (*The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail*). “It is an ever-changing barrier island,” says Piersma, “that connects and disconnects to an estuary and the mainland of Marco Island. Following every storm, it is always a surprise to see how the area will change.” She continues, “Mudflats and sandbars have increased in perfect timing for the mass number of migrating shorebirds and wading birds that use them to refuel.”

Piersma shares, “Instead of walking the beach side, I recommend choosing a low tide to explore the lagoon side heading north. Federally protected Piping Plovers have returned to this lagoon every year.” She adds, “We are monitoring closely this winter due to a planned dredging project we fear will negatively impact the area. There are plans to alter the lagoon and remove 6.4 acres of the north tip where Black Skimmers, Least Terns, and Wilson’s Plovers nest every summer.”

This destination also holds a Critical Wildlife Area designation that protects 456

acres of surrounding wildlife habitat. On site is a two-story bird watching tower with exceptional views of the lagoon, beach and tidal pools teaming with winter avian visitors. Scan the crowds on land, water and in the air for terns, plovers, egrets, Black Skimmers and Magnificent Frigatebirds.

## Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge

Set your craft upon the water for a one-of-a-kind birding experience at this destination. “You will need to take a boat to access this location,” states Piersma. “You can kayak to the closest sandbars of Caxambas and Kice or take a boat tour down the coastline. High tides lead to the birds being congregated in limited sandbars and shoals. Low tides allow for the birds to disperse and feed amongst the many mudflats and sandbars. Surrounding mangroves host wading birds and other wildlife.

“All different species of shorebirds, seabirds, wading birds, and water birds use these critical areas to rest and refuel,” she continues. “White Pelicans love feeding and resting amongst the backwater areas. You will most likely see dolphins and manatees while enjoying the birds!”

For land exploration, Piersma recommends the Marsh Trail – a 2.4-mile repurposed former oil well road. “There is an observation tower



hooded warbler

and trail for viewing a beautiful ecosystem of birds, alligators, fish, and plant life. It is highly recommended to go prior to sunrise or near sunset so you can view thousands of birds leaving their roost site to start their day or flying in to sleep for the night.”

The refuge protects 35,000 acres of marsh, tropical hardwood hammocks and the “largest expanse of mangrove forest in North America.” Winter is the recommended season for the best birding. •