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Birds winter at stormwater treatment area near Clewiston



By **WILLIE HOWARD**
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Thursday, February 28, 2008

CLEWISTON — Driving the desolate roads winding through the Hendry County sugar cane fields south of Clewiston, visitors to Stormwater Treatment Area 5 begin to realize they're a long way from the traffic and conveniences of the city.

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That's one reason birds flock to the man-made marshes built to hold and clean water flowing into the Everglades.

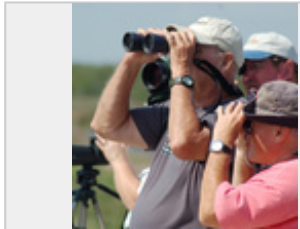


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Members of the group took turns looking at the lone flamingo through a spotting scope.

"Don't slam your doors," trip leader Vincent Lucas told some members of our sprawling group of 88 bird-watchers, a mix of seasoned veterans and curious beginners. But the flamingo, apparently disturbed by cars rumbling along the levee roads, spread its wings and flew 100

"It's wonderfully isolated," said Steve Buczynski, president of Hendry-Glades Audubon, whose members lead bird-watching trips to STA 5 in the cool months. "There's very little human activity. Birds are very accessible there."

Bird watchers with Hendry-Glades Audubon have found more than 100 species of birds while peering through binoculars and spotting scopes from the elevated dike roads that run along the perimeter of the STA 5 impoundments.

During three days of birding at STA 5 during the Great Backyard Bird Count Feb. 16-18, the Hendry-Glades Audubon birders logged 91 species in the remote marshes near the Palm Beach/Hendry county line.

"This is the most spoonbills I've ever seen at once," Rock Hightshoe of Delray Beach said while watching a cluster of the pink wading birds during the President's Day trip to STA 5. "They're such a beautiful bird."

Margaret England of Hendry-Glades Audubon, who organized the Presidents' Day trip, said a visitor from Canada saw the pink spoonbills fly over the dike road and jotted a note in her diary that said she was "covered in a cloud of spoonbills." The official count of roseate spoonbills at STA 5 that day: 513.

Florida's roseate spoonbills were nearly wiped out in the early 1900s by plume hunters who sought them and other wading birds for feathers, sold for use in women's hats. The coveted spoonbills, which swish their flattened bills from side to side to feed, have been seen in shallow parts of Lake Okeechobee.

Also pretty, pink and attracting a lot of attention at STA 5 was a greater flamingo standing by itself near one of the levee roads.

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yards to more a more private patch of shallow water near the center of the marsh.

Lucas took a few minutes with a bird book to explain the difference between a purple gallinule and a nonnative purple swamphen, then let a visiting birder look at the swamp hen through binoculars.

"It looks like a purple gallinule on steroids," Lucas said.

By its nature, bird watching is a discovering and sharing experience.

"Birders see a bird and they want everyone else to see it," said Walter Bokus, a winter resident of Venice who has been birding for 40 years and travels to remote places to watch birds.

The rectangular marshes of STA 5, Bokus noted, are not as pretty as wild habitat that birders might find in other locations. But the birds are there, especially in the cool months, and birders pursue them with enthusiasm.

"Bird watchers have a great sense of adventure and appreciation for nature," Bokus said.

While separated from the group for a few minutes, I watched a group of white pelicans swimming side by side, apparently herding fish, then dunking their heads under to feed.

Ducks flew fast against cotton-ball clouds as black simmers glided gracefully over the water's surface, searching for a spot to scoop up fish with their long lower bills.

Rounding a bend in the levee road, I watched a Northern harrier swoop down toward the water with its talons extended. The hawk did this a few times. I moved in for a closer look and found a coot dunking its head under the water to avoid the hawk, which eventually flew off to look for something easier to catch.

Bird-watching in Everglades treatment marshes

Stormwater Treatment Area 5: Guided bird-watching tours of STA 5 (off County Road 853 and Blumberg Road south of Clewiston) are planned for March 15, March 29, April 12, April 26 and May 17. The free tours are led by Hendry-Glades Audubon. Reservations are required. Call Margaret England at (863) 674-0695 or send an e-mail to mleighthouse@embarqmail.com.

Stormwater Treatment Area 1-E: Guided bird-watching tours of STA 1-E near Wellington are planned for Saturday, March 15, April 12 and April 26. They're free. Reservations are required. Call Helen Beers at Pine Jog Environmental Education Center at (561) 686-6600 or e-mail her at hbeers@fau.edu.

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About STAs: Stormwater Treatment Areas are man-made marshes designed to hold and clean water flowing into the Everglades. They're operated by the South Florida Water Management District. Most STAs are open to the public on selected dates for duck hunting and bird-watching. New public access areas provide regular access (four days a week) at STA 3/4 on U.S. 27 south of South Bay. Public access areas are under construction at STA 1-E near Wellington and STA 1-W near 20-Mile Bend.

Birds of the STAs: Bird watchers at STA 5 in Hendry County found 91 species during a three-day birding weekend Feb. 16-18. The STA 5 birds included a greater flamingo, dozens of roseate spoonbills, a white morph of the great blue heron, a Cooper's hawk and a bald eagle. During a similar tour of STA 1-E near Wellington on Feb. 16, bird watchers found 49 species, including a peregrine falcon, a black-crowned night heron, white pelicans and limpkins.

Great Backyard Bird Count results: For the greater Clewiston area, including STA 5, birders found 121 species during the President's Day weekend. Clewiston ranked fourth in the state for the number of species reported. (Tallahassee was first with 150 species.) Clewiston also ranked fifth in the nation based on the number of birds tallied during the bird count weekend: 143,558.

Other guided birding trips: The Loxahatchee National Wildlife refuge offers guided trips at 7:30 a.m. on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The interpretive birding walks are held along the Marsh Trail near the refuge headquarters off U.S. 441 at Lee Road west of Boynton Beach. The refuge entrance fee is \$5 per car. Binoculars can be checked out at the visitor center. Call (561) 734-8303. The Audubon Society of the Everglades (www.Auduboneverglades.org) also leads bird-watching trips to various South Florida locations.

Equipment: Binoculars or a spotting scope, a bird guide and a notebook will get you started. Cameras are popular. On longer walks, birders should wear hats, use sunscreen and carry water.

Great Florida Birding Trail: The bird-watching trail lists 445 places to find birds in Florida. The trail is divided into four sections - east, west, Panhandle and south. Free section guides can be downloaded at www.Floridabirdingtrail.com. Hard copies of the guides can be found at "gateway" locations, including the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge visitor center off U.S. 441 at Lee Road west of Boynton Beach.

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JOB FAIR **2008**

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