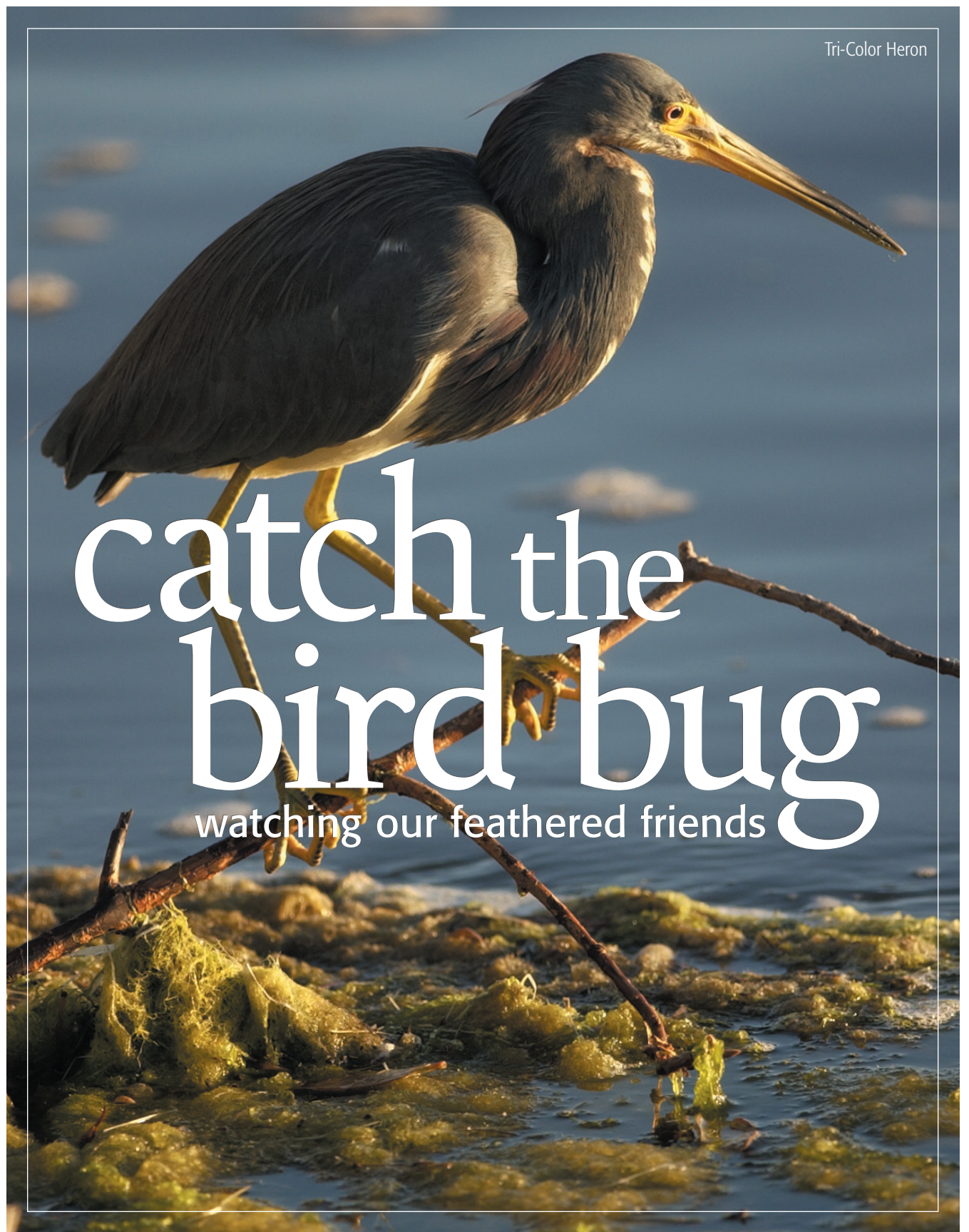


ANYONE WHO HAS SPENT MUCH TIME IN COLLIER COUNTY HAS SEEN A BROWN PELICAN DIVE INTO SHALLOW GULF WATERS JUST OFF THE NAPLES PIER OR AN OSPREY CARRYING A FRESH FISH DINNER TO A NEST OF CRYING FLEDGLINGS. WATCHING IN WONDERMENT AS A FLOCK OF ROSEATE SPOONBILLS FEEDS ON A MUDFLAT AT DUSK AND SEEING THE ANCIENT-LOOKING WOOD STORKS THAT GATHER EACH WINTER AT THE CORKSCREW SWAMP SANCTUARY HAVE BECOME LOCAL RITES OF SPRING. ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER OF OUR SEASONAL FEATHERED VISITORS PEAKS IN MID-WINTER AND EASTER IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER, THERE IS STILL TIME TO GET OUT AND SEE WHAT IS WADING, NESTING AND FLYING IN AND AROUND NAPLES.



Tri-Color Heron

catch the bird bug

watching our feathered friends

by **PETE BISHOP**

photography by **CHRIS SPELL**

March is a pretty good time to bird watch,” says Ted Below, the president of the Collier County Audubon Society. “Some of the birds are getting pretty antsy and some are going north already. But a bird’s winter should really be called its non-breeding season. Many species are here from the end of July to around mid-May. They’re gone for only a few weeks, really.”

Below is a serious birder by any measure. In addition to his work with the Audubon Society, he is a researcher for the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve. He helps monitor more than 70 species of shorebirds over 60 miles of coastline in this region, a task that has given him a deep appreciation of bird behavior. Yet, he has not forgotten what initially led him to start observing birds.



Roseate Spoonbill



Limpkin

“What attracts people to birds in the first place is the fact that they’re all around and you can see them,” says Below. “They’re colorful and active and it gets you outside and makes you look at the natural world. If you open your eyes, you also see all kinds of other things — it leads to a combination of other interesting, healthy activities.”

More and more Collier County residents and visitors are opening their eyes to the world of birds. From the Fakahatchee Strand on the edge of the Everglades to the beaches of Marco Island and Lake Trafford near Immokalee, the county is brimming with natural habitats where birders can hike trails and boardwalks, kayak or motor through mangrove estuaries and stroll along un-groomed beaches to appreciate the myriad beauties of birds.

Visiting one of the area’s nature centers, parks or beaches is one way to develop an interest in birding, but some of Southwest’s Florida’s more common sights draw many to the avocation. In an area where herons, ibis and other leggy waders regularly

patrol the sides of roadways, a fledgling birder merely needs to be observant. The birds are so numerous it is easy to forget how spectacular they are.

“If you look along any of the canals beside the road you’ll see tons of little blue herons, great blue herons, tri-colors and white ibis,” says Naples resident Vince Lucas, an experienced birder, guide and bird photographer. “They’re almost like lawn chickens, we say, because these birds have adapted to us. But that’s how it happens. People get interested in birding because they see some kind of large showy bird.”

Once that happens, curiosity takes over, says Lucas, who is also the president of the Caloosa Bird Club, based in Fort Myers. “Someone can be four or 40 years old, but they’ll want to go to the library or ask someone knowledgeable to identify that bird they saw. Once they identify it, they get the bug and they want to find out more.”

Natural curiosity, a pair of binoculars and a field guide are all that is needed to get serious about the enlightening new



Birding hotspots

One of the challenges that make bird watching so rewarding is finding the highly mobile, well-camouflaged wildlife in a natural habitat. No one can guarantee that you will observe a rare bird during any field trip, but these are a few Collier County hotspots local birders suggest:

activity, says Lucas. And the more one observes the complex behavior and stunning diversity of birds, the more absorbing the activity becomes.

“The enjoyment at the beginning is heightened because everything is new,” Lucas explains. “You’ll start noticing those familiar birds in the neighborhood, then the passerines, the small perching birds. You’ll start seeing natives and identifying some exotic natives. You get a field guide, some binoculars and you go out on field trips and meet people with similar interests. Pretty soon you might get pretty good and know birds’ songs and their calls. It’s an ever-increasing appreciation because they’re fascinating creatures.”

Nestled between the Everglades and the Gulf of Mexico, the beaches, sanctuaries and parks in and around Naples are a source of year-round pleasure for novice and expert birders alike. There is no need to trek to one of those areas to start an absorbing new activity, however; a teeming society of lively wildlife can be found in almost any neighborhood, right outside the front door.

“You can birdwatch from your window too,” says Below. “I have a friend who lives on the beach, and she sits and looks at the Gulf and sees all kinds of interesting birds. It’s like anything else; you just have to open your eyes and let it all register in your brain.” n

LAKE TRAFFORD

Take a guided boat tour or rent a vessel to look for wading birds, ducks and raptors on and around the 1,500-acre lake near Immokalee. See www.laketrafford.com for information.

CORKSCREW SANCTUARY SWAMP

Famous for being one of the best places in the United States to see wood storks, the National Audubon Society-owned property has a 2.25 mile boardwalk through five habitats. See www.corkscrew.audubon.org for information.

CLAM PASS PARK

See shorebirds like royal terns, ring-billed gulls and sanderlings in mangrove forest, tidal lagoon, coastal dune and beach habitats. See www.colliergov.net for information.

NAPLES BEACH

Find a public beach access off Gulf Shore Boulevard, anywhere from 5th Avenue North south to 32nd Avenue South, to see migrating and year-round shorebirds.

SUGDEN REGIONAL PARK

Walk the beach or take a stroll down a 1.5-mile fitness trail to see laughing gulls, little blue herons and osprey. See www.colliergov.net for information.

EAGLE LAKES COMMUNITY PARK

Just off the Tamiami Trail in East Naples, Eagle Lakes is a 32-acre park with three lakes, a nature trail and picnic shelter. Ducks, waders, raptors and even bronzed cowbirds have been seen. See www.colliergov.net for information.

TIGERTAIL BEACH

This Marco Island beach is one of the best spots in the country to see shorebirds, especially piping plovers. See www.colliergov.net for information.

COLLIER SEMINOLE STATE PARK

Adjacent to Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, this park is 8 miles east of the intersection of US 41 and County Road 951. A boardwalk, an observation tower, an off-road bike trail, a 6.5-mile hiking trail and a 13.5-mile canoe trail provide access to a wide variety of wintering birds. See www.floridastateparks.org for information.

JANES SCENIC DRIVE

An 11-mile gravel road that cuts through Fakahatchee Strand State Park, Janes Scenic Drive is known for offering a great variety of birds including great blue herons, belted kingfishers and red-shouldered hawks. See www.floridastateparks.org for information.