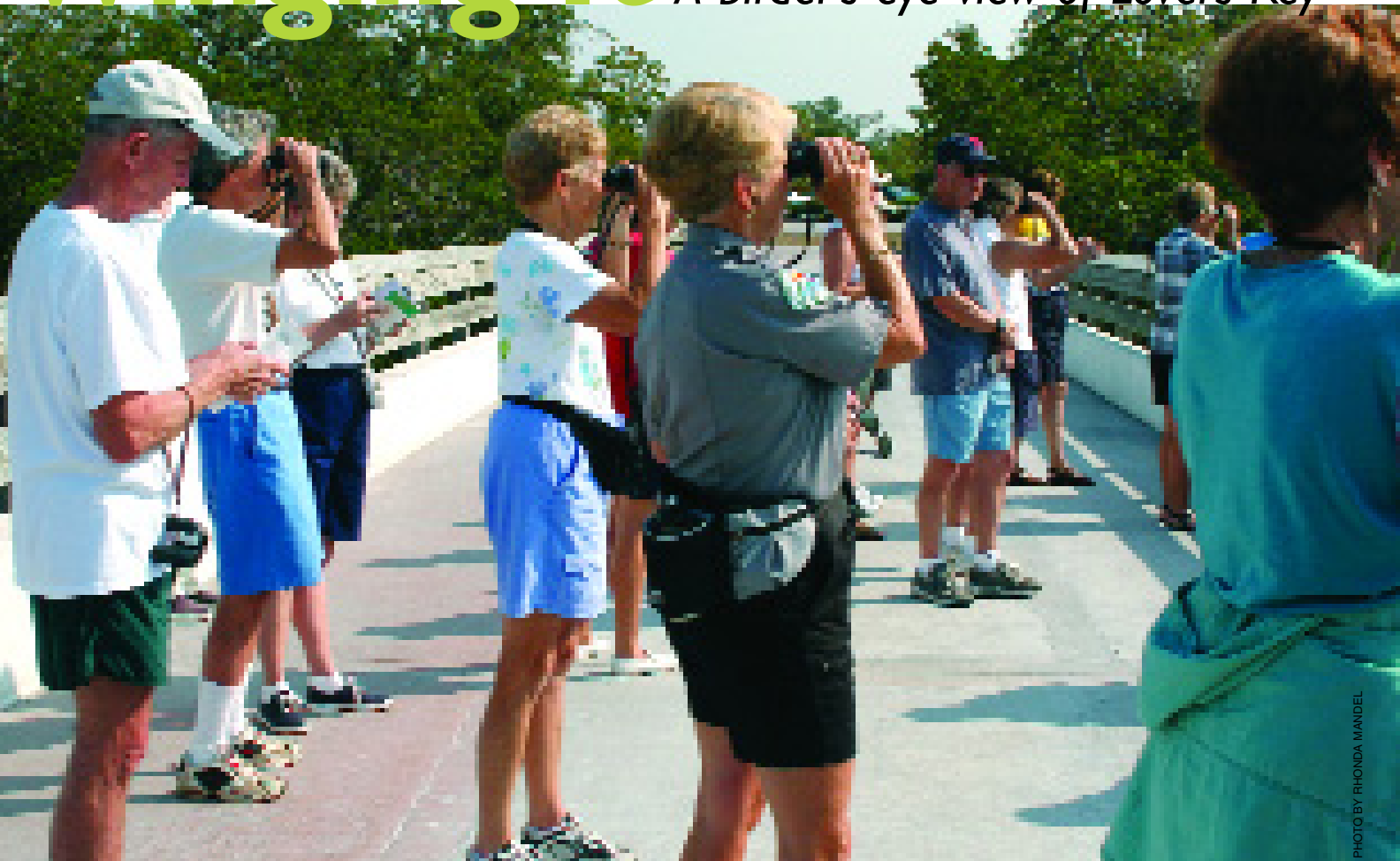


Winging It

A birder's eye view of Lovers Key



Guide Cheryl Hohmann (above center) helps beginning birders learn how to spot (opposite, clockwise from top) yellow-crowned night herons, double-crested cormorants, tricolored herons, and ospreys.

by Beth Luberecki

Binoculars? Check. Camera? Check. Comfortable shoes? Check. I had everything I needed for my first official bird-watching outing. Everything, that is, except for a thorough knowledge of the birds that reside in this area. I was fully prepared to admire our feathered friends, but when it came to identifying them, I needed some help.

That's why I signed up for the Beginning Birding Walk at Lovers Key Carl E. Johnson State Park. I figured some instruction could turn me into a regular Audubon in no time.

On a Wednesday morning, I joined about a half dozen other budding avian enthusiasts at the park's tram shelter. There, Florida Park Service volunteer Cheryl Hohmann handed out binoculars (for folks who didn't bring their own) and

copies of Stan Tekiela's *Birds of Florida* (on loan for the walk but available for purchase at the park). Hohmann pointed out that Tekiela's book is good for beginning birders, as birds are organized by color and then size, rather than by name.

Just south of Ft. Myers Beach, Lovers Key State Park covers 1,616 acres between Estero Bay and the Gulf of Mexico and comprises four barrier islands—Lovers Key, Inner Key, Black Island, and Long Key. Where Calusa Indians and pirates once roamed, more than eighty kinds of birds have been spotted among the mangroves, beach dunes, and maritime hammock, everything from bald eagles and great horned owls to mourning doves and house sparrows.

Everyone on the walk was given a checklist for marking his or her sightings. But as Hohmann warned us as we set out, "Bird-watching, unfortunately, is not an





PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

Walk participants can bring their own binoculars or borrow a pair from the park; a snowy egret takes flight.

exact science.” What you might see on any given day can be affected by all kinds of factors, from tides to time of year.

As we stood on a small bridge connecting Black Island and Inner Key, the tide had just started coming back in, and we immediately spotted a great egret, a snowy egret, and a couple of white ibises in the shallow water near the red and black mangroves. Out came the binoculars, as all eyes focused on the feathered crew. The long-necked great egret stood very still, observing the scene until it found a fish worth lunging at. The snowy egret, on the other hand, paced around the water, using its bright yellow feet to attract small fish. The ibises must have been hungry, as they never stopped poking their lengthy red bills into the sand, digging around for “anything that moves,” according to Hohmann.

We were told that black- and yellow-crowned night herons hang out in the trees along this stretch, but we never caught a glimpse of them. We did, however, spy a great blue heron off in the distance toward Big Carlos Pass and an osprey nest high in the branches of a snag

(birder speak for a dead tree).

Once on Inner Key, we heard the loud “chiff, chiff” of a red-bellied woodpecker in a coconut palm tree. I stood with binoculars at the ready, but I didn’t actually see the bird until it dashed to a neighboring palm. Farther down the path, we paused to check out another osprey nest, this one just over three weeks old, according to Hohmann. Also known as “fish hawks,” ospreys tend to build their stick nests in high, open areas near water. To catch fish, they dive from heights of up to one hundred feet, hitting the water feet first. Their flexible fourth toes help them grab onto the fish and carry them back to the nest. While the nest we scoped out was empty, we did see an osprey flying in the distance, perhaps waiting for our group of intruders to move away from its home.

The bridge connecting Inner Key to Lovers Key proved a prime area for spotting wading and shore birds as well as birds of prey. We faced west to watch a turkey vulture soaring overhead; I was a bit too far away to spot the black and gray pattern on the underside of its wings. A

ring-billed gull flew over my head as I turned east to focus my binoculars on a pack of double-crested cormorants resting on the sand. Some had their wings spread out, drying them in the sun. A tricolored heron, almost iridescent blue with a white breast and yellow bill, walked delicately across the sand, like a teenage girl in her first pair of high heels. Farther in the distance, a great blue heron stood alone under some branches extending over the water. “Heron and egrets are pretty independent,” said Hohmann. “They tend to do their own thing.”

Shore birds (think sanderlings, plovers, gulls) usually congregate on or near Lovers Key’s beach during the late afternoon, so we didn’t notice much activity as we stood there shortly before lunchtime. We spotted only a brown pelican flying off in the distance and a single ring-billed gull, which stood sizing up a couple of sunbathers, perhaps looking for a handout. “Remember, there is no such thing as a sea gull,” Hohmann told us. “They’re gulls, and they just happen to hang around by the sea.”

But back on the bridge, we got the

chance to observe more shore birds. A ruddy turnstone scurried across the sand on its short orange legs, turning over shells and rocks in search of food. A Wilson’s plover snacked on something while sitting in a small hole in the sand, its brown-colored back blending in with its surroundings.

As I marked all my sightings on my checklist, I could understand why millions of Americans have taken up bird-watching, making it one of the country’s most popular outdoor activities. There’s something satisfying about not only observing nature in action but also identifying what you’re seeing so you can learn more about how the birds fly, eat, or build nests. And you can bet that over time, I plan to check a lot more birds off my list.

Lovers Key Carl E. Johnson State Park offers Beginning Birding Walks (free with park admission) at least once a month. For a schedule of walks, call 239/463-4588 or visit www.florida.stateparks.org/loverskey.

Beth Luberecki is a freelance writer and the editorial director of Times of the Islands.

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