

On the first leg up the coast, birding rules

A few moments after adventuring onto the boardwalk at Florida's Wakodahatchee wetlands, I stopped to join several individuals peering intently at a small bird none had ever seen.

The sora scampered in and out of thick clumps of marshgrass, a few feet from the boardwalk. After many oohs and ahs, one of my comrades looked over and asked, "Elliott, what are you doing here?" I stopped trying to get the perfect picture and recognized Jim Forti, a Massachusetts bank examiner I have known 35 years. He'd been sitting in my office just two weeks before. Then another birdwatcher introduced himself as Larry Berk. He owns a house in Wellfleet and has served as a volunteer naturalist for Cape Cod National Seashore.

"What are all these people

from Massachusetts doing at Wakodahatchee?" I wondered. My visit came several hundred miles into the first leg of an odyssey up the East Coast from Key West to Campobello Island.

Despite living on Cape Cod, I confess to failure to worship sand, humidity, or aging; Florida is one of my least favorite places. But I'm entranced by any coast where land, sea and sky come together, by what man has done to it, and by wildlife – particularly birds. Florida represents the "back to the future" place where Americans flock to vacation and die and we can view what ultimately will become of all our shoreline.

I still don't consider myself a birder or a photographer, but I do like to take pictures of birds. It's like golfing, fishing or hunting – each day, another mind game awaits.

Vox Clamantis

By Elliott Carr



Wakodahatchee is the Pebble Beach Country Club of bird photography. It's an unusual wetlands, manmade in 1996 by the Palm Beach County Water Utilities Department to provide final stage purification of a million gallons of wastewater daily. The county built a silk purse from a sow's ear; a labyrinth of islands, fresh water marshes and pools where carefully selected plants feed on rich nutrients. An elegant two-mile boardwalk lets mankind view the wildlife attracted by the process,

particularly birds. Some lesser souls prefer alligators.

Unlike birds on the Cape, these don't fly away when approached by humans. They've learned people won't leave the boardwalk, not wanting to sidle past alligators through muck. I got so mesmerized I forgot Wakodahatchee's origins and it smells better than local salt marshes. Birds even land on the rail next to humans, and I spent more time retreating with my telephoto lens than trying to get closer. Maybe they take the birds into the water department building every night to wash and brush them, then instruct each where to pose.

Wakodahatchee is such a beautiful place that it's populated by exercisers as well as nature lovers: power walkers with weights in each hand, walkers doing several laps around the boardwalk. It became so popular that in 2005 the county built Green Kay Wetland about a mile away. Green Kay also helps process the county's growing supply of wastewater. The Palm Beach Recreation Department joined the County Water Utilities Department at Green Kay, building a large nature center to "teach residents and visitors the importance of wetlands." At Wakodahatchee the only public conveniences are large bathrooms built after the fact.

A farmer gave the county the land for Green Kay because he wanted "to return the land to nature." People don't do that much around Cape Cod any more; they sell the land for all they can to afford the move to Florida. I wonder if they enjoy the endless traffic when they get there. The multi-lane roads (with left turns nearly extinct) carry traffic far worse than on the Cape.

The night after I drove from Key West to Palm Beach, I had a dream. I was driving in the slow lane, fearful that with so many large trucks whizzing by I couldn't see or escape that lane. Traffic came to a complete halt with a palm tree right in front of me, presumably on the back of another truck. When traffic started moving, the palm tree did not. End of dream.

When I arrived at Palm Beach Airport to return to Massachusetts, a man noted my large camera and stated, "You must have taken some great pictures."

"Only birds," I responded.



UNAFRAID: A great blue heron gets close enough for a tight portrait

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SOUTHERN COUSIN: A green heron almost camouflages in the woods.

VIGILANCE: A pair of blue-winged teal make good use of a wooden perch.

"They're the only good thing about this place," he answered.

(Photographs from Vox's southern swing are now on display at Orleans Camera and Video's Orleans branch.)



OBLIGING: The elusive sora stops long enough for a profile.