

## Birds of Canaveral

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Canaveral National Seashore (CANA) and the adjacent Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR) offer a great opportunity to add to one's life bird list. As would be expected by the predominance of water, many water and wetland-dependent birds can be found. Up to several hundred thousand ducks and coots are recorded each winter. Migrating and wintering shorebirds forage on mudflats in impoundments and along the edges of Mosquito Lagoon. If someone wants to improve their identification skills of "peeps", the smallest shorebirds, this is the place to be! Larger, herons, egrets, ibises and other wading birds of all shapes and sizes are also abundant and can be closely approached by car along the MINWR Black Point Wildlife Drive.

One good "find" is the endangered **wood stork** (*Mycteria americana*). The stork's population in Florida is thought to have declined by more than 90% since 1930, making it the most endangered wading bird in the state. It is extremely particular and will only breed when small fish are abundant and water levels are low to aid in catching prey. Although nesting platforms have been erected in the refuge, no new nests have been recorded since 1990. If you have the opportunity, watch one feed. Utilizing a highly developed sense of touch, it will move its bill about in the water. When a fish is touched, the bill snaps shut with one of the fastest reflexes known among vertebrate animals - 1/25,000 of a second! You may also see it using its pink feet to stir up fish. Storks can be seen in impoundments and roadside ditches.

Another rare wading bird that is relatively common here is the **reddish egret** (*Dichromanna rufescens*). The refuge is one of only two primary breeding sites in Florida and possibly the greatest chance for its recovery in the state. One distinguishing trait is its unique feeding style, darting erratically about with wings held out stabbing for prey. One observer likened it to a drunken sailor chasing a hat in the wind.

There are other special water birds. Resident **brown pelicans** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) are joined by groups of **white pelicans** (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) that have journeyed all the way from the Rockies to spend the winter. Notice that while the brown pelicans dive to catch fish, the white pelicans swim with their bills open to scoop up prey. It is always a treat to see the beautiful pink **roseate spoonbill** (*Ajaia ajaja*) which has been sighted in increasing numbers in recent years. The dapper **black-necked stilt** (*Himantopus mexicanus*) with its fragile bright pink stilt-like legs nests in the park. **Black skimmers** (*Rynchops niger*) gather in little groups along the lagoon, waiting for calm water to fly along the surface, skimming the water with their long distinctive bills. Along the beach, in season, **ruddy turnstones** (*Arenaria interpres*), **willets** (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*) and **sanderlings** (*Crocethia alba*) abound. Keen observers can gaze out over the ocean and see **gannets** (*Morus bassanus*) flying parallel to the shore. Look for a white bird with black wing tips.

The **bald eagle** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) spends time in both aquatic and terrestrial habitats. In the 1930's the breeding population around CANA was among the densest in

Florida. In ensuing years, habitat loss, accumulation of pesticides and other causes led to a serious decline. Conservation efforts have partially restored the population with 14 active nests recorded in the park and refuge during the 1999-2000 nesting season. However, the number of nesting pairs is not increasing. This is thought to be due to a limited number of tall pine trees, perfered by eagles for nesting. The park is implementing a prescribed fire program to simulate the role of natural fire in the park and encourage the regeneration of pine trees.

The best time to see eagles at CANA is winter or spring since the Southern bald eagle's calendar is almost the exact opposite of its northern cousin. Nesting occurs between October and late spring, after which most of the birds move out of the area. Notice that at CANA and the refuge, nests usually occur in tall live pine trees, far enough from the top to be shaded by a canopy of needled branches. If you see a large nest in a dead tree or on a pole, it is probably the nest of an osprey although eagles will occasionally utilize dead snags. Eagles feed on waterfowl, catch fish or try to steal them from ospreys, and at CANA can often be seen in the undignified position of feasting on roadkill with the vultures.

The loud clear whistle of the **osprey** (*Pandion haliaetus*) is one of coastal Florida's most characteristic sounds. At first glance, it is often mistaken for a bald eagle because of the white head. The osprey however is white underneath and looks like it has a crook in the wings while in flight. Ospreys can often be seen flying with a fish grasped tightly in their talons. Note that the fish is always seen with the head pointing in the direction the bird is flying to improve aerodynamic efficiency. Ospreys are occasionally robbed by marauding eagles who harass them until they drop the fish. Osprey nests are commonly seen in dead snags, telephone poles and light poles. The electric company erects nesting platforms to keep the birds from shorting out the circuits and electrocuting themselves.

The arctic **peregrine falcon** (*Falco peregrinus tundrius*) is an impressive migratory visitor between September-October and March-May each year. It feeds on small waterfowl and shorebirds. If one flies overhead while you are watching a group of shorebirds or ducks, you will know immediately from the way the birds scatter.

One strictly terrestrial bird needs to be mentioned, the **Florida scrub jay** (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*). Many out-of-state birders come to catch a glimpse of this species. It is one of the park's protected species, only occurring in Florida. A cousin of the blue jay, it has adopted a unique and fascinating lifestyle. It lives in areas of oak scrub where one of its primary foods is acorns, which it buries in sandy spots for later retrieval. It does not migrate but stays in a territory of 5-50 acres that it defends year round, including the acorn crop. The jay lives in family groups with young of past years staying for a time with their parents to help raise the next year's brood. While part of the group is feeding, others stand guard to watch for predators.

The jay population is decreasing by about 50% every 10 years which has researchers greatly concerned. Primary threats are habitat loss due to development and fire suppression. When scrub vegetation gets above six feet high, the habitat becomes less

suitable. Migrating cooper's hawks and sharp-shinned hawks can more easily ambush and capture the jays. In the Fall of 1992, one-third of the breeding birds in the park/refuge area were killed by hawks. Overgrown scrub also allows blue jays to move into the area and prey on nests.

The park has implemented a prescribed fire program to reduce scrub height and create more openings. If you visit the South District, look for one of the treatment areas just past the fee booth. It is an excellent place to see scrub jays. Look for a crestless, jay-sized bird that is blue on its upper parts, with a gray patch on its back.