

The Blow Family Trip to Florida June 2008

2 centre holiday:

6 nights Orlando and 8 nights in Sanibel

Background and other information

18 months ago we visited Florida for the first time, during which we spent three days in Sanibel. Sanibel is a wonderful island around 220 miles south of Orlando on the east coast, on the Gulf of Mexico and is home to an abundance of wildlife.

The holiday didn't start too well however. We stayed the night before we flew out in the Holiday Inn at Gatwick so we could do twilight check in, book our seats and get rid of the cases. It's a long and complicated story but somehow after checking in we managed to lock the rucksack containing the car keys, passports, wallets, tickets etc in the boot of the car. It took a recovery company 2 hours to break in for us. Just as well we weren't flying that then, as otherwise the window would have had to be smashed!

Anyway back to the holiday. We flew with Virgin to Orlando taking around 9 hours. We arrived late afternoon and surprisingly got through immigration control very quickly, probably 30 minutes from the plane to being through. It took 2 hours last time! Unfortunately, it did however take 2 hours of queuing to get our hire car. We used Dollar who were totally unorganised and unapologetic. Eventually we were on the road and off to our hotel.

The first thing that struck us was the heat. I was a bit of a shock. The average temperatures daily were around 100f with it not dropping below mid 80s at night. The big problem however was humidity, with it being reported at around 80%. It was like breathing in hot air from a hair drier a lot of the time. Thank goodness for air conditioning.

We stayed the first six nights at the Pop Century Hotel, Disney. We had five full days in the Disney parks before driving the four hours south to Sanibel. Disneyland is a funny place, you'll either love it or hate it. You need to get yourself in the Disney mood and go with it and you'll have great fun. Personally I love it but I have to say in small (ish) doses. A week is more than enough for me in Orlando. After all there are so many fantastic other places to visit in Florida and doing the theme parks is very tiring.

Day 2 Fri 12th June Magic Kingdom

The day didn't get off to a great start when I realised first thing that my camera (that I bought on my last trip to Florida and has since taken some good digi-scoped photos) was broken. The zoom lense had malfunctioned. I was very disappointed as knew there would be some good opportunities for bird photos in and around the parks. I planned to keep trying it and unless it miraculously fixed itself before we went to Sanibel I would have to buy another one. This is the explanation for a distinct lack of photos in the first part of this report.

During our stay in Orlando and on most days we saw in and around the hotel and theme parks, **Common Grackle** (lots), **Mourning Doves** (lots); **Northern Mockingbird** (lots) and a few **Brown Thrashers**. Up above **Ospreys** and **Turkey** and **Black Vultures** were common place.



Mockingbird



Common Grackle

The only other birds we saw at Magic Kingdom were fleeting views of unidentifiable woodpeckers flying between trees. Probably Red Bellied but I could not be sure. There was of course a big white duck with a blue waist coat but even I wouldn't put that one on my list! Well maybe.

In around the theme parks we saw many herons and egrets with **Little Blue Heron**, **Wood Stork**, **Great Blue Heron**, **White Ibis**, **Snowy** and **Great Egret** roadside.



Snowy Egret

Day 3 – Sat 13th June Space Shuttle launch

I was very excited about this. I have always wanted to see a shuttle launch and Kennedy Space Centre was around an hour and a quarter drive from Orlando. I had researched the best free viewing sites and had planned the journey to get us there in plenty of time. The shuttle Endeavour was due to lift off at 7.10am. All was set the night before, we set our alarms and were up at 4.30am. We found our way to the viewing site easily and arrived at around 6.10am in the twilight. There was already a few hundred people on the beach and it was a beautiful morning as we watched the sun rise. It was at this point we were informed that the launch had been “scrubbed” as they call it at the last minute. They had detected a small fuel leak and it was off. I have to say I was bitterly disappointed and couldn't really enjoy the abundant bird life around us and on the beach. My mood brightened as we were told the launch had been rescheduled for five days time. The day we were leaving Orlando. This would suit us fine. Still only 6.30am we headed back to Orlando for a day at Sea World.

That morning we did manage to see some birds; what I am pretty sure was a **Common Nighthawk** over the car near the shuttle viewing area, **Least Terns** on the beach, **White Pelicans**, **Tree Swallows** and **Purple Martins**. There were probably other birds there too but for once I was a little pre occupied.



Least Tern

We spent the day Sea World which I had very missed emotions about. It was unbelievable to see Killer Whales so close, massive and beautiful creatures but I could help but think it was not right they were there. Things got worse for me when I saw the lone Polar Bear passing up and down in its indoor enclosure. I am glad I have been but I doubt I would go back. And it is very expensive to get in. Much more than the Disney parks. One big plus was the chance to go on the new Manta ride where you lie horizontally under a rollercoaster and do all sorts of loops, drops and corkscrews head first! Brilliant! I was the only one to go on that, the others bottled it.

Day 4 – Sun June 14th Animal Kingdom

If you like zoos and theme parks Animal Kingdom is the place for you. Personally, it's the rides I go for and the more extreme the better! Sophie (11) is starting to get a bit braver and I wanted to try and get her onto Expedition Everest. It is quite scary with some good drops, forwards and backwards and in the dark in places but has no loop the loops. Extreme rides are not Jamie's (9) thing and I think that suits Julia giving her the option at times to opt out "to look after Jamie". Anyway, Sophie was very brave and done it, sitting in the front seats of the rollercoaster. Although she said she couldn't walk properly afterwards as her legs were wobbling so much, she also said she really enjoyed it!

We saw our first **Northern Cardinals** in Animal Kingdom, good close up views but unfortunately I still had no camera.



Northern Cardinal

Day 5 – Monday 15th Epcot Julia's birthday!

Today got off to a really bad start. Before we left home I had collected Julia's birthday cards and put them in the case so Julia could open them on her birthday. Unfortunately before we left home we decided that one of the cases we were taking was not big enough and I was sent out to buy a new one. I transferred all the clothes etc into the new case but forgot the cards etc I had hidden in the inside pocket. It wasn't until the morning of Julia's birthday when I went to the cases and couldn't find the cards. I was bamboozled for a while until the penny dropped. I felt very guilty but there was nothing I could do.

We arrived at Epcot mid morning, it was very hot as usual around the 100f mark, and we planned to stay all day into the evening for the fire works. Epcot has some, good rides and again Sophie done them all including the Extreme version of Mission Space where you experience the effects of a Shuttle Launch on a pilot. The g-force is incredible.

We had great views here of 3 **Green Herons** expertly fishing in a pond. They picked up bread thrown by passers by, put it in the water and then picked off the small fish as they come to the bread. Very clever, they were close, within 20 feet, still no camera!

Day 6 – Tues 16th June Aquatica

Today was our last full day in Orlando and we headed to the new water park Aquatica. I didn't really take much note of the birds as we enjoyed the water rides all day. We did however get quite sun burned despite putting 3 lots of factor 40 sun cream on during the day.

Day 7 – Wednesday 17th June - shopping and drive down to Sanibel

My camera never regained consciousness and therefore we were off to buy another one before getting to Sanibel. I just couldn't go there without one. I bought an updated version of the previous camera a Canon XXXXX with a x 10 zoom lense that digi scope perfectly on my telescope. At £144 it was considerably cheaper than a home. Pity it still isn't two dollars to the pound as it would have been around £110.

After much shopping and picking up some real bargains we began our journey south. Driving in America is easy. The cars are big, the roads are big and straight and petrol is very cheap. On the news whilst there we were informed that car owners are up in arms because fuel has risen a dollar in the last year from \$1.57 a gallon to \$2.57, about £1.80 a gallon! We had a huge Chrysler 300 which took about \$40 to fill up. I would recommend a Sat Nav however, our provided very handy. It costs about £65 to get the USA and Canada maps on your UK Sat Nav and with daily hire rates a day of £6 it is worth buying the American maps if you are likely to ever visit again.

The journey took about four hours including a stop for lunch. Many birds can be seen from the free ways so keep your eyes peeled. I actually added one of my main target bird on the way down although the view was fleeting as a **Swallow Tailed Kite** drifted across the road in front of us. **Glossy Ibis** was added to in a road side ditch not far from Sanibel.

We stayed in the Sanibel Hotel and Spa Resort (link) which is actually on the main land just yards before the bridge that take you over the Sanibel Island. The toll is expensive to cross the bridge at \$6 so I suggest when you pick up your hire car you get a Sun Pass. It's \$25 a week and includes all tolls, plus means you can drive straight through with out stopping to pay.

We had stayed this hotel previously and it is very luxurious. However, it is the views that really make it. All rooms have balcony looking out towards Sanibel over a mile or so shallow tidal water. On our previous visit at low tide I have seen many herons and egrets out there, as well as a Bald Eagle on the sand bank and racoons. However, It was at high tide when we had seen dolphin within 10 feet of the beach below us that Julia and the kids wanted to see again. They wouldn't be disappointed and we even went one better. Read on to see what we saw from our balcony. Last time we had visited it was November and it was so quiet that we were given an upgrade to a condo (suite) it was massive, 2 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, kitchen, dinner area, lounge area, huge TV, maid service etc and this time I was hoping to use the Blow Monkey negotiating skills to get another upgrade. It wasn't looking good though as I had enquired a couple of months earlier and was told it would be an additional \$100 a night, so with an 8 night stay an additional \$800 (£550) was a bit too much on top of an already expensive holiday, so I had to reluctantly turn it down. Anyway, when we checked in we were very pleasantly surprised to be offered the upgrade for \$50 a night. This we couldn't turn down. In the suite we checked out the nightly rates and at it's peak they are \$1099 a night (£700) and we had just paid \$239 a night, that around £160 for four of us in complete luxury. Superb.

The hotel backs onto the beach but in front of the hotel is mile upon mile of mangrove swamp so many birds are found in and around the hotel.

Within an hour or two of arriving we had **Green Heron, Brown Pelican, Great Egret, Osprey, Cattle Egret, Snowy Egret, Laughing Gull** and **Red Bellied Woodpecker**, without even trying.



Red-bellied Woodpecker

Sanibel has loads of independent good cafes and restaurants. There are a few 7 Elevens and a supermarket (Jerries) that also has a good café. Ideal for a cheap breakfast (approx £16 for 4) or lunch. We had dinner in an Italian restaurant we discovered on our last visit (Matzaluna) which is great for kids as the food is very good and all the tables have paper table clothes that you are encouraged to draw on. The best are put on the wall. There is a framed picture by the author Stephen King up there!

Day 8 Thursday 18th June - our first full day in Sanibel.

After breakfast we headed onto the island and to one of favourite places the last time we were there; The Tarpon Bay Refuge. It is part of the Ding Darling reserve network and had loads of activities to do. We arrived around 10.30am and at 11.00am a morning boat trip was leaving looking for Manatee and Dolphin in the lagoons. We had never seen a wild Manatee so this was right up on our hit list. It was a 2 hour guided trip costing around \$60 for the 4 of us (approx £40). Good views were had of **Least Terns, Double Crested Cormorant, Little Blue** and **Tri Coloured Heron, Reddish Egret** as well as our first **Roseatte Spoonbill** of the trip (over) and **Magnificent Frigatebird**.



Little Blue Heron



Magnificent Frigatebird

After 40 minutes or so we spotted movement in the water just ahead of us. A **Manatee** was surfacing. The engines were cut and we floated in the area for 20 minutes or so during which time we had sight of 2 or 3 **Manatee** as they again surfaced for air. Having never seen Manatee before we were very pleased. We also saw a brightly coloured Ray swimming along just under the surface. On the journey back I spotted a **Semi Palmated Plover** on a small island to add to the trip list.

Once back on dry land we headed toward the lighthouse end of the island. There is a magnificent ice cream parlour called Pinocchios, not far from the lighthouse car park. It has won all sorts of awards and had recently been featured in National Geographic. (see <http://www.pinocchiosicecream.com>). A small ice cream costs you \$3.95 which seems quite a lot until you realise that a small is 5 scoops!

The temperature was around 100f with 80% humidity so a quick walk around the lighthouse area was all we could manage. We did however see a large **Gopher Tortoise**.

In and around Sanibel and our hotel we saw many species every day. Rather than list them over and over I have noted below the common birds seen daily:

Osprey	lots
Royal Tern	lots
Least Tern	at least 1 or 2 every day
Magnificent Frigatebird	6+ a day
Brown Pelican	lots
Common Grackle	lots
Northern Mockingbird	2 or 3 pairs around the hotel
Red Bellied Woodpecker	lots
Snowy Egret	6+ a day
Great Egret	6+ a day
Northern Cardinal	2 or 3 a day
Fish Crow	lots
Laughing Gull	6+ a day
Black Vulture	6+ a day
Turkey Vulture	6+ a day

The day was rounded off looking for **Bottle Nosed Dolphin** from the balcony of the hotel room over a bottle of wine. To our surprise as the light dimmed we saw a **Manatee** just feet from the beach swimming along the tide line below us.



Royal terns



Osprey

Day 9 Fri 19th June

With the afternoons being so hot we decided to make the most of the cooler (only 90f!) mornings for walks etc. We were up at 7.30am to go for a short morning walk around the Bailey Tract. Although part of the large Ding Darling reserve it stands alone and is free to access any time. There is a short circular walk of around 1 mile which can be very productive.

It soon became apparent that although it was still before 8.30am, the heat was making it hard work. Our walk lasted no more than an hour before we had to get into the chill of the air con of the car. New birds were added to the list, with a pair of **Black Necked Stilts**, with young, a **Piliated Woodpecker**, and **Anhinga**. Plus we also managed to find an **Alligator**, a freshwater **Red Bellied Turtle** and another **Gopher Tortoise**.



Alligator

Next we went to the main Ding Darling reserve visitors centre to cool off and have a look around. The rest of the day was spent in the pool. On the way out to dinner early evening I spotted a **Brown Headed Cowbird** with Grackles on the lawn outside the hotel which was a pleasant surprise.

Day 10 – Kayaking – Sat 20th June

Again up early we decided to give Kayaking a go. We headed back to Tarpon Bay to hire Kayaks for a couple of hours. Now Kayaking looks really easy and relaxing when you watch other people do it, unfortunately it turned out to be anything but that.

Sophie(11) and Julia were in one with me and Jamie (9) in another. We were told that there was a trail through the mangrove swamp about half a mile away which was good and easy to follow. So we headed that way. It soon dawned on me that Kayaking was quite tiring and I was soon sweating like a pig in a sauna! We entered the swamp trail and began following the trail. It was about a mile long and at times was very narrow with over hanging trees (that cost my sunglasses! – knocked into the water) and other obstacles. Having never sat in a Kayak before let alone navigate through a mangrove swamp, this soon became quite difficult and frustrating. The boys were faring slightly better and we soon we some way ahead. By the time we reached the half way mark we were tired and to be honest not overly enjoying the experience. We had had some good views of **Reddish Egret** but we just wanted to get out of there. The second half of the journey was now against the tide which meant no stopping for a rest as we just drifted backwards. The mangroves got more tangled and it just seemed to go on for ever. Unfortunately the girls were having an even worse time. They were tired and not very good at steering the Kayak. With probably a quarter of the trail left to navigate the final straw came when they were about to collide with yet another low overhanging tree, Sophie reached up to grab the branches to soften the impact only for dozens of large black crabs to scatter along the branches. Scared and worried they would fall in the boat or on her she screamed and started crying. Jamie and I were blissfully unaware of this having just exited the trail. We were floating waiting for them to appear. After a while we decided we had better go back and see where they were. We found them a couple of hundred yards back and not very happy. We showed them the way out and paddled the half a mile or so back to the visitor centre. The whole experience had not been very enjoyable and I doubt I'll get the girls back in a Kayak for a while!

Again we spent the day relaxing and enjoying the pool and beach.

We decided to try the Wildlife Drive around the Ding Darling Reserve that evening. It's a nice and easy way to see some wildlife from the comfort of your air conditioned car. It costs \$5 as long as you are in at least 30 mins before the gates close at 8pm you can take as long as you like. Really you need to get the tides right (info available from Tarpon Bay visitors centre) and go at low tide. The tides were not ideal during our stay with it never being low tide in the early evening. Our evening drive produced our first magnificent **Yellow Crowned Night Herons**, which are a favourite of mine, with up to half a dozen seen very well to within a few feet.



Yellow-crowned Night Heron

At a viewing area we had a distant **Roseate Spoonbill** foraging along the shore line. I was distracted by a small pipit sized bird by the side of the road around 100 yards ahead of us but could never get enough on it to fully ID it but the best bet would be **Northern Waterthrush**. Another tick soon followed when I spotted two small birds, not much bigger than a sparrow feeding in grass up ahead. They remained settled as we drove up along side them to discover they were **Common Ground Doves**, like Mourning Doves but literally half the size. Very smart. The drive was completed when by the side of the road and within 20 feet we found a **Red Shouldered Hawk**. I set up my scope to get amazing views which were equally enjoyed by an American non birding family out for an evening drive. As the sun was setting we left the drive, still keeping eyes peeled and had two **Pileated Woodpeckers** on telegraph poles and a family of **Racoons** by the side of the road.

Day 11 Sun 21st June

We spent much of the day on the beach, looking for shells and paddling in the sea. The beach gave us a welcomed breeze that made the sun more bearable. There were no new birds of note on this day but probably all of the usual suspect as listed above.

Day 12 Mon 22nd June

We decide to have a morning at Corkscrew Swamp. I had been looking forward to visiting this reserve since Sam Shippey had told me all about it from previous visits. I had intended on going on my own for some birding but the

night before Julia and the kids decided to come too. The reserve is to the east of Naples and about a 1.5 hour drive from Sanibel. We decided to get up and leave early to make the most of the slightly cooler early morning hours which would hopefully be better for the birds too.

We set our alarms and were on the road by 6.30am. We found the reserve easily and were there around 8am. (reserve opens 7am) The car park was empty and we almost had the place to ourselves. There is a good visitors centre and I bought a small guide book of the wildlife we would be most likely to encounter. The reserve itself is basically a boardwalked trail through an ancient mangrove forest. It is easily navigated and around 2.3 miles long. Much of the trail is shaded by the huge trees which is a relief.

The first thing that struck me within yards of setting off along the boardwalk was the noise. There were calls coming from all directions, most of which I had never heard before, and many which it turned out were not birds! Within a few hundred yards I had seen **Tufted Tit Mouse**, **Carolina Wren**, **Northern Cardinal**, **Carolina Chickadee**, **white Eyed Vireo** and **Eastern Phoebe**. Just down the trail Julia about 50 yards ahead pointed skyward and shouted **Swallow Tailed Kite!** Jamie and I rushed to get a better view of two fantastic black and white kites. Their forked tails really are something. Just a short distance further we discovered a **Red Shouldered Hawk** even closer than the one seen a couple of days previously. Julia spotted it literally a few feet above Jamie's head over the boardwalk.



Red-shouldered Hawk

We were told that the reserve was very dry at the moment but the lettuce ponds were the best bet for **alligator**, sure enough there were two in the area there including one which was huge. Another ranger here explained that the buzzing sound I was trying to decipher was in fact a **Tree Frog**. He said they are difficult to see but should we find a curled up leaf by the boardwalk gently unravel it and if we are lucky there'll be a frog tucked up inside. Half a dozen curled up leaves later we struck gold, well green actually.

Further along the boardwalk we came across another section with some water and the pads and grass were moving. At first we thought it must have been another alligator until a **River Otter** showed itself. It was quite a bit bigger than the Sea Otters I have seen in Scotland. It showed nicely for a couple of minutes before slinking out of view. As we came out of the woods into a clearance 7 **Swallow Tailed Kites** soared over our heads for a minute or so before drifting from view.

It was now nearing 10am and the temperature was well over 90f. Not far from the visitors centre we came across two **White Tailed Deer** ambling through the trees.

Julia was happy to rest in the visitors centre with the kids as I set up for a quick (ish) loop again. I was particularly pleased to add **Great Crested Flycatcher** this time round. A huge Mistle Thrush sized flycatcher with a large crest and yellow belly. I also had a bird similar to a Gold Crest which after studying the ID book (Sibley) decided it was most like a **Golden Crowned Kinglet** although it would be quite unusual in that part of Florida.

I thoroughly enjoyed Corkscrew Swamp and would highly recommend it to birders and families. It is an easy walk with lots to see. We headed back around midday for a relaxing afternoon around the pool.

Day 13 Tuesday 23rd June Cape Coral

I had two main target birds for the holiday. I had already seen one; Swallow Tailed Kite and the other was Burrowing Owl. Jamie has a thing about owl and at nine has already seen six species in the UK (inc. Snowy Owl), so I done my research and found that there were a number of reliable sites less than 30 minutes drive from our hotel in Cape Coral. The local council were really helpful and emailed me a number of detailed maps and other guidance regarding finding and viewing the owls. We decided to go to the site in the grounds of the library in Cape Coral which we thought should we get lost it would hopefully be sign posted.

We decided to all have a look after breakfast. The drive was straight forward and we pulling up in the library car park by 9.30am. I was about to go into the library to ask for directions when I realised they weren't necessary, about 50 yards ahead of us on the grassy rough ground was a cordoned off patch and sitting aptly on the sign advising us it was a protected area for Burrowing Owls was a **Burrowing Owl**, in fact there were three on this 10 foot square patch. I managed to get within 30 feet to get a few pictures but worked out you could get really close from the road. We got back in the car and drove round the edge of the square grassed area. From the car we were no more than 10 feet from the birds! We continued around the edge of the grassed area until we reached another cordoned off area.

This time a slightly bigger area of probably 20 square feet contained at least 9 owls and were just a few feet from them. If you are ever in mid west Florida a trip here is a must. We were there no more than 15 minutes as to not disturb the birds too much before leaving, ticking the only **Kildeer** of the holiday in the library grounds too.



Burrowing Owl



Killdeer

Leaving Caoe Coral we noticed a few more cordoned off areas with Owls sitting out in the open. We had a least 20 that morning in no more than 30 minutes. Amazing!

We headed to Captiva which is the smaller island which is accessed by driving the length of Sanibel and over a small road bridge. When we last visited in November 2007 we had many Willets and Snowy Plovers on the beaches intermingling with sun bathers and kids splashing about in the surf. This time though we had seen none until now. Our only trip sighting was 2 **Willets** and 6 **Snowy Plovers** flying along the tide line that afternoon.

We spent the rest of the afternoon as usual back at the pool. We had a dolphin just 15 feet from the shore patrolling for fish which entertained us for quite a while from the pool.

We again did the wildlife drive after dinner as the sun went down. It was relatively quiet but did manage a **Great Crested Flycatcher**, **Red Shouldered Hawk**, a few **Yellow Crowned Night Herons** and a couple of racoons.

Wednesday 24th June – fishing

Jamie and I spent the morning on a fishing trip. It was a little disappointing as the boat was too packed which made casting etc difficult. I managed to hook 2 and handed the rod to Jamie to land them but one got off. He was pleased with his foot long catfish though. Julia and Sophie has spent the morning on the beach and reported seeing an **American Oystercatcher** – a species I had not seen!

That PM the heavens opened and thunder and lightening rolled in. We spent a couple of hours in the hotel room watching the storm until it eased. We then went to Publix supermarket to get some provisions and was pleased to have **Loggerhead Shrike** and **Gray Kingbird** in the car park!

Amazingly blue sky returned and we headed over the bridge to Sanibel for the last time. We visited the Shell Museum which was interesting but expensive for the 20 minutes it took to walk round it. Back at the hotel to pack that evening we had a pair of **Gray Kingbirds** in the car park.

Thursday 25th June – time to go home

We left Sanibel about 9.30am knowing one day we would be back. We had to be at Orlando airport, 220 miles away at 4.30pm. Coincidentally on route we had 3 sightings of **Sandhill Crane** by the road which is where we had our only sighting last time we visited Florida, although on the east coast last time. We were pretty sure we had a juv **Bald**

Eagle over the car during the journey but couldn't be 100% sure. Making good time we stopped in Downtown Disney for some last minute shopping, which as it turned out was a good move as I added **Red Winged Blackbird** to my list and a pair of **Western Kingbirds**.

We had a great holiday again in Florida and I would highly recommend it to birders, and particularly birders with kids! The birding is easy, there are birds everywhere, in the theme parks, around your hotel and you'll be surprised what you can see from the car. Having a week in Orlando and a week on the coast is a great way to have fun but also see a bit of real Florida, which in places is absolutely beautiful.