

Photo Journal: May 10, 2008, Biscayne Bay, launching from Deering Estate

Conditions: Low tide at 9:03 am, 26% moon visibility; launched at 7:30 am, 84 degrees increasing to 90 by noon, winds SW 5-7 knots, humidity high. Excellent paddling conditions, a bit hot and humid (that time of year again) and we are off the water by 11 am.

The late spring and summer month period is when I spent most of my paddling time on Biscayne Bay. The convenient location for me makes this a very easy trip to do on a whim. Before heading out, I know the tides and prefer a low tide sometime during early to mid-morning hours. This is when I see the most birds. This spring, I've been out to the bay three times. The first two times were similar with high wind conditions (15-25 knots), not good for photographing. The first trip was on April 12th and we launched from Blackpoint. Staying in the Blackpoint lagoon area kept us protected from the winds but it was particularly overcast as the storm clouds moved in from the southwest. Photography opportunities were few and far between. There was a large flock of cattle egrets but they would not let me near them, so I hung out mostly with the flock of kayak fishermen. The second day was on April 27th and once again we had very high winds. We also had a high tide during mid-morning. Because of the winds, we changed our plans to launch from Deering and instead put our boats in near the Matheson Hammock marina on the canal and paddled into the creek that eventually leads out to the gulf a ½ miles south of the marina. I spent time on the gulf near the mouth of the creek, but did not have much luck in photographing with the exception of a couple cormorants perched here and there.

Today would be a much different experience compared to the April trips. We had perfect tide and weather conditions and I would finally get back to the bird rookery near the channel leading out to Chicken Key. By the time we were on the water, the cloudless sky was bright white with the morning sun. I had good lighting along the mangroves to my left as I began heading north toward Deering Estate. The tide was already low enough that several white egrets were wading in the shallows about 300 feet out from the mangrove shoreline that runs between the launch site and the pier near the Deering Estate. I began paddling in the shallows and noticed a green heron and a snowy egret near the mangroves. The green heron allowed me to approach closely, within 30-40 feet. I turned and started heading out toward the gulf to get myself on the east side of the two white egrets that were busily feeding. Once I got lined up with a good front light, I approached as close as I felt comfortable. One bird was closer to me, but was mindful and would move away so that I would have to continue moving to stay in the good light. I managed some good shots of the bird, catching a worm and a puffer fish and some excellent flight shots as it moved away from me.

I moved in closer to the mangroves when I noticed the green heron under the mangrove canopies near the pier. I spotted a large raccoon digging along the shoreline and at the same time, it noticed me. Being a curious type of animal, he came out of the shadows to get a good look at me while I took some shots. I came into close range of the green heron. I've noticed that when these birds are intent on feeding, they generally do not go into hiding and in fact, this bird let me stay rather close to it for quite some time. I captured the bird in poised mode on a couple of shots with it catching a small minnow.

While shooting the green heron, I spotted the snowy egret near the pier, about 200 feet or so away. All alone, it was busy catching food in the shallows. I decided to head over to the bird. Once I was lined up with good front light, I came in close to the bird, within 30 feet. The egret appeared to be in breeding plumage, all buffed out with some yellow tint on its chest. It was also quite active with its feeding method. I stayed with this bird for almost an hour watching and shooting. It had a very interesting way of catching worms and fish. It would look intently at the water and then lift one of its bright yellow feet above the water and bring it down into the mud while moving it around; with a motion similar to when some one snuffs out a cigarette on the ground with their foot. After doing this for some time it would then go after its target with wings spread. On occasion, it would fly up and move to another location a few feet away. The best display I captured was when it caught a worm and flew off with its catch twisted around its beak.

By now, I must have been on the water 1 ½ hours and had not eaten or drank anything. This is not a good thing, especially with the heat and humidity we had in the air today. With the incredible photo

opportunities I had all morning, it was easy to forget the necessities. Finally, I was content with my snowy egret encounter and got a soda in me. At this time my paddling companion who was about ¼ mile east of me further in the gulf had radioed me. I headed out toward her and a few other paddlers. I was happy to find that one of the paddlers is another avid photographer, Phil, someone I had only corresponded with through email. We started corresponding a year or so ago after I commented on one of his pbase galleries. He had displayed some photos from the Miami River as well as the Everglades and Biscayne Bay. It seemed he and I had been photographing in the same areas but never met up all these years. Finally, I got to meet him. He was heading over to the bird rookery, which is just shy of 2 miles from our launch site. I wasn't going to have much time since we needed to get off the water well before noon but I decided to paddle over there anyway.

We had a nice paddle toward the rookery and there were plenty of egrets flying by to and from the rookery location. About ¼ mile from the tree island that serves as the rookery I could hear the cacophony of birds. It always amazes me to hear that sound and makes me think of what the Everglades must have sounded like 100 years ago. We headed through an opening through the jetty that runs along the channel where there were a dozen or so cormorants roosting on tree branches. We got to the tree island where several cattle egrets and cormorants were flying back and forth. I spotted some cormorant nests and I could make out some young ones, but they were all very well hidden among the mangrove leaves and branches. I spotted a tricolor and a blackcrown heron, but mostly, the birds were well hidden. I did spot a cormorant coming in with some nesting material on two occasions. Unfortunately, I could not stay long. The next time I come to Deering, I'll head over to the rookery first. The best way to capture activity here is to sit in one spot for a while and let the birds get use to your presence. Flight shots can be endless.

Some notes on the camera and lenses. I used the Minolta 300mm + 1.4X teleconverter completely today rather than the Sigma zoom lens. I did bring another camera with the Sigma and only on one occasion did I wish I was using that instead of the prime lens. While the Sigma lens is great, using the 2X teleconverter with it makes it very difficult to use in terms of focus speed. The other problem is that the camera does not recognize the teleconverter so it does not recognize the increased focal length (no real problem, just an annoyance). I've used the Sigma set up on several occasions, both on the water and on land and decided that I am better off shooting in manual mode with that lens. It seems that if I use the meter on the camera it works quite well; but I do need to experiment with it more. I'm so use to the quality of the Minolta, which focuses precisely and quickly. For instance, I noticed on the Sigma that if I try to focus a plain object that is in the far distance, it has a very difficult time focusing in. I have to find something that has distinct textures in order to get the focus. It seems to work well though with most objects, including flying birds. Nevertheless, the prime lens (420mm with the teleconverter) worked well today, perfect focal length for all the bird shots.

Today, I shot in aperture priority. A big problem that I did not see until getting the photos downloaded was that I was spot metering on the white birds with some EV compensation, providing me excellent exposure on the white feathers. But, once I transferred the RAW images into the image converter software, the images went very dark, not what I was seeing in the Browser software or the camera LCD. I should have paid attention to the histogram and I believe that shooting in evaluative meter mode would have helped. As it were, the birds were correctly exposed, but the surroundings were too dark. I did some shadow adjustments and that helped, but not ideal. Obviously, I need to work on this. Here are some shots from the day.

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