

Photo Journal: July 2, 2007; Getting to know Chokoloskee Bay

It had been almost 3 months since I had purchased my first SLR camera, the Sony A100. I had it for less than a week when I was shooting wading birds on Fort DeSoto State Park and Fort Myers beaches during a photography workshop with Jack Rogers, accomplished Florida nature photographer. A week later, the Sony was taking its first canoe trip on Biscayne Bay and again the following week. But it wasn't until today that I got back to the Everglades with this new camera.

Prior to using the Sony, I was shooting with the Canon Powershot S3, which fit comfortably in the 1200 pelican case, along with a couple teleconverters. It was to my relief that the larger Sony camera and the 75-300mm (f4/5.6) zoom lens fit snugly in the case. My accessories (memory card, extra battery, lens cleaner) go inside my sealed bucket where I keep various items like my keys, map, compass, sunscreen, bug spray, etc.

We arrived at the Chokoloskee Island Park marina around 7 am. By this time, the morning light was giving off a soft morning glow as it rose behind us. This means that the morning light would be to my back mostly and would offer the best lighting for morning shots of whatever came my way. I love how the mangroves are lit up by this morning light and the reflections in the water are stunning. Now all I needed was some wildlife as my fishing buddies went their way, chasing red fish and trout around the oyster beds of Chokoloskee Bay. I would explore behind some of the many islands that form a labyrinth between Chokoloskee Bay and the gulf and are sandwiched between Chokoloskee and Sandfly passes. This area has become well known to me spending several days on the water during the summer months exploring it.

If you have a map of the area, notice that Chokoloskee Island sits southwest of the Turner River mouth that enters into Chokoloskee Bay. Where we put our canoes in today is located about where the island points out in a westerly direction toward the gulf. If one were to stand on the marina dock and look straight ahead (due west by northwest), you will be looking at the outer edges of the mangrove islands that line the south and west side of Chokoloskee Bay and eventually lead to Sandfly pass. If you continue down Sandfly pass toward the gulf, you'll come on to Jewel Key and from there you can head back up toward Chokoloskee Island through Chokoloskee pass. This route forms a triangle and it is within this triangle that I spend my summer months exploring.

This is an excellent area to become comfortable in the canoe or kayak with your camera. You can get out of the bay (which can get very choppy) and inside the triangle of islands where you'll find plenty of photographs waiting. I study the mangroves, and consider them to be a challenging photo subject. Today, I would try to find some wildlife with my zoom lens. I kept the 18-70mm lens at home so there would not be much chance for wide open waterscape photos today. The waterscape photo opportunities this time of year are quite amazing with the storm clouds that come through the sky. It makes for excellent panorama shots. But for today, I would be zooming in on some birds and maybe a kayak fisherman catching a redfish.

When photographing from Chokoloskee Bay, be mindful of the tides and moon phases. You can look those up on Saltwatertides.com; search for Chokoloskee in the list for the gulf coast of Florida. On this day, we had a full moon, high tide was at 5:27 am and low tide was at 11:09 am. This meant we had an outgoing tide the entire morning, strongest during early morning, weakest as the time approached 11 am. For photography, this means that I would have a strong tidal current heading toward the gulf and by 10 am or so, I would have some inaccessible routes between the triangle and the bay. If the tide is not too low, you can easily venture inside the triangle from just about any point from the bay. So I planned to go inside the triangle first thing before much of it became inaccessible. Later, I would go back to the bay where my buddies would be fishing at low tide around the oyster bars.

When daytripping in the Everglades during the summer months, it is advisable to get out as soon as possible with the intention of being off the water before noon. One obvious reason is the heat; it gets ghastly hot by 10 am. But the other reason is the summer storms that rush in like a herd of buffalo. By 10 am you are watching beautiful storm clouds coming in from the distance, sometimes the east side

sometimes the west side. I mentioned already that these provide dramatic backgrounds for waterscape photographs. But, you don't want to be caught out there in your canoe when one of these storms pounces on top of you. It will be over quickly, but during those 20-60 minutes, it's nasty and dangerous.

When going into the triangle, I always carry a map and compass (and a VHF radio) because I often get far inside these confusing mazes and have only recently (after a few years of doing this) been able to confidently identify certain landmarks. And when you are navigating around mangrove islands, landmarks are very subtle. But today, I would not be venturing far so I never even got the compass out of the bucket. I left the bay and no sooner did I round a mangrove island that I came across a great white heron. A great white heron has yellow legs, contrary to its cousin, the great white egret that has black legs. I spotted a great white heron near this spot a year ago and I reckoned it may be the same bird. There he was among the miniature mangrove trees scattered among the oyster bars. I managed to get a few shots of him before he flew off into a tree canopy. This shot also gives you a glimpse into the waterscape of the area. Notice the oyster shells sticking out of the water, which was not quite at lowest tide.



When shooting in the 10,000 Islands of the Everglades, be aware of oyster bars, they will carve your boat mercilessly. I also tend to get pulled into the barnacle-encrusted mangrove roots when shooting; they can also do a number on your boat. My canoe is a Wenonah Vagabond made from very sturdy Royalex. I've allowed this boat to take a beating, but the inner layer of the boat has not been penetrated yet. While I do use this canoe for camping, it is my slummin' boat, which gets me into the nooks and crannies of the Everglades and keeps me above water while doing so. The boat maneuvers like a charm and gives me so much room for my camera. I basically keep the pelican case under my seat, with a rope attached to the boat itself. I typically leave the camera out around my neck most of the time, unless I need to paddle somewhere quickly or it rains.

After hanging out with the white heron, I wandered around the triangle for awhile, catching a few mangrove shots. I did come across a tricolor heron and a white ibis, but didn't manage to get a photo worth sharing. Here's one shot of a mangrove seedling I took while meandering:

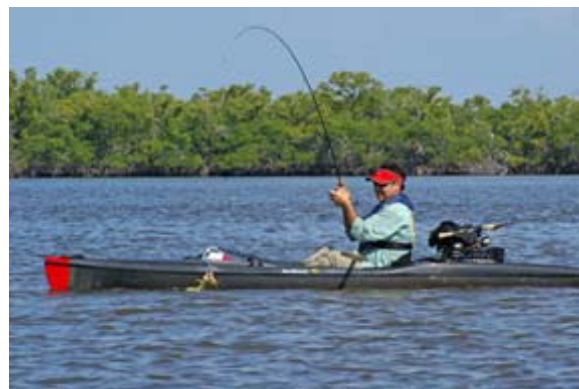


Eventually, I worked my way back to the bay near the mouth of Chokoloskee pass where a very large oyster bar sits next to the entrance of the pass. This oyster bar is the home of a very large flock of white pelicans during the winter months (check out my new years eve trip blog in Everglades Adventures for a photo of the birds). The white pelicans leave south Florida around March, so I did not expect to see any today. I passed this oyster bar in early April and noticed one lone white pelican hanging out on the island. I didn't give it much thought since it was migration season for the birds and maybe the one bird was slow in the process. To my surprise, I came upon a lone white pelican on this July day. I slowly and quietly got to the island and had to work my way around so as to catch the better lighting. The bird was skittish and got into the water and swam around, making a very large circle to avoid me but not get too far from his home.



I placed my stake out pole in the water near the oyster bar, keeping a comfortable distance, and waited. Eventually he came back and I proceeded to get several shots of him. It wasn't until after I looked at the photos on my computer that I realized something. The bird must be quite old and had the battle scars to prove it. I can only guess, but it seems that this white pelican was too old to make the flight north and decided to stay here in Florida, along with all the other retirees. I wondered about the life span of these birds and hoped that this bird had lived a long one.

Now, I would concentrate on my fishing buddies, 2 kayakers and one canoeist. Each had a fairly good day of fishing so I was told, but as usual, when the photographer shows up, the fish stop biting. One kayaker did catch a beautiful snook in my presence but my reflexes were slow, I was in a bad position and ended up with a blurry image. It did get posted on a kayak fishing forum, for informational purposes (e.g., bragging rights), but it is not a photo I would flaunt. After awhile another kayaker got on with a good size Jack and this time, I was in perfect position to get some continuous shots. Here are two of them:





Beautiful action shots, I thought; good lighting, nice depth of field, and sharp focus on the action. The fisherman in the photo was also proud of this moment. But, according to some fishing expert friends of mine, this is not a bragadocious moment; it was, after all, only a Jack. This photo did NOT get posted on the fishing forum to my disappointment. “I mean come on, can’t kayak fishermen appreciate a good photo!” I argued, but only on deaf ears.

By 11 am the storm clouds were heading our way from the southwest. I took some vertical shots and got the widest range I could get (75 mm) so I could capture some of the clouds with the water and mangroves. Here’s a shot before we got off the water. The canoeist looks very attentive to the clouds!



Any day on Chokoloskee Bay is a good day. A few hours on the water passes quickly but its well worth starting your day early.

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