

Photo Journal: August 4, 2007, another morning at low tide, from Deering Estate

No matter what day or how often I get out to Biscayne Bay, each trip is special. Every time I get into my canoe (or kayak) and venture out, I'm presented with an unexpected gift. And this day was no different.

The bay is huge and there are several locations to access it with a canoe or kayak. The most southern put-in before entering the keys is the entrance to Biscayne National Park, where there is a very nice ramp for small boats and some rentals as well. And it's free. Further north is Blackpoint marina that has a very long jetty separating the powerboat marina from the canoe/kayak put-in. This is my favorite put-in because it begins in a tranquil creek leading you into a large lagoon that opens into the gulf. At sunrise, it's breathtaking. The most northern point for a put-in is from Matheson Hammock Park, closest to the city of Miami. There is one other put-in site on Biscayne Bay and it seems to be the most popular among paddlers. It is next to the Deering Estate (south of Matheson) and as far as I know, is run by Miami-Dade county (or city, depending on who you talk to). This is a relatively new spot for paddlers to access the bay and the city thought it would serve kayakers and canoeists well by building it. Here's the catch. You drive in about ¼ mile on a very rutty, rocky road (full of potholes) that is bordered completely by cement bumpers. The road ends with a turn-around, plenty of space for several cars to pull up for loading and unloading. Unfortunately, you can't get much closer than a couple hundred feet from the water. I suppose the idea was to keep out powerboaters, but compared to all the other put-ins along the bay, this is absolutely the least canoe/kayak friendly. But yet, I saw more kayakers this day than any other day I've been on the bay. We came to this access site today to try something different, despite there being better access sites for us. For me, I would have new areas for photographing and my paddling companion had heard about the number of bonefish schools in the area. So we put up with the put-in and got in the water before 7 am.

Once again, the sunrise was colorless due to several large clouds on the horizon (typical Florida summer day). I anticipated some good sunrise shots because this is a beautiful location for them, so I set up the tripod and got ready for the sun to break through the clouds. There was an abandoned mini-katamaran stuck at low tide just off shore and it would make a nice silhouette for a photo. I prepared for the shot as my paddling companion proceeded to slide her canoe into the water and head out. A funny thing happened along the way; the hook on her lure which was sticking out of the bow caught her pants in the most unfortunate location. Lucky for her it caught only the pants. I know nothing about lures and hooks and the various tools used to fix this type of problem, but there I was with tripod and camera set up on an uneven ground of wet sand and I didn't want to leave it alone. Besides, we were the only people there at the time except for one character who I suppose was there for nothing more than the sunrise. My dilemma was that I didn't want to walk away from the camera. But, eventually I snapped out of it and came to my friend's rescue. After some finagling and a lesson on how to remove the barb, we got the pants unhooked. There would be no sunrise shots today.

Lowest tide was about 8:30 am, so it would be shallow for several hundred feet from the mangroves. Today, I brought two cameras, the Canon Powershot with a wide angle lens attached, and the Sony A100 with the 300mm telephoto lens attached. It was sitting in my lap, while I kept the Canon in the pelican case below my seat. I brought the Canon so I could get some wide open shots without having to change lenses in the canoe. I knew the Deering Estate from the water would make for a nice photograph. The old house sits back away from the water with enough space for two long rows of royal palms that meet you at the water's edge. Here's one of those photos. With the telephoto lens I could never put the canoe tip in the photo, something I often do for those wide angle shots. As cliché as it gets, having the canoe or kayak tip in the photo gives the viewer a sense of place and puts you right there in the boat, so I've always favored keeping it in the photo. With kayaks, you get the benefit of a color (usually) that adds a nice contrast to the water and scenery.



Near the put-in were a few wading birds, one great blue heron and a few ibises. Ibises (I call them the Jimmy Durante birds) are kind of like chickens. In fact, Totch Brown, an Everglades native, called them Chokoloskee Chickens, because, well, they taste like chicken. Anyway, Ibises are everywhere, even in my backyard. They are not spectacular like the twice sized great blue heron, they're feathers are a white or if an immature, a dull gray (unless it's a glossy ibis) and they don't catch large fish. In other words, they are relatively boring from a photographer's point of view. But, I will say that their profiles are always interesting and they have a brilliant blue eye color, especially during mating season. Their beaks seem to get a more brilliant color of orange during that time. Ibises will let you get relatively close to them and they generally hang out near the mangroves. That's why I like them. And they make the funniest honking noises too, quite amusing birds actually. Today, I took some photos of a couple ibises, not so much for the birds, but for the background that is in contrast to them. Before I owned a telephoto lens, I would display photos of birds and always talk up the background because I could never fill the frame with the bird. Now that I have a telephoto for those close ups, I still like the background. Check out this one photo of the ibis, which makes up a very small percentage of the total photo. It gives you a glimpse into Biscayne Bay and the mangrove jungle that lines its shore. It's almost unearthly, from another world. I like the cave-like feel of this shot and the bird offers a nice contrast to it. And the reflections are always an interesting touch with these photos.



I moved further south and harassed a few more ibises and a cormorant or two, but there really wasn't much activity in terms of wading birds. My friend radioed me from an area north of the Deering Estate to describe the very large bird rookery she came across while looking for bonefish. I was at least 2 miles

away at that point. I started to paddle in that direction. Later, the tables would turn and I would find myself in a small canal loaded with very large mangrove snapper (some of the tastiest fish I ever ate) and my fishing companion was no where to be found.

As I headed north toward this purported bird rookery I came across a yellowcrown night heron that had come out of hiding and was now busily looking for breakfast at low tide. I got up to him quite close (about 25 ft or so) and was able to get some beautiful shots of him catching one crab right after the other. I've become quite familiar with this particular type of bird and have had very good luck photographing it this summer. Here's one of those shots from today. I was particularly happy with the location because of the reflections from the mangroves that offered a nice green color in the water along with the grasses surrounding the bird as he hunted. This was different from the shot of my yellowcrown night heron in Chokoloskee Bay, where it was all oyster beds. Nevertheless, even though you think you have enough photos of a particular bird, they always manage to give you a new pose. Here's one of the shots.



Eventually, we started heading back toward Deering Estate and that's where I saw a few schools of bonefish revealing their dorsal fins. I swear, if I ever get a shot of those fish, I'll be the happiest photographer on the planet; one of these days. In the meantime, I perused some mangroves from a slight distance and noticed some brown pelicans and several cormorants in the canopies. I thought I'd head over there and see what I could get. I started getting some shots of the pelicans overhead when I noticed a green heron in the mangroves at eye level. Then I saw another, and another. There were probably 5 or 6 green herons and at least two of them were juveniles with their scraggly brown feathers sticking up from their head. One adult green heron worked itself up to a tree limb that was probably 10 ft above me. I had a great opportunity to get some shots of this bird as he preened. He stayed put the entire time as I lined myself up for the shots, trying to get the mangrove branches out of the way. I would get a few shots while my boat was being moved along with the current (by now it was an incoming tide), then I would grab a mangrove branch and pull myself back to my spot. The background was great, the lighting was perfect. A couple shots of this guy are below. I did some serious cropping on the second shot.

This is an example of one of those situations where I have a great opportunity to photograph a cooperative bird but having to deal with the current moving my boat and the various tree branches that sometimes are impossible to get out of the way without breaking them off. I'm not against breaking off a dead branch now and then, but I don't go out of my way to move things around for a shot. I like to think of it as part of the challenge. My philosophy with photographing nature is to photograph it the way it is, not the way you want it to be. Along those lines, I often encounter birds that get spooked easily by me and my boat and will consequently go into flight. I can anticipate their flight and once caught myself intentionally scaring a bird into flight just for the photograph. I allowed my boat to move in close to the bird while talking to the bird. The bird took off and after attempting a flight shot I stopped for a moment, did some reflecting, and decided that was not to anyone's benefit, not even mine. Now, I wait it out, drift

along and have gotten so good at stealth that many times I get too close to the bird to get a shot with the 300mm. I get closer and closer and the bird gets larger and larger in the frame. That's when it's nice to have a zoom lens where you can change your focal length.



While photographing the adult green heron, a juvenile got himself on a branch that allowed me to get some good shots of him. He was also preening and just hanging out. Here's a shot of the youngster in the middle of a good shake.



That was a gift. Green herons are generally very difficult to photograph. They hide very well on the low end of the mangroves, close to the water. Today, I caught them after they had their breakfast and were resting and cleaning up, apparently not bothered by my presence. I had to maneuver in the mangroves between shots with the moving current. The mangrove branches are never exactly where you want them to be, so you have to work the scene so to speak and find the best spot for shooting. I was lucky today, the birds were cooperative and stood still for me. When fishing or looking for food, green herons are very elusive but great subjects to photograph when you get the opportunity. Of all the heron birds, the green heron is the most like a shape-shifter. It can look like 3 different kinds of birds it seems. In flight, you can see their long necks that lack that crookedness you see in large egrets or great blue herons. When in a classic pre-strike position (the most commonly photographed position), they're heads become part of the torso and the neck disappears. And when standing up in alert position, they are indistinguishable from the Least Bittern. The two photos here of the adult green heron are very different looks for the same bird.

If all I had to show for this day were the green heron shots, it would be a perfect photo day. Every day on Biscayne Bay (and Chokoloskee Bay for that matter) brings a new experience, what I call a photo mini-adventure. I had never seen so many green herons in one small area, I had another great time with a nightheron and I was able to practice some flight shots as well. I'm a lucky person.

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