

Photo Journal: September 8, 2007, Biscayne Bay (in the creeks near Matheson Hammock)

Biscayne Bay has been a windfall of bird photography this summer. At low tide, birds are out in numbers feeding in the shallows. Today would be different. We had high tide at 8 am and were on the water by 7 am. This meant that I would not have any opportunities to photograph the birds catching fish or crab along the shallow shoreline. This morning there was an easterly wind that was helping to push the tide in. As we drove into the Matheson Hammock launch area, we had to drive through salt water several inches deep on the roads. The water came right up to the pavement at the launch site. After unloading the car, I parked it on the other side of the road, where we normally park. When we arrived back later that morning, I found my car in a pool of water that had worked its way up there during high tide. The high tide and a 10-15 knot wind this morning would not make it a good bird photography day.

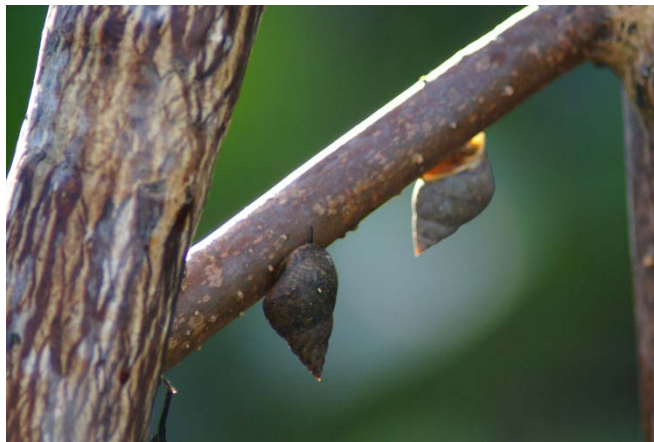
The clouds were thick in the sky, as usual, making this morning relatively dark. Here is a shot from the launch site, with Key Biscayne in the horizon with the morning sun. It would be about an hour before I had the sun without a cloud covering.



Because of the high tide and wind, it is a perfect day to go into the creeks. First, I would do some paddling, heading south along the shoreline, weaving in and out of the mangrove trees that usually serve as a feeding area for birds at low tide. I headed down to the Snapper Creek canal and with the stiff crosswind, I was out in the open bay not with the camera and lens secured inside 2 closed dry bags. There was no reason for me to hang out in the open bay, so I headed back to the shoreline and cruised over to the creek where I would spend the rest of the morning.

Going into the creeks in these conditions is a perfect opportunity to photograph the creatures that live among the mangrove roots. It was an incoming tide when I entered the creek but by the time I started heading back out to the bay, it was an outgoing tide. The current was relatively strong with a new moon making it difficult to photograph the little creatures along the way. If I try to anchor my boat in the mangroves, I scare all the crabs away. So, I drifted with the current without paddling and looked hard along the mangrove roots for crabs and snails. The large red mangrove crabs can be easily spotted if the sun hits their red shell, making them glow among the dark mangroves. Lighting in here is not great; along the roots it is dark. Today, I experimented a bit and tried a couple different strategies. First, I bumped up the ISO to 800 and that seemed to work very well for the shots taken on the side of the creek where there was little sunlight. Then, I tried using the fill flash. I found a great shot of two snails on a mangrove root with nice backlight that gave them a glow of sorts. I turned on the flash and maneuvered the canoe as best I could for a good shot. With the 420mm focal length I was working with, I found that I could not get very close to the snails, which meant I had nothing to anchor my boat to. I would have to stay in the middle of the creek and keep moving back into place as the current moved me along. I got a few shots, but the focus was not too good. I use continuous focus when the boat is moving and quickly learned the flash did not serve well under those conditions. Nevertheless, here are 2 shots I liked. One of the snails

was moving toward the other, so it was interesting watching them. I noticed though that snails do sense your presence and will try to hide, such as the crabs.

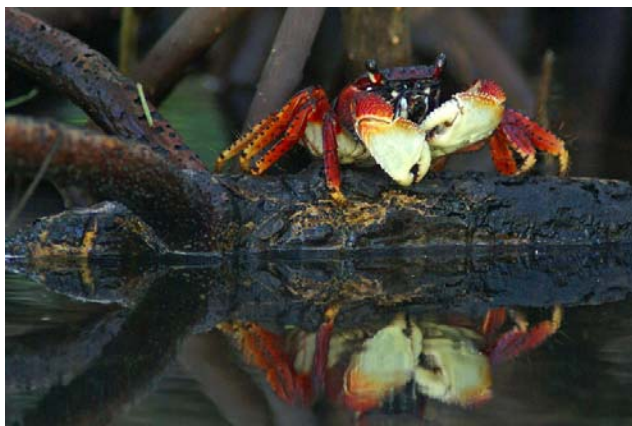


I spotted some red mangrove crabs along the way. To give you an idea of how difficult shooting among the mangroves can be, look at this shot below. Here, you have a mangrove crab capturing some nice sunlight. But in order to get a full view shot of this animal, you can see that finding an opening can be next to impossible. By itself, this is difficult shot, but add a moving boat to the mix and it becomes downright frustrating.



I continued drifting along the creek and tried to capture a crab or snail whenever I saw the opportunity. For the most part, the photos I got were out of focus, mainly because I could not get a

shutter speed faster than 1/125. An ISO 800 allowed for good exposure, but with a moving canoe, focusing on a tiny subject was a spectacular feat. I did get lucky, there was a large red mangrove crab sticking out and I was able to get several full frontal shots of this guy, without him scurrying away. The best part, its reflection was clear in the water, making it a beautiful shot. Here's one.



I headed back out to the bay with the out going tide. There were no birds except for a couple cormorants so I took some shots of the Miami skyline. Here's one of those shots, notice the "forest of cranes" among the high rise buildings. The term "forest of cranes" was coined by Dave Barry who described some of the attractions of the Miami area for the tourists. He suggested that one should see the forest of cranes before leaving the area and if you didn't know any better, you're thinking there is a flock of sandhill or whooping cranes somewhere in the Everglades. For those of us who live in Miami, we know what the forest of cranes is all too well (forest of construction cranes that is). Here, the city of Miami looks out of control. You have to wonder how they were able to construct so many high rise buildings in a relatively small space. But they have and continue to do so; unfortunately we haven't seen the last of it yet. I find these photos I take from Biscayne Bay interesting because they show an interesting contrast, urban meets wilderness. This is always a reminder that I am never to far from paradise when I am in the city.



Finally, before heading back to Matheson Hammock Park, I started paddling around the mangrove trees that sit out from the shoreline and were now in about 2 feet of water. I saw several snails on the roots as my boat drifted by. I decided to anchor the boat and get out and walk around the mangroves and try to find some good shots. Here is one shot I managed to get before I had to leave (incoming storms!). For this opportunity, I would love to have a macro lens on hand. Perhaps next time.



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