

Photo Journal: August 12, 2007, finding the bird rookery with a lousy teleconverter

This journal has two parts, the first about the incredible morning I had on Biscayne Bay and the other part describing a hard lesson I learned concerning camera equipment. But first I'll tell you the best part about an excellent morning paddling an incredible bay full of life.

It had been over a week since we put in near the Deering Estate (see Photo Journal August 4, 2007) and ever since my paddling companion came across the bird rookery, I had been dying to get back out there. Finally, I had this morning to do that, the tide was low at about 6:30 am and would be in-coming all morning. I arrived at 7 am and was on the water shortly after that. My intention was to make a beeline to the bird rookery, which would be about a 30-min steady paddle. It took me an hour to get there, not because I was slow, but because of all the photo opportunities along the way, and some amazing surprises.

From the Deering Estate, heading north, there is a narrow mangrove island that juts out from the edge of the Estate. Once you round the corner of that island on the ocean side, you'll see several birds wading at low tide near the mangrove shoreline due north. Today, there were a dozen or so white ibises enjoying the crab and other small aquatic creatures. There were two juvenile yellowcrown nightheron as well, although they were not cooperative as the ibises. I did manage to get a good shot of one of them before they flew off to hide in the mangroves. I hung out with the ibises for a spell; they are always fun to photograph. As common as these birds are (thankfully), they are one of my favorites to photograph. When eating or preening, you can capture an endless number of poses from these comical birds (I call them Jimmy Durante birds). And they don't seem to mind photographers who keep a relatively comfortable distance from them. Here are a couple photos, one of the ibises, one of the nightheron.



After that, I continued along the mangrove shoreline where there was an occasional greenheron, tricolor heron, nightcrown heron and snowy egret. If you are patient enough to allow only the mild current to move you along, you can peruse the mangroves and find several birds along the way. You often have to look hard for them, most blend very well. Many times you don't notice them until they are flying away from you. But with patience and quietness, you learn to find them before they get scared off. I managed some decent shots; here is one of the snowy egret.



I started paddling away from the shoreline. Frequently, I would see shark fins come out of the water; they love to feed in this shallow area. It's thrilling to know they are close by! From the shoreline I looked east toward Chicken Key, which is close by. Just north of chicken key is a channel coming out of a marina. There was something very interesting happening in the distance just this side of the channel. The early morning sun was shining brightly as clouds started to burn off and I could barely see the silhouettes in the water. I began to approach and started to see that the silhouettes were birds, hundreds of them. I wasn't quite sure what they were, so I continued paddling toward them. Whatever they were, it was going to be an interesting photo, so I headed in an easterly direction that would get me to one side of the birds and then I could come back around toward them with the morning light behind me. What I was observing was a very large flock of cormorants, there must have been at least 500 of them. I had never seen such a thing before! There were one or two gulls that were flying around them, occasionally scooping downward and disturbing one of the cormorants who would flap its wings as if to scold the gull. I finally got into a good shooting position. The birds, with their brilliant turquoise eyes and orange beaks were all facing the same direction. They reminded me of zombies all mindlessly moving toward the same point. One cormorant was further out front, away from the crowd and was busily diving for food. Every time I noticed this lone leader, it had its head in the water. For a minute I thought it was dead and the others were attending its funeral. Occasionally, a cormorant would fly off or move to another portion of the crowd. I started shooting and found it impossible to capture the entire flock in one shot without losing them in the photo. I settled for group shots, at least to capture the bird profiles, all in unison.

At some point, more gulls started swooping down toward the cormorants, disturbing them. Things started getting more exciting as the cormorants were starting to fly off. It was right at that moment I ran out of memory. I shoot in RAW so 1 GB card gives me 65 photos. The largest card I use is 2 gigs, giving me about 135 photos. I won't go any higher; I'm just a bit paranoid of losing an entire card. 135 photos are easier to lose than 1350 photos. At this moment, I regretted I didn't start out with the 2 gig card, so there I was. 65 photos later fumbling to change memory cards while the cormorants were beginning to fly away. I'm not sure why the gulls were bothering the cormorants, after all the cormorants were minding their own business. Finally, there were a dozen or so gulls and the cormorants would have no more of them. And that is when they all started to fly off, a half dozen or so at a time until the entire flock had

shifted toward another spot in the bay. I managed to get some shots of the melee after getting my 2 gig card in place. Here are couple shots from this spectacle of birds.



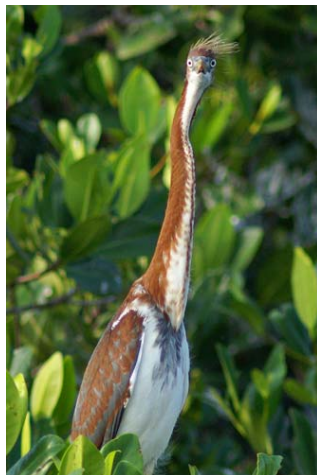
After the cormorant show, I headed over to the southwest point of Chicken Key where several great white egrets were wading. As I approached, one of the birds had just caught a fish and was dealing with his catch. I couldn't get close enough for a decent shot of the bird with his catch and he eventually flew off with the fish in its mouth. I would have sat around and hung out with these birds longer but by then, I needed to get to the rookery. The thing with great white egrets in my opinion is that they are very difficult photo subjects. To get a worthy shot of one of these birds, you need to capture them in action, in flight or in a nest. Otherwise, your shot of a long slender white bird will look like millions of others. And if you want to capture them in action, you need lots of patience; they will stand in one position for hours if necessary. I got lucky with them on Biscayne Bay where the fishing is incredible. But usually, they are tough birds. The other thing about these birds, as well as any white bird, is the difficult metering situation. I always shoot them at  $-.7EV$ , a trick I learned from Jack Rogers. I spot meter on the bird itself and let the background go dark. I can always use the *shadow and highlights* option in Adobe Elements to bring back some of the background and I have the white feather detail of the bird.

Finally I start paddling to the channel where I would cross it before passing a long row of mangrove islands that line the channel for about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile or so. I quickly cross the channel and paddle along the mangroves on the other side. From here, you can see the bird rookery to the north, a small mangrove island situated close to the channel in a large lagoon. From about a  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile or less, I could see several white figures in the canopies of the island. Along the way, the mangrove jetty provides a roosting area for cormorants and egrets. Today, there were dozens of cormorants in the trees. They spooked easily as I

paddled by and would skip off across the water and settle somewhere in the lagoon, away from me as I headed toward the rookery.

As I approached the island, I started to hear the noise. I've read books about the Everglades that offer descriptions written by American soldiers who tromped through the swamps looking for Indians, or those Americans who settled in the area. In these descriptions they tell about the sounds of the birds that would drive men crazy. The cacophony of noise from the trees was deafening. Soldiers wrote with fear about this sound. Today, as I approached the island, I heard that sound. Now I think I know what they were writing about. This was new to me. I had to stop and listen. I wanted a bird expert with me at this time to identify all the individual sounds that, to an unexperienced ear, sounded like unorganized noise. I heard the low guttural noises of the cormorants; at least I could distinguish that from the rest. But there were bird sounds I had never heard before. Once I stopped and listened more intently, the non-descript noise became a symphony. I was in awe that such a place existed among the development and human encroachment of the Miami area. This was a testament to the rebirth of Biscayne Bay and the Everglades. Maybe we can co-exist with the birds and the alligator after all? I felt so much optimism, what a joy to have this available.

As I approached the island quietly, letting the in-coming tide carry me toward it, I began to see the birds and there were hundreds of them. Many juveniles and some adults, I saw blue herons, green herons, tricolor herons, snowy egrets, cattle egrets, cormorants, anhingas, all in the canopies. Below, along the dark forest of mangrove roots, I spotted a blackcrown nightheron who seemed to have the advantage of the entire bottom floor with hundreds of residents living above. The birds spooked easily and would fly to higher canopies, the penthouse suites, where they would be well hidden from the intruder in the canoe. Many seemed to not be phased by my presence and stayed put; these were the young tricolor and green herons. The cormorants seemed to have made peace with me by now and were also not bothered. I tried to shoot as much as I could. The current kept me moving so I anchored. Even so, it was very difficult to line up good shots that didn't have the bird camouflaged by mangrove leaves and branches, they were doing their best to hide from me. So I settled for a few shots of the juvy tricolor and greenherons, couple shots of the juvy blueherons in flight and a cattle egret in plumage. Next time, I would like to approach at lower tide and sit quietly in one spot; let the birds get use to me. Here are a few shots from the island of birds.





I left the island, with black clouds forming in the northern horizon. I was able to get a good flight shot of a great white egret in one of the mangroves lining the channel. I found a spot to stop in the mangroves for a quick break before heading back. A fast moving storm was coming my way and I would need to paddle back in a steady manner. If I rated my days on Biscayne Bay this summer, this would come in as a 10 in terms of activity and opportunities for photography. But for the actual photography part of the day, I rate this as a low 2. Why is that? Here's part two of my story.

Recently, I purchased the excellent quality Minolta prime telephoto lens, AF 300mm, f4. This is a relatively fast lens with exceptional optics and it goes very well with the Sony A100. I purchased this lens from my friend Jack Rogers who upgraded his Sony with the faster version, AF 300mm, f2.8. The man uses a Minolta APO 1.4X teleconverter; he used it with the f4 lens that I purchased and he now uses it with his new lens. So naturally, he did not sell the teleconverter to me when I bought his lens. I wanted a teleconverter and searched for the Minolta version all over the internet, but with no luck. I found a Sigma version and couple other knock off versions as well, but no Minolta. Minolta was bought out by Sony so I looked at Sony's version. They wanted \$600 and it was my understanding that a 1.4X teleconverter should not cost more than a couple hundred dollars.

At last I found a compatible teleconverter on ebay and it was going for \$80. What a steal I thought! I snatched it up and within a week, I had a Tokina PRO 1.4X teleconverter for my Minolta lens. This would be great, now I had 420mm to work with, meaning I could get close ups without scaring the birds! I took it out on the water once before today with several kayak fishermen. I had some good photo opportunities and took them home to process on the computer. I couldn't help but notice while shooting with the teleconverter that the autofocus (and continuous focus) was sluggish. The camera became slow and I was having a more difficult time getting into focus. I figured that came with the territory and chalked it up to lack of experience. A little practice was all I needed. It wasn't until I started looking at the photos at home that I realized what I was dealing with. None of the photos were sharp, they were

adequate, but not to the point I had been getting previously. With the Minolta lens, you can demand sharp, tack-on photos, and you will get them.

I took the teleconverter and lens out again, this time to Crandon Park, with a tripod. Same thing happened, loss of sharpness, slow focusing; very frustrating. And now today, with the amazing bird rookery, I was again let down. In the meantime, my friend Jack scolded me and I'm sure he felt a bit insulted that I would attach a piece of crap teleconverter to that premium lens he sold me. Now I understand. Buying that \$80 Tokina teleconverter for the Minolta lens was like going to Home Depot to buy window treatments for a \$3 million home. It made no sense! OK, I get it, I get it! Even as I approach the age of 50 years, I still struggle with that concept "You get what you pay for". Seems we try to cut corners and it always comes back on us. Right after this epiphany, I found a Minolta APO teleconverter on ebay, going for \$450. I bought it and it will arrive soon. I'll get back to that rookery, it will be lower tide and I will have 420mm to work with. Never again will I try to save a buck when it comes to equipment. That would have worked a year ago, before the Sony, before the Minolta, but not now. I'm already deep into it, there's no turning back.

So there you have it, dear reader, I hope my lesson learned will save you some frustration and money. Allow yourself to learn from others experience. In the meantime, my summer is coming to a screeching halt. I had another great day on Chokoloskee Bay and will have that journal soon. For that trip, I left the Tokina at home.

One last note, I did get back to my car and loaded the boat and gear before the storm came in. I hung out watching the black clouds roll toward the shore where I comfortably stood with my car near by. The winds had already increased to 20 knots easily and white caps were forming all over the bay. Such is south Florida in the summer. If you know this and can get yourself out of bed and on the water before 7 am, you'll have the best conditions for photographing; calm waters, morning light and lots of photo subjects before those storms roll in. This may be my last outing to Biscayne Bay for awhile, so until next time on the bay, I'll have some Everglades adventures to share with you.

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