

Photo Journal: July 14, 2007, a morning on Chokoloskee Island

Today we arrive at Chokoloskee Island Park before 7 am and are in the water by 7:30. It's a new moon (like the full moon, tides are stronger during this phase) and high tide was 4:13 am and low would be at 9:46 am. I had a similar plan as my previous visit on July 2nd that also provided me an outgoing tide with lowest tide later in the morning. I started to head out across the bay as my fishing buddies would be hanging out there, working the oyster bars as the lowering water levels would continually reveal more of them. I looked to my left (south) and noticed a whiteness in the distance. This looked familiar. Back in December on our new years eve trip (see Lostmans Expedition story in my Everglades Adventures) we noticed the same whiteness after putting in at Outdoor Resorts marina on Chokoloskee Island. As we headed down the bay toward Rabbit Key pass, the white wall continued to grow and as we approached, the vision became clearer. It was an oyster bed island full of white pelicans. There must have been over a hundred of the birds and I was able to capture some photos of them. One of the photos is included in the Lostmans Expedition story.

Today, I was excited to see this familiar white wall and knew it had to be the same oyster bar. The last time I was here (see July 2 photo journal), there was one lone white pelican residing on the oyster shell island. I could not believe that this would be a group of white pelicans because they had all left for the summer months ago, except for the one left behind. So, I figured it was a flock of ibises or egrets. I look through the 300mm lens to get a better look and lo and behold, the white wall turned red. As I approached, it became evident that these were not egrets, they were roseate spoonbills. I started paddling faster with excitement; wow, a flock of brightly colored reddish orange birds were awaiting me. As I neared the island, I slowed down and got ready for the shots. I got the camera ready; continuous focus, continuous shooting, set to f8 in aperture priority. These settings gave me high shutter speeds that would capture any birds in flight with stop action. Perfect; now I had to get myself situated with the light and the tides. It was an outgoing tide so I paddled between the roseate island and Chokoloskee Island lining myself up so that the tide would cause me to drift near the birds, but not directly toward them. I would have the morning light behind me, a perfect set up.

Once lined up where I wanted to be, I started shooting as I got closer. The water levels were still a bit high, but I tried to put my stake out pole in the water once I got to a good location from where I could shoot without the tide moving me away. A friend had given me his stake out pole to try, it's heavier than mine (I made it from PVC piping) and did not have a T-handle. I could not get the thing far enough into the hard sand (filled with oysters) enough to keep it in place, so I had to settle for drifting.

By then, I was within 50 ft of the island and the birds had already started to fly away, a few at a time. When I got too close, they all took off, which gave me some beautiful photos of a flock of roseates in flight, but I was not happy that I disrupted them. They all flew off to nearby mangrove canopies. The white pelican had taken off as well and was now swimming around waiting for me to get out of his territory. Below is one of the shots that illustrates the size difference between the white pelican and the roseates. Even brown pelicans look small compared to their white counterparts.



I proceeded to head over to the mangroves where the roseates had dispersed. To get to them, I would cross the entrance of Chokoloskee pass, a busy boat route. There was a small oyster island with two roseates just on the other side of the entrance. I lined myself up again to get closer to the island so I could get more shots of these birds. Just as I was approaching, a 50-ft yacht of sorts came buzzing by with its huge wake. The roseates were not happy and flew away. Oh well, I would have to continue toward the mangroves if I was to get any more roseate shots. And I did. I headed toward the end of the mangrove line so that the tide would carry me past the mangroves where the roseates were perched all along. I found certain roseates perched on lone branches that offered the brilliant blue sky as the background, as opposed to the more cluttered mangrove background. I also managed to get one roseate in flight. Here's one of the shots of a bird in the canopy:



From high in the canopies, the roseates must have felt secure enough, none attempted to fly away as I slowly and quietly drifted below them. I was content with my roseate shots and decided to move on and leave them to their morning. I headed further up the bay toward my fishing buddies. I passed an osprey in a dead tree near the roseate's oyster island, the white pelican was still around and a yellowcrown night heron was flying from one oyster bed to another, attempting to stay away from me. I hung out with the fishermen for awhile, got a couple shots of them (not catching anything) with the cloudy sky above. I also got a great shot of the yellowcrown night heron in flight. It was a sweet shot too, eye level, nice wingspan position and perfect catch light on the eye. Here it is:



I left my fishing friends and rounded the outer island that would lead me toward the sandfly pass entrance. I knew there would be plenty of oyster bars exposed just on the other side of the island and I would find some birds hanging out there. There was a juvenile osprey perched high on top of a mangrove canopy. I couldn't get close enough to him to get a full frame shot, but I was able to photograph him as he cleaned his feathers. No sooner did I leave the osprey that I came across an oyster bed with a yellowcrown night heron, crabbing for his breakfast. He was in a perfect location for me to set up for some shots. I drifted slowly and quietly toward him and put the stake out pole in the ground to stay put. He had just captured a small crab when I started shooting.

Something interesting was happening with this bird. He wasn't doing anything, just standing with this crab in his mouth. After awhile it became clear that the crab had grabbed hold of the bird's bill. The bird would shake his head occasionally to get it loose. Here's one of the first shots where he looks exasperated. Notice the reflection of his legs in the water. I purposely captured the reflection with a vertical shot.



Eventually, he was able to break it loose, work it around his mouth, toss it and gulp it down. Here's a photo of his successful consumption of the crab:



This was fun! In the meantime, I was able to get very close to the bird; he seemed to be use to me and didn't mind that I was there. He continued to crab and I captured a couple more of his successes.

When approaching birds or any wildlife for that matter from a boat, you must be quiet and slow. Even then, the birds will often spook before you have time to get your camera ready. But with practice, you learn to approach them with patience. It helps to have at least a 300mm lens so you can maintain a more comfortable distance between you and the bird. When approaching them, turn off your VHF radio, use

the paddle sparingly and only for steering and keep it as low as possible. When you get a good position, anchor yourself. Remember the direction of the tide, if you are being pulled toward the bird, anchor off the stern, opposite if you are being pulled away. And always line up for the right lighting. This sometimes means you have to paddle farther, but it's worth it.

When shooting birds, always try to get the light in the eye (catch light) and focus on the eye. When capturing movement (in flight, catching fish or crab, nest behavior, etc), use continuous focus and set your shots for continuous, you don't want to miss any of the action. Better to have 10 photos with 1 or 2 keepers than none. It can be very challenging from a moving boat, that's why I recommend a camera or lens with built-in image stabilization. I don't think I could have gotten any these shots as well as I did without IS (although I have been practicing and notice improvement). It takes patience to photograph birds and wildlife, sometimes they just come right out in front of you and you just have to be ready. But mostly, you have to wait and watch. I've learned more about wildlife behavior through my photography than at any other time in my life. To photograph wildlife, you have to be a naturalist to get the best shots. You have to know the behaviors so you can anticipate the perfect shot. One way to do this is to hang out with experienced nature photographers; that's the best way to learn. Follow them around for while, learn by example. A couple tips I got from a workshop I took with Jack Rogers was to stop down when shooting white birds (typically -.7) and that birds fly into the wind when they are taking off or landing. Knowing this flight behavior can help you anticipate a flight shot.

Here's one last photo, these are the old pilings in front of the Chokoloskee Island Park marina where we put in. Hurricane Wilma of 2005 was like a wrecking ball swinging its way across Chokoloskee Island. The marina has been re-built and improved, but here are the remains of a dock. I like shooting these pilings and have taken some nice shots of brown pelicans. I like the reflection in the water here.



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