



"Birds In Our Midst" PART TWO
by Carol Ellis

White Pelican takes flight in Everglades waters.

Bird photographers have the patience to sit behind a tree blind for hours waiting for the bird to appear. To the contrary, when I see a bird, I raise my camera to shoot and I get a photo of a bird flying away.

One winter, when the birds are plentiful, I hired a guide to tour the Florida Keys Backcountry on his flats boat. The guide was skilled in finding birds, the only problem, the 500 horsepower announcement of our arrival, caused the birds to fly, which then resulted in a high speed pursuit from my perch in front of the center console, firing 10 continuous frames per second with my camera. A guide's reputation is only as good as the fish they catch, or in this case, birds that are sighted. We return to the dock with bird images captured, albeit flying away. Looking back at the experience, it is quite disturbing, for me to have disrupted the birds for the sake of a photo. The only consolation is, unlike James Audubon's artwork, I didn't have to kill the bird, in order to paint it.

During July 2020, we're just emerging from Covid lockdown, and I get a call asking for help. My caller states he's undergoing cancer treatments and needs to focus on his camera to relieve some of his pain, and to feel produc-

tive. He wants to make a journal, and illustrate it with his photographs.

At our first meeting, I thought I was there to solve some technical problem with the computer and the camera. By the third session with Joe the C.E.O. (I always promised to keep his identity confidential), I realized I was his teacher, and guiding light in this journey, which had no certain end.

Joe was used to world-wide hunting excursions, and had impressive shots from those trips. But now with cancer, his travel was limited to what he could capture in his backyard. Fortunately for Joe, his backyard bordered on a wildlife refuge, where he was documenting the American Crocodile in the mangrove lined creek behind his house.

Joe thinks the photos are not turning out so well. On first inspection, let's say his photos were extremely artsy. There was a little motion blur, camera blur, and a few photo filters added for good measure. Joe thought perhaps it's his camera. I viewed it as the challenges of low light photography, and just trying to make something good out of what he's captured.

I shared with him my recent experience involving my health, and how it affected my confidence and balance. I learned by attaching a mono-pod to my camera, my pictures would remain clear and in focus. I lent him my so called "photographer's cane", thinking perhaps his cancer treatments had affected his steadiness.

Immediately his photos improved. He went on to photograph with extreme competency an amazing array of species from his lanai, including Bald Eagle, Osprey, Crocodile, Heron, Egret, Red Shouldered Hawk, Red Cardinal, and Iguana. The images were compiled into a coffee table book, prefaced with Joe's words, and then he put the camera away. Yes, away. Project complete. On time and a little over budget.

Fast forward to Spring 2021, not too far from Joe's lanai, in a small pool of water next to a bridge, I encountered a diverse group of wading birds, just hanging out. A rare sight, I had to give it a shot, so I set up my tripod and Hasselblad medium format camera. So far so good, it is quiet, the birds are unfazed by my presence



Breakfast Club - Sepia-tinted photograph of shoreline and wading birds congregating in a North Key Largo pond.

"Birds In Our Midst" CONTINUED: Article and photos by Carol Ellis



Red Shouldered Hawk, a year round resident, overseeing from a native hardwood tree. Its main conservation threat is deforestation.



Osprey with Ladyfish catch in flight.

behind the cover of a green buttonwood branch. The resulting sepia tinted photograph I call the "Breakfast Club" and features our winter wading and shoreline bird visitors including Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, Little Blue Heron, Green Heron, Tricolored Heron, Snowy Egret, White Ibis, and Great White Heron.

Seeing these birds congregating within a residential community was a special experience. In 2020, scientists captured ten adult Roseate Spoonbills nesting in Florida Bay and attached cellular tracking devices so they could learn about their nesting and foraging habits. They've found the birds are using more ponds inside bay keys than the mangrove wetlands on the mainland that they historically preferred. Audubon incorporates trail cameras to monitor nesting success. The photos taken by the cameras are able to capture truly candid images of every movement these birds make. I cannot wait to learn more and hopefully see more birds in the future.

Joe passed this year. I miss him, however his

memory lives on, whenever I sight birds in our midst.



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She has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer/artist at Ocean Reef Club.

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