

Critters in Our Midst: Wading Birds

by Carol Ellis



A huge congregation of wading birds on a cold, overcast morning in Crocodile Lake. Photo by Jeanette Rivera.

The more I write about nature, the more people identify me with the subject. Every week, I get texts and emails with pictures, links to articles and sometimes even a call to get out here NOW... there's a huge flock of birds at the three way... referring to the intersection of Card Sound Road at Crocodile Lake in North Key Largo. From Ocean Reef, as you turn north on Card Sound Road, it is the first wetland to the right; a productive birding spot.



The Kingfisher often perches along Card Sound Road. Their "mohawk" style feathers on their head give the Kingfisher an air of confidence.

Such was the case on January 31st, about 8:00 am on a really cold morning with overcast sky when I received a call from Jeanette Rivera, naturalist at Ocean Reef, who was heading to work when she spotted a huge congregation of wading birds. She snapped a photo with her iPhone and in it were White Ibis, Great Egret, Cattle Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, White Pelican, Great White Heron, Reddish Egret and Wood Stork. It was just beautiful. Rivera said, "I was in shock that there were so many birds in that one spot! It was really magical... special... I love it!" As you can tell, Jeanette is very passionate about nature.

Of the birds present on this morning, the Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, White Pelican, and Great White Heron were a special treat, as they are most typically seen flying overhead, but on this day they were all here!

According to Isabella Collamati, Invasive Species Biologist at Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge, "time of day, time of year, temperature, and tide would probably be the biggest factors for why they chose to gather that day. It all lined up

so that the water was deep enough to host enough prey to keep all parties interested, but shallow enough to make the hunting easier." The birds' diet consists of minnows, mullet, and killifish, and they are pickier about size than species.

By the time I arrived, some of the birds had already left, but there were still dozens of birds. I had fun photographing the Reddish Egret and its distinctive hunting behavior. As it searched for fish, it would do a "crazy dance" as it jumped and hopped back and forth with outstretched wings raised over its head, peering at the water. The wings cast a shadow so they can see the prey better. The Reddish Egret is also one of the rare egrets, with only 2,000 pairs thought to be breeding in the U.S.

A Roseate Spoonbill sat grooming on a red mangrove perch. Not sure, perhaps it was there because the tide had risen and its short legs were no longer able to maneuver in the deepening wetland. Spoonbills have the broadened bill-ends full of nerve endings, to feel for animals when mud grubbing.

Though not a wading bird, I saw a Belted Kingfisher hunting near this shallow wetland. The Kingfisher can regularly be seen perched on the power lines along Card Sound Road.

Winter and Spring is nesting season for these birds, though I am not sure where these particular birds were



Show me a little pink, peach and fuchsia, you pretty Rosie! Spoonbills have broadened bill ends full of nerve endings, to feel for animals when mud grubbing.

from. Historically wading birds nested in the small Keys and nearby mangrove islands, within Florida Bay, far from human disturbances. The Everglades supports 70-90% of all wading bird nests annually. Wading birds initiated approx 89,514 nests in the Everglades in 2021. The wading bird nesting in 2021 was the highest recorded in 80 years.

Wading Birds...

CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



A solitary Great Egret in mating plumage, standing beside White Ibis, which is the most numerous wading bird species in South Florida.

Nesting success is highly dependent on the availability of fish, waters shallow enough to concentrate the fish, and water just the right level for the birds to wade in. Wading birds are abandoning their traditional nesting grounds in Florida Bay, and are moving north, partly due to increased salinity and the resulting reduction of species of fish that thrive in brackish water. Salinity of the Florida Bay is a problem, and the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) is intended to divert more fresh water through Taylor Slough to Florida Bay to improve the Bay's health by reducing salinity. On the mainland Everglades, Madeira Hammock and Paurotis Pond, are locations with a reliable number of birds and they are also a short field trip from the Keys.

It is very special living near designated wildlife refuges and national parks, but birds cannot read, and can easily settle in parks and gardens with suitable conditions.

Or they even can be seen flying overhead... this story was told to me by an avid tennis player Pat Holbrook, about a situation that occurred in mid-serve, requiring a "do-over." As Pat tossed the ball preparing to serve up a winner, and she called "let," there was a Roseate Spoonbill flying over the tennis court. It is rare to see a Roseate Spoonbill, but never had she seen one flying overhead. An unexpected pause, a brief delay of game... and all the players agreed, nature had served up a winner.



CAROL ELLIS has lived in South Florida her entire life and Key Largo for 37 years. Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



Observe how the Reddish Egret hunts. They do a "Crazy Dance" using their wings to shade the water for a better view and then give chase until they can strike their prey. Reddish Egrets differ from other egret species, that simply stand and wait for food to come before they strike.