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There's a bird that is everywhere, but is generally under appreciated... it's the seagull. This group of 47 species is one of the most recognizable, despite there being no such species as a “seagull.” These members of the gull and tern family are common near coastal beaches and waterways. If you mention “seagull” to a Keys resident who likes to fish, they'll tell you if you see a line of seaweed, with flocks of seagulls flying over it, chances are there will be mahi or tuna nearby.



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My photos of the Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) were taken from the stern of a sightseeing boat, while touring the wooden stilt houses of Stiltsville in Miami about a mile and a half offshore Key Biscayne. These birds are named for their calls that sound like a laugh. Gulls are opportune feeders, adept at fishing and scavenging. The passengers were throwing saltines into the air, to the gulls in our wake. These superb flyers managed to catch the cracker before it (or the bird) hit the water.

Key Biscayne is connected to Miami by a causeway called Rickenbacker Causeway, named after Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, the legendary WWI flying ace, Commander of the 94th Aero Squadron and innovative fighter pilot who devised new ways for how American pilots engaged the enemy.

The nation cherished Capt. Rickenbacker, and he was a true American hero. After the war, he started a car company, founded Florida Airways,



purchased the Indianapolis Motor Speedway from Carl Fisher, and founded a comic strip called *Ace Drummond*. Eddie's nickname after World War I was the 'Ace of Aces'.

But all those accomplishments pale in the eyes of Capt. Rickenbacker who was grateful for a seagull that saved his life and the lives of 6 other men who survived 21 days adrift at sea.

In October 1942, Eddie boarded a B-17 Bomber in Hawaii headed to see General Douglas MacArthur. Capt. Rickenbacker was a passenger and envoy on this secret military mission, when the plane had a navigation malfunction, got lost, ran out of fuel, and ditched in a remote part of the Central Pacific Ocean. The crew was adrift aboard three rubber life rafts; food and water ran out after three days.



Capt. Rickenbacker, too weak to stand after 21 days adrift in the Pacific, is lifted aboard the rescue plane.

On the eighth day of being lost, Rickenbacker fell asleep only to be awakened by the feel of a seagull that had landed on his head. He reached up, grabbed the bird's feet, wrung its neck, and it became dinner for the men. The intestines were used for bait and by using the bones as hooks, they were able to fish and survive for 13 more days. After 21 days and 400-500 miles floundering at sea the men were rescued. Capt. Rickenbacker had lost 40 pounds and was too weak to stand when he was lifted aboard the rescue plane.

He recovered and went on to achieve personal and financial success. But



despite all his accomplishments, and the accolades of a nation, Rickenbacker never forgot that incident, and chose to be grateful for that one bird... a seagull... who gave hope both physically and spiritually to the survivors.

For the remainder of his life (he lived to age 82), part of “Old Ed's” routine every Friday evening about sunset was to go to a South Florida pier with a bucket of shrimp to slowly and methodically feed the seagulls. He'd reflect on events of that fateful day a half decade earlier, and express gratitude to the bird who gave of itself without a struggle. He'd walk to the end of the pier alone, but soon would be surrounded by dozens of seagulls, screeching and squawking, flapping and fluttering and in a few short minutes the bucket was empty.



January 1935: Capt. Rickenbacker assisting Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, after completing her first extended flight aboard Eastern Airlines. He revolutionized air travel.

As the sun goes down, the old man whispers “thank you - thank you” to the gulls, as he lingers in thought, transported to another time and place, then turns and slowly walks home. To the unknowing, his actions would appear strange or unusual. You never know about the quiet old souls, and the great things they have done during their lifetime.

Miami was grateful for Capt. Rickenbacker. In 1935, Eastern Airlines was headquartered at Miami International Airport in unincorporated Miami-Dade County. Eastern Airlines was the first airline to operate without a subsidy from the Federal government. Rickenbacker revolutionized air travel.

On Nov. 9, 1947 the Miami Commission dedicated “Rickenbacker Causeway,” the road connecting Miami with Key Biscayne. Rickenbacker's good friend and Commissioner Charlie Crandon was instrumental in the acquisition and



The Rickenbacker Causeway, opened in 1947, made possible public access to Key Biscayne and Crandon Park, expanding Miami-Dade's parks and recreation opportunities.

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