

FLORIDA CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

by J. F. ROY*



Slometto-pine pasture, Tampa, Florida.

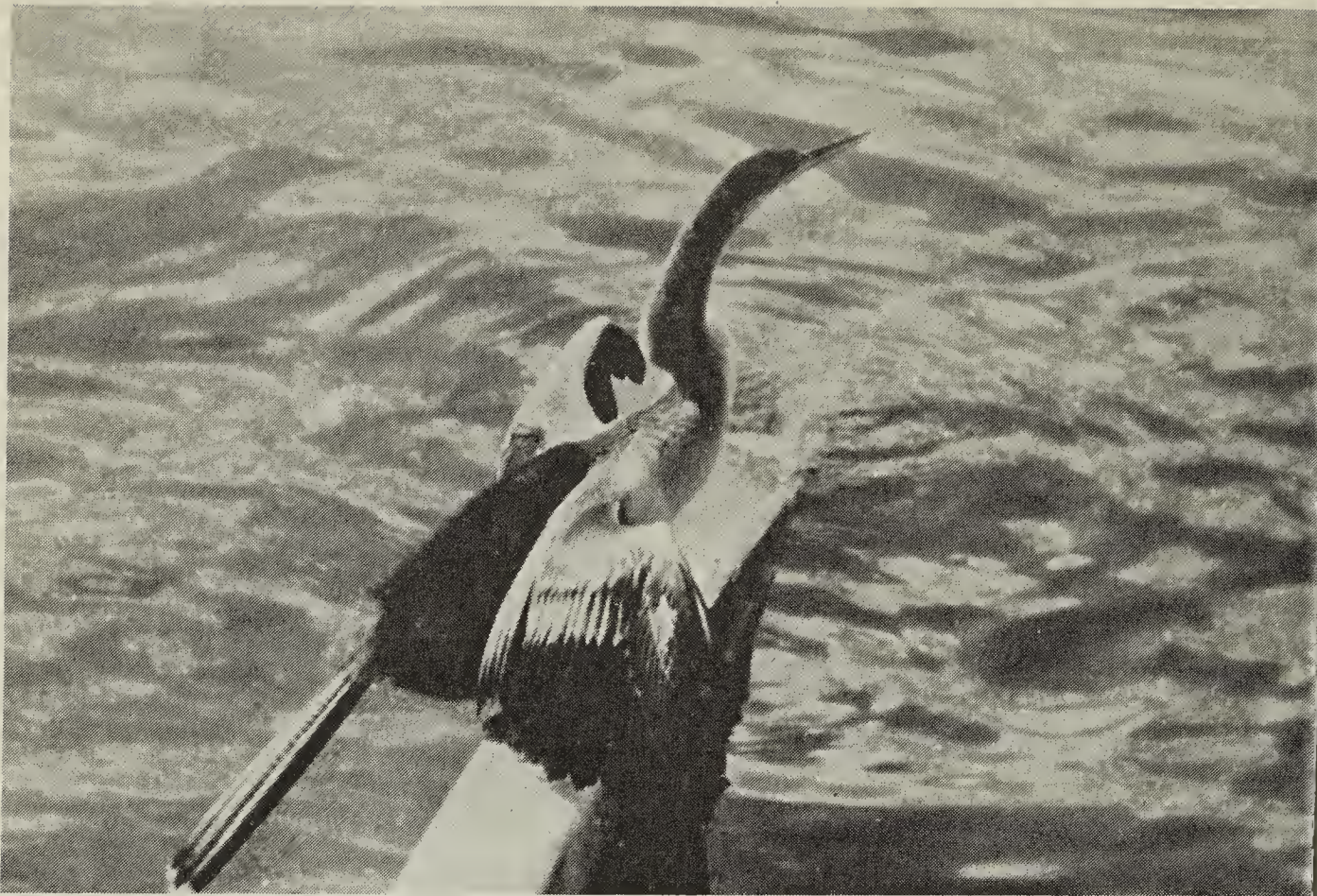
Frank Roy

153 species and over 70,000 individuals in a single day? Having to stop for extra drinks at noon because the blazing sun had raised the mercury just under 80°? Pileated Woodpeckers, Purple Finches, Barred Owls, and Great Horned Owls within a couple miles of Common Gallinules, Anhingas, White Ibis and a Limpkin? Where? When? It was Tampa, Florida, December 28, 1974. The occasion: Tampa's annual Christmas Bird Count.

When I knew I might be in Florida in time for one of the later Christmas Counts, I checked Audubon Society's *American Birds* for the names of the organizers of last year's Florida counts. Bill Courser, a biologist with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, had compiled the Tampa count. I telephoned him as soon as I arrived in that large city on the Gulf of Mexico, mid-way down the west coast of the state.

"Will you let an ignorant Northerner who doesn't know the difference between an immature Green Heron and a Least Bittern join you on Saturday?"

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Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.



Anhinga, Cypress Gardens, Florida.

Frank R

“Welcome on board,” he said. Meet us at Morrison’s Cafeteria at Fletcher and 30th at 6:30 a.m. We want to be in the field before sunrise at seven. I’ll be out counting owls at 4:00 a.m., but I’ll join you there.”

I made a dry-run out to the rendezvous spot the day before the count — 17 miles across the city from our hotel. A wise decision, it turned out. Unusually warm weather had resulted in several dense morning fogs in recent days. December 28 produced a real pea-souper, rolling in from the Gulf of Mexico. I left the hotel at 5:30 in case I should lose my way in the fog. Luck was with me. I parked at Morrison’s and waited.

The city was still quiet. A Killdeer called; a flock of Boat-tailed Grackles flew over. Precisely at 6:30 a well-used Dodge station wagon rolled onto the lot. Four men stepped out into the mist: Bill Courser, Ron Mumme, Dale De Wild, and Ed Caldwell were ready to introduce me to the winter birds of the Tampa region.

Our assignment was to canvass the northeast section of the count area. We would scour palmetto and pine pastures, deciduous forest, roadside the marsh on the campus of the University of South Florida, an abandoned airport, and the weedy field adjacent to Busch Gardens.

Visibility was only fair until about 10 a.m. when the hot sun burned off the fog. Having been granted permission to walk the woods and pastures of a large ranch just north of the city, we broke into two groups. Bill Courser, Dale De Wild and I headed into the forest: the other fellows explored the banks of the Hillsborough River. Contrary to my expectation the forest floor was open — the result, I suppose, of dense summer foliage. Now most of the trees were leafless — oak, ash and maple. Several species of evergreen oak and palm provided splashes of green. At times it was very underfoot, and I learned to skirt the boggy places.

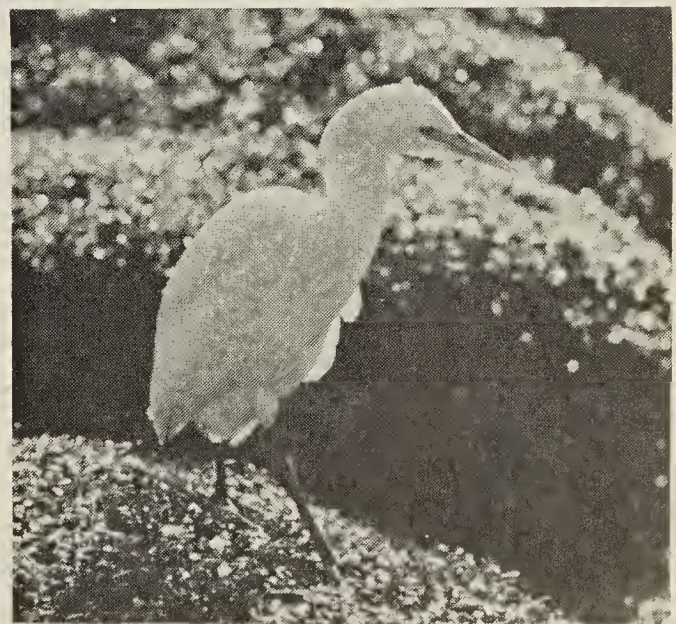
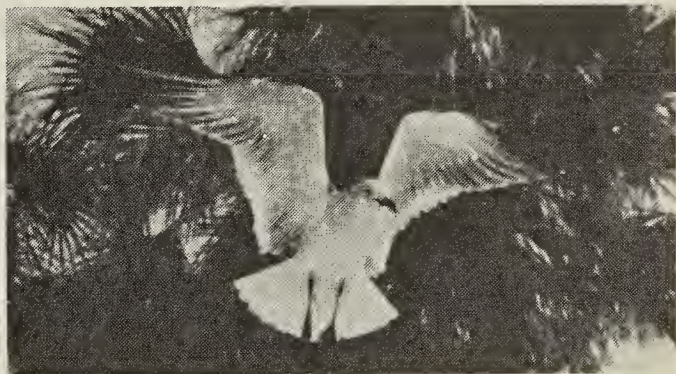
The woods, dripping wet in the fog, were alive with sounds, several of them alien to my ears. On all sides we heard the raucous cries of Blue Jays and Red-shouldered Hawks, both common in central Florida. Great Horned and Barred Owls hooted in the distance. I soon learned to recognize the nasal calls of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, a relative of our kinglets. Yellow-rumped Warblers flitted everywhere in the branches overhead, and I identified my first White-eyed Vireos. Solitary Vireos, Carolina Wrens (what a beautiful song), Tufted Titmice, Cardinals, numerous silent winter Robins, Goldfinches, Yellow-shafted Flickers and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers moved through and above the trees. Three immature Purple Finches alighted on a tree just above our heads. A rarity in Florida, they were an unexpected addition to the count. My familiarity with them in Saskatchewan helped us to confirm their identification.

Moving out to more open areas, dotted with palmetto, bushes and scattered slash pines, we were scolded by numerous House Wrens, more furtive than when we see them in Saskatchewan. Here, too, we saw numbers of Mockingbirds (surely one of the most common birds in Florida), Mourning Doves, Loggerhead Shrikes, Tree Swallows and Palm Warblers. After mid-morning, Turkey Vultures began to sweep in great circles overhead.

Using sticks to beat the grass and palmetto plants, we sought to flush the ground sparrows that winter in the region. Incidentally, the sticks also serve a second purpose: they can alert the hiker to rattlesnakes, still fairly common in this region. Grass sparrow identification is difficult enough in Canada when the birds help by singing and perching on tall weeds; here, during the Florida winter, it is nearly impossible. Uttering only a single chirp as they fly up at your feet to drop

again into dense grass or palmetto perhaps 25 yards ahead, they must be flushed time after time until a view is obtained of breast, or tail, or median and eyebrow lines. Here, and in brushy fields later in the afternoon, we identified Vesper Sparrows, Savannahs (the most numerous winter sparrow), Swamp Sparrows, and the scarce and local Bachman's Sparrow. We also raised a number of Eastern Meadowlarks, but many needed no coaxing. They flew to convenient posts or bushes to sing their characteristic *tsee-you, tsee-ear*, a far cry from the melodious cascades of their Western cousins.

Leaving the pasture-land, we skirted fence-lines on either side of the highway. Noon was approaching, and as at home on the May-Day Count, it was becoming harder to add new species. Bill, on the other side, identified a Grasshopper Sparrow. On my side of



Laughing Gull, Clearwater, Florida.

Cattle Egret, Busch Gardens, Florida.

the road I flushed a Bobwhite, and added a Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Black-and-White Warbler.

As we joined forces with the rest of the fellows, Ron Mumme, a veteran birdman still in his early 20's, asked me if I wanted to see a Limpkin. Another lifer for me, it stood in the shade on the banks of Cypress Creek. Restricted in range in the United States to Georgia and the Florida peninsula, it is a handsome, speckled, brown and white water bird related to the cranes and rails. Although we visited only a couple of ponds and marshes, we saw a number of other water birds during the day: Pied-billed Grebes, Great Blue Herons, Green Herons, Cattle Egrets (common all over Florida, even in the cities), Great Egrets, a flock of six White Ibis, Wood Ducks, Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks, over 300 American Coots, Common Gallinules and several Snipe.

After lunch — a period of sporadic munching extending from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. as it does everywhere on bird counts — we visited the 10-acre marsh on the University of South Florida campus, a beautiful spot, lush with cattails. How long it can be preserved is anybody's guess; the pressures to drain marshland are even greater in Florida than they are in Saskatchewan. The several hundred ducks which had been in the marsh the day before had taken wing, leaving behind a few Ring-necks and Ruddies and rafts of Coots and Gallinules.

We spent the late afternoon in what is known as the Tampa Industrial Park, a partially developed district with weedy fields and sparsely-grassed areas north and east of Busch Gardens, a popular preserve for exotic animals and birds. Here Bill Courser, an authority on the Florida race of the Burrowing Owl, showed us no fewer than nine birds. Imitating their call with ease, he soon brought these curious little owls out of their

burrows. We even spotted several within the confines of Busch Garden perfectly at home with the zebras, gnus and African antelope which were cropping the grass at their very doorsteps. I asked Bill what kind of burrows these owls had taken over. "In the sands of Florida," he replied, "they use the holes of the gopher turtle or they dig their own." No ground squirrels or badgers in Florida, I concluded.

The fields produced few new species, but more sparrows, dozens of Savannahs, in particular Meadowlarks, Ground Doves, Bobwhites, Boat-tailed and Common Grackles, Cowbirds, and Palm Warblers.

The sun was setting when we returned to Morrison's Cafeteria and my parked car. Our group had tallied 8 species — 70 short of the total count for the region, but a satisfactory number for the habitat to which Bill had assigned us. In addition to the species already mentioned, I had seen Laughing Gulls, Fish Crows and Yellow-throated Warblers, none of which, as far as I can determine, have yet been recorded in Saskatchewan. Rarities in Tampa on a Christmas Count included the Black-necked Stilt, Eastern Kingbird, Great Crested Flycatcher, Blackburnian Warbler, Northern Waterthrush and Purple Finch.

I learned more about Florida bird life and winter plumages in that one day than I would have done in a month of birding by myself. While Saskatchewan birders uncovered a record 42 species on Boxing Day, a migrant Saskatoon 2 days later, helped in a count which surpassed in number of species many of the May-Day Counts at home. I offered my thanks to Bill Courser and his friends, and suggested they might like to join us sometime on Boxing Day when the temperature was -20. They made no promises!

