

Birds of Anna Maria Island



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Digital capture by Susan Puder

White ibis, by Susan Puder. Nikon D90, Nikkor 18-200mm F3.5-6.3 lens, focal length 102mm, f/16 at 1/1250 second, matrix metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 400.



American oystercatcher, by Susan Puder. Nikon D90, Sigma 50-500mm F4-6.3 APO DG lens, focal length 420mm, f/10 at 1/1000 second, matrix metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 400.



Yellow-crowned night heron, by Susan Puder. Nikon D90, Sigma 50-500mm F4-6.3 APO DG lens, focal length 420mm, f/10 at 1/800 second, matrix metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 400.

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BIRDS OF ANNA MARIA ISLAND

Who knew the local residents would be so friendly? A family visit in the spring of 2011 brought me to Anna Maria Island, a small barrier island off the Gulf coast of Florida, where I found a birder's paradise. Anna Maria Island is situated off Bradenton, between Tampa and Sarasota. I was working on my book, *New Jersey Birds and Beyond*, when I took this short vacation to Florida. As a birder and photographer living near the coast in Barnegat, New Jersey, migrations can bring hundreds of thousands of birds through the state. However, they are usually very wary of people getting too close; even using a car as a blind driving around the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge can be challenging to get that killer close-up photograph of a great blue heron.

I brought my camera equipment and binoculars hoping that I could squeeze a quick trip to the Venice Rookery, which was about 40 miles to the south on the mainland, to get a few shots of whatever might be there during breeding season.

Little did I know what awaited me on my first morning on Anna Maria. After a wonderful breakfast provided by the Harrington House Bed and Breakfast, where I was staying, a walk along the beach on a warm overcast morning looked inviting. Carrying my Nikon D90 with a Sigma 50-500mm F4-6.3 APO DG lens, I took off along the white sandy beach. It was past the high season so the beach was fairly empty this early in the morning. Then I saw it: a beautiful great blue heron standing on the beach near a fisherman. Were my eyes deceiving me? The heron was no more than five or so feet from the bait pail. I knew then what was on his bucket list. I rushed down the beach towards the bird, which moved off a few feet, but did not fly away. It was still cloudy out, but I was able to squeeze off several shots before the heron decided to try his luck up the beach. Wow! I was excited.

Then the sun started to break through; brown pelicans were flying by low to the gorgeous green-blue water of the Gulf of Mexico. So close, so fast. Heading back up the beach I was amazed when a white Ibis flew down beside me and joined me for my walk. And then another came along. I found that I didn't need the 500mm and was glad I had a zoom with less telephoto length. I was in heaven. Birds in New Jersey don't behave this way—maybe it's the unfounded reputation that Jersey has from *The Sopranos* or *Jersey Shore* that causes them to be more suspicious of people with big objects in their hands.

Up the beach there were willets and sanderlings; again I could just sit on the sand and they would come really close following the waves while looking for food. This was great; these birds are common in New Jersey so I could use their photos for the book. What else may come along? Later in the day, there was an American oystercatcher with several bandings on his legs. I'm guessing he was really into "bling." Overhead there were ospreys circling, and then a ruddy turnstone in breeding plumage showed up along the beach. This was the best ever.

I did get my trip to the Venice Area Audubon Rookery and was surprised at how small it is. That did not diminish the amount of birds there, finding great blue herons, black-crowned night herons, anhingas, and great egrets. There was even a juvenile white ibis to be found. The black-crowned night heron was good, but my quest for the past two years was the yellowcrowned night heron. Seen but never photographed well in New Jersey, I was really hoping to get one before the book went to the publisher. Later in the vacation, nearing the end of another morning beach walk, I looked up towards the chairs near where I was staying. "What is that moving close to the sun-bathers?" I used my binoculars to check it out. "Whoa! It's a yellow-crowned, just walking casually along." I crept up and photographed it. The heron could have cared less as he was looking for breakfast. My quest was over.

During the trip other birds were seen, including black skimmers, least terns, double-crested cormorants, and even a magnificent frigatebird. A brown pelican landed in the surf and, again, was too close for the 500mm. Even an endangered wood stork was just standing in someone's yard looking for a fish handout. The vacation was wildly successful from a photography standpoint, with

many photos being included in my book. I've even planned another trip there in 2012 to get that killer photo of that magnificent frigatebird. If you go, using a 300mm zoom lens is sufficient for spectacular photos. Of course, you need to be careful to keep sand and water off your equipment. The heart of the day brings harsh lighting, so it is always best to do your photography in the morning when the sun is low and is lighting up those ibis that want to walk with you. The lighting later in the day is ideal as well. Using a circular polarizing lens is something you may want to consider, but just be aware that with a longer telephoto lens you may lose some sharpness. I prefer Shutter Priority with an ISO of 400. My shutter speeds varied from 1/200 to 1/1000 of a second. I did not take my tripod as plane travel these days makes packing a challenge, but a tripod is all the better. Black skimmers gather at sunset up at the northern end of the island, so be sure to visit that area and get those spectacular Gulf Coast sunsets. A trip to Anna Maria Island will provide you with many opportunities to photograph birds and beautiful beaches. I would suggest going after the Easter crush is over. You may be glad that you packed your bathing suit as well.

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