

WHERE WE WENT: DRY TORTUGAS, FLORIDA

APRIL 28 - MAY 1, 1985

by Harriet E. Hoffman, Arlington

On Sunday night, April 28, at 10 P.M. or thereabouts, forty-three participants plus crew departed Key West aboard the *Yankee Cpts.* Our intention had been to use the Yankee Fleet's new luxury boat, *Yankee Freedom* (air-conditioned, showers, more private accommodations). However, several days before departure, vandals damaged the *Freedom*. The *Cpts.*, already en route to its summer berth in Gloucester, Massachusetts, was quickly recalled by the resourceful Yankee Fleet management. Our destination was the Dry Tortugas, specifically Garden Key, sixty-eight nautical miles away, about a five-hour voyage. The leaders were Wayne Hoffman and Kevin McGowan, of the University of South Florida, Tampa. The sleeping quarters on the *Yankee Cpts.* were three cabins, each containing fourteen bunks in two and three tiers. Because of the warm weather and calm seas, many people slept on deck. Personal gear was stowed on the bunk and environs.

Before dawn we tied up at the pier on Garden Key, the largest of the Tortugas Islands, to be on land at first light. We disembarked and started to walk around the key. First encountered were some shorebirds: Black-bellied Plover, Spotted Sandpiper, and Ruddy Turnstone. As light increased, we observed Sooty Terns



Magnificent Frigatebirds with Brown Noddy
Dry Tortugas, April 1985

Photo by Rick Cech

and Brown Noddys wheeling over Bush Key. We scoped the water, spotted Brown Boobys resting on a channel marker, and then turned back to go inside the Fort Jefferson courtyard area, a known land-bird trap.

Fort Jefferson, now a crumbling ruin, was begun in 1846 and was regarded at the time as an American "Gibraltar," guarding the Straits of Florida, but it was never completed. It was occupied by Federal troops during the Civil War, but its chief fame stems from being the jail where Dr. Samuel Mudd was imprisoned. Dr. Mudd treated John Wilkes Booth, assassin of Abraham Lincoln. Dr. Mudd was released after his heroic efforts during an outbreak of yellow fever among the prisoners. In the early 1900s, the Navy used the fort as the site of its first wireless station and as a seaplane base in World War I.

The fort is a more or less circular structure around a large grassy area studded with various species of trees. The trees were heavily leaved, and for the larger ones, it was necessary to stand next to the trunk to peer up into the branches to see what birds might be resting thereon. Visual sighting was important because migrants in Florida do not sing; they only chip - and quietly at that. A freshwater fountain, contaminated with guano, was located within the courtyard. There was also a drinking fountain for human use. Freshwater is in short supply on the Tortugas - hence the name "Dry." The Park Service personnel live in houses that are part of the circle of the fort and face



Dry Tortugas, April 1985

"Wade in the Water"

Photo by Rick Cech



Black Noddy
Bush Key, April 1985

Photo by Rick Cech



Brown Noddy
Bush Key, April 1985

Photo by Rick Cech

the courtyard. A conspicuous link to the outside world is a large satellite dish. Once inside this courtyard area, we saw large numbers of Cattle Egrets, Gray Kingbirds, several species of warblers, Indigo Bunting, and soaring high overhead, White-tailed Tropicbird. Since the tropicbird was a life bird for many of us, we spent a fair amount of time observing it. We saw tropicbirds - a total of six - only on our first day.

We returned to the boat for breakfast. Because the Park Service allows only a two-hour tie-up, we had to leave the pier. So we anchored a short way out and used the dory for shuttle service back and forth. After breakfast we broke into splinter groups, explored new areas, and rechecked old ones. Then the dory with leaders aboard went out to circumnavigate Bush Key, a nearby small key, where the Sootys and noddys nest.

When the dory returned, I was invited to go on the second trip. An interesting bird possibility intervened (a false alarm), and I became the thirteenth person for a twelve-person trip. Therefore, I went on the third trip - my very good fortune! On the back side of the key, Mark Lynch spotted what he thought was a Black Noddy, perched on a branch. Despite our presence, the bird remained mostly in the same place, allowing us looks from many perspectives. Because it was surrounded by many Brown Noddys, we had plenty of opportunity for comparison. After, perhaps fifteen minutes of observation and discussion, we reached consensus and agreed that, yes, we did have a Black Noddy! Then the trip shifted into high gear: nothing describes the search so accurately as to say it really was looking for a black needle in a brown haystack.

Any visitor to the Dry Tortugas can scarcely miss seeing Brown Noddys, which are numerous, but the great hope of any birder is to catch sight of the Black Noddy. Bill and Harriet Davidson report in the October 1985 issue of Birding (17: 213) that they camped on Garden Key for six consecutive springs before finding the bird on Bush Key in the spring of '85 - the same bird seen by us (the Bird Observer travel group). So similar are the two species that field guides are of little help. The Black Noddy is described as smaller and darker, with a whiter cap. But these differences are a matter of degree. Furthermore, the younger Black Noddys may lack white caps, and the extent and whiteness of the cap in the adults varies with the light. Hence, other features - body proportions and bill structure are the key. [See "Answer to August Photo Quiz" by Larry Balch in the October 1985 issue of Birding 17: 243.] The difference shows up well in the two photos taken on the Bird Observer trip by Rick Cech and printed in this issue.

We took one last look at our precious rarity and headed back to report. The next boatload went out, saw the bird, and returned. Elation! Subsequent trips that day did not have any luck sighting the bird. Gloom!

After lunch the options were swimming (it was very hot), snorkeling, land birding, or continued attempts to find the Black Noddy. Late in the afternoon we were again permitted to tie up to the Park Service pier and so were able to have cocktail hour, dinner (steak), and the day's checklist session on shore.

On Tuesday morning we again did some prebreakfast land birding on Garden Key. After breakfast, the Yankee Capts went to Loggerhead Key (about three miles away) for approximately a two-hour walk (very hot) to see what was passing through. A few who had not yet seen the Black Noddy decided to stay with the dory to continue to search Bush Key. The vegetation on Loggerhead (Spanish bayonet, cactus) was such that long pants were necessary. We turned up nothing unusual, but the large number of feathered remains of Yellow-billed Cuckoos indicated the presence of raptors. Two Merlins were observed. We returned to our anchorage for lunch and to rendezvous with the dory. Success! More people had seen the Black Noddy. After lunch the options were again swimming, snorkeling, chances to see "The Bird" again, or continue to check the fort area.

The latter part of the afternoon was spent in various activities, including a saltwater "bath," in a large box at the stern (Joy detergent for the body, Prell for the hair), followed by a freshwater rinse. Dinner was again on shore, featuring barbequed chicken, with provision for vegetarians. Many of us spent the evening chatting with old and new acquaintances and the crew. I tried my hand at fishing off the stern and managed one "keeper" and several pieces of seabottom.

We rose early on Wednesday for our final walk through the fort area and a group picture. We returned to the boat for breakfast and to prepare for the long, productive trip back to Key West via the Gulf Stream. Because the stream had moved south slightly, we had to travel at a somewhat higher speed than had been planned. Consequently, a few people experienced some short-lived seasickness.

As we worked our way along the sargasso weed line in the stream, we encountered large numbers of Bridled Terns. At first the sightings were few, but as we got fully into the stream, we observed them frequently, both in flight and in the water. The total for the day was forty. The presence of Sooty Terns afforded opportunity for comparison of the two species. We also had good looks at Masked Boobys (eight in all), which were standing on a sandbar.

We did observe some non-avian species: many kinds of reef fishes, flying fish, dolphin fish (not a mammal), and nurse sharks. Many visitors come to the Dry Tortugas just for the sport fishing or to scuba dive and "fishwatch." We also saw loggerhead turtles - the Tortugas were discovered in 1513 by Ponce de Leon who named them for the numerous turtles he found there - and Atlantic bottle-nosed dolphin.

We returned to Key West in the late afternoon. There was plenty of time for people to bird the keys for several hours and still reach Miami for a nighttime flight or to check into a motel and fly out the next day.

Advice for those planning to visit the Dry Tortugas. The Bird Observer trip was timed to coincide with the midpoint of spring migration through Florida. Fly to Miami or Fort Lauderdale, and then rent a car for the three-hour drive to Key West. Or take a commuter flight (Gullair, Southern Express, or PBA) from Miami to Key West. The overnight boat trip from Key West was on gentle seas. Once at our destination, very little boat travel was necessary. The only seasickness problem for some people was on the longer return trip to Key West via the Gulf Stream, but it did not last too long. For those for whom seasickness is a major problem, it is possible to charter a plane at Key West, Marathon, or Grassy Key for a trip to the Tortugas or Fort Jefferson National Monument. However, as there is neither housing, meals, drinking water, or supplies available, a plane trip has limitations.

The two and a half days that our group spent on the Tortugas is more time than most other organized trips spend there, and it provided an opportunity for repeated trips to find the Black Noddy and a satisfactory chance to meet and interact with birders of diverse backgrounds. And you can swim and snorkel in beautiful, uncrowded waters.

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