

# 2012 TRAVEL GUIDE TO FLORIDA

www.floridatravelguide.travel

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DISPLAY UNTIL AUGUST 31, 2012





# Birds of a FEATHER

BY SUSAN B. BARNES

Annually, tens of thousands make their pilgrimages south during the winter months to warmer weather, brighter sun and richer feeding grounds. And those are just the snowbirds!

During these same winter months, hundreds of species of birds find their way to Florida during migration, not to mention the myriad species that call Florida their home year-round. It's no wonder,

then, that the Sunshine State is a popular destination for birders the world over, any time of year.

## GREAT FLORIDA BIRDING AND WILDLIFE TRAIL

More than 500 species of birds have been documented in Florida, and with the right planning, you can most likely spot a few to mark off your Life List. The Great Florida

Birding and Wildlife Trail (GFBWT), a program of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, is a 2,000-mile highway trail designed to promote bird and wildlife-watching opportunities, as well as encourage conservation.

The trail is divided into four sections—northwest, east, west and south—and nine “gateway” sites have been designated at exceptional birding locations: in Northwest Florida, Big Lagoon State Park in Pensacola and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge near Tallahassee; Ft. Clinch State Park in Fernandina Beach, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in Titusville, and Tenoroc Fish Management Area in Lakeland in the east; Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park in Gainesville and Fort De Soto County Park in St. Petersburg to the west; and Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples and Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge near Boynton Beach in the south. These gateway sites have staffed visitor centers complete with birdwatching tips, loaner optics and copies of the free trail guide booklets.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MARTHA MARKS/SHUTTERSTOCK; ARKORN/SHUTTERSTOCK; SPACE COAST OFFICE OF TOURISM; ST. PETERSBURG/CLEARWATER CVB

## NORTHWEST FLORIDA

In the Northwest Florida section of the GFBWT, there are 78 sites at which bird-watchers will want to roost, from Pensacola to Panama City to Tallahassee and points in between. Keep an eye out for the Bachman's sparrow, black-whiskered vireo and roseate spoonbill (often mistaken for flamingos) in this part of the state.



## TO THE EAST

The East Florida section of the GFBWT was the first to open in 2000. Of the 40 most popular species sought after in Florida, the bald eagle, Florida grasshopper sparrow and the elusive yellow rail, to name a few, are found in the east section. More than 180 birding sites can be found from Amelia

## NEED MORE INFO?

Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail:  
[floridabirdingtrail.com](http://floridabirdingtrail.com)

Island, Jacksonville and St. Augustine south through Daytona Beach and Cocoa Beach to Port St. Lucie, and west through Orlando and Lakeland up to Ocala.

## FLY WEST

One hundred and fifteen sites make up the West Florida section of the GFBWT, which encompasses Madison in northern Florida hugging the west coastline through Tampa and St. Petersburg, south through Bradenton and Anna Maria Island, with a few inland counties thrown into the mix. Here birders will find the magnificent frigatebird, piping plover, snowy plover and swallow-tailed kite.

## WAY DOWN SOUTH

Head to southern Florida and birders will find more than 116 sites crisscrossing the state from Sarasota south to Naples along the west coast, through the Everglades, and east to Ft. Lauderdale, Miami and the Florida Keys. Of the 40 most sought-after birds in Florida, the scarce masked booby, purple gallinule and white-tailed kite may be spotted here.

Birdwatching tours and events are scheduled throughout the state, year-round. For more information on these events and an up-to-date listing, visit [floridabirdingtrail.com](http://floridabirdingtrail.com).

## RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT

To make the most out of wildlife-viewing excursions, good binoculars are a must. Binocular choice is quite personal. Ideally, they should be waterproof (not just water repellent) and nitrogen purged; provide long eye relief with an adjustable eyepiece (not the fold-down type); comfortable in your hands; and easy to focus. Choose good quality lenses over higher magnification. Best for all around wildlife observations is the 8 or 8.5 power because the lenses are brighter, provide a somewhat wider field of view than the 10x and typically provide a closer focus to see details. Consider \$400 as the minimum for quality binoculars.

Rather than a neck strap, consider a harness or pack strap. The harness leaves both hands free, holds the binoculars against the chest (to minimize swinging) and keeps them at a convenient level when you need them. The harness is excellent for hiking, spending long hours standing at a viewpoint and you don't have to fumble for your bins when you spot something.

Spotting scopes are invaluable for observing more distant wildlife and birds. A tripod with adjustable legs is also recommended and must include an attaching mount.

For serious wildlife photography, you will need an SLR with a 400 mm lens and a tripod. For general vacation photography, any good point-and-shoot camera will suffice however a camera that provides "super zoom" and wide-angle capabilities precludes the need to carry extra lenses.

Be sure to purchase equipment from a store or website that specializes in birding and wildlife watching.