

Photo Itinerary...

Sanibel Island, Florida

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Most avid bird photographers go to Sanibel to photograph in "Ding" Darling NWR. This is one of nature's gems that I have visited as a photographer every February or March since 1995. Given good light and luck, it's possible to come away with wonderful images of roseate spoonbills, dancing reddish egrets, white ibis, both brown and white pelicans, little blue and tricolor herons, great egrets and great blue herons, cormorants and anhingas. If you're really lucky, you'll also see a yellow-crowned night heron and red-shouldered hawk. The birds are so accustomed to people that almost all shooting I do is done out of my car using a sturdy tripod and Wimberly head, a F5 Nikon camera, a 500mm AF Nikon lens plus teleconverters if necessary. However, many times the birds are within a few feet, and I switch to my Canon EOS3 and 100-400 IS lens which I carry with me as well.

I buy the annual pass for \$12 rather than pay the \$5 per day fee and get to the refuge about 7 a.m. to get my gear ready and wait in line for the gate to open at 7:30 a.m. If you're hardy, you can walk in at dawn, but I don't advise it. There is a 5 mile newly paved one way road that passes many ponds and waterways. Since my priority is the roseate spoonbill, I usually drive beyond the first ponds and the tower to location #8 on the refuge map where these birds congregate to feed both early morning, as well as fly, into before sunset. Racoons and alligators can also be observed along the drive. "Ding" Darling is closed on Friday.

My most recent trip there mid-February was initially disappointing because of the weather. I awoke the last morning unable to even see the ocean only 100 feet away. Yet by 8:30, the sky was already getting lighter. So I took a last stab at the refuge. Despite poor lighting conditions, I saw a yellow crowned night heron (YCNH) in each of the first two large bodies of water which I've never seen before. One of the cutback ponds on the right even had a YCNH which I was able to photograph using a flash and fresnel, approaching to within 18 feet. I then proceeded to the cross dike walk, where I was informed there was another YCNH close by. I



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spotted him feeding in poor light. He was tolerant enough to allow me to approach to within 20 feet. He kept foraging for fidler crabs as I watched over the next 25 minutes. Finally my patience paid off as the sun came out, allowing me to capture the image I have included with this article. I was a little over 12 feet away without disturbing him. I never dreamed of being this close nor being able to put on teleconverters. I actually had to back away at times because I left my extender in the car.

Like all wildlife photography, it may be hit or miss. Where else can one go when the refuge is a bust? At sunrise or after your swing through the refuge, go to Bowman's Beach or Blind Pass just miles down the main road towards Captiva Island to shoot shorebirds, pelicans, great egrets or great blue herons. If I'm going a distance from the parking lot, I'm more inclined to carry the lighter Canon system. Be prepared to get down flat on the sand to be at eye level and capture the image. Since

people walk these beaches regularly, the shorebirds will take off and often land back at the same spot, so be prepared for flight shots as well. At Blind Pass, there's a short rocky jetty where pelicans land expecting food from local fishermen. Head shots are possible. This is also a great location to capture pelicans silhouetted with the fiery ball of the sun as it sets.

As one drives back to re-enter the refuge, there is a school and ballfield on your left. Nesting on top of these lights are many osprey.

If the sky is blue and they are noticeably flying, pull over and park beyond the outfield fence for morning flight shots. If school is out, I've even shot from just below the nests hoping for landing shots. Off Dixie Beach Rd., there is another easily accessible osprey nest.



Other places to shoot include making a right at the light just before the island causeway toll booth. There's a series of boat slips and brown pelicans hang out in hopes of being fed by the fishermen. On the causeway to Sanibel, there are numerous pulloffs allowing one to photograph shorebirds. Similarly there's a fishing pier on the eastern tip of the island near the lighthouse where birds expect to be fed. Flight shots and close-up portraits are easy to obtain using shorter lens. I have shot snowy and piping plovers on the beach off Lingren Blvd., which is the extension of the causeway on the island. Consider looking in the parking lot of the shell museum for pileated woodpeckers. Also consider going to the Dunes Golf Club for close-up images of anhingas, cormorants, and great blue herons.

I have been fortunate to have been with many talented photographers over the past 8 years. Not to take anything away from the others, but I'd

like to thank Art Morris for emphasizing three factors. Above all, try to photograph birds shooting directly in the line of your shadow. Get down to eye level, but avoid cutting off their feet. Lastly, move no more than 10 degrees to right or left so that the background is blurred and not distracting.

Fort Myers Airport is the closest facility to fly into. It's another 35 minute drive to the island. This is prime tourist season so be prepared for heavy traffic.

For more information on Ding Darling write or call:

Ding Darling NWR
1 Wildlife Drive
Sanibel, Florida 33957
Phone: 1-941-472-1100

Editor's Note - To learn more about Jim Urbach and view more of his work, visit his website at www.urbachwildlifephotography.com.

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