

Tour Descriptions for the Big "O" Birding Festival

Birding by Boat on Lake Okeechobee

Our name wouldn't be the BIG "O" BIRDING FESTIVAL if it wasn't for the Big "O": Lake Okeechobee.

Lake Okeechobee, meaning "big water," is Florida's largest freshwater lake and the second largest freshwater lake contained entirely within the lower 48 states. It is known world-wide for its high quality, trophy largemouth bass and black crappie (also known as speckled perch) fisheries. Fishing guides, watercraft rentals and excursions are available in lake-shore towns surrounding this 730 square-mile lake. The Okeechobee Waterway stretches from Fort Myers on the west coast to Stuart on the east coast of Florida. Completed in 1937, the Okeechobee Waterway allows boats to pass east-west across the state rather than travelling the long route around the southern end of the state. The 100-foot wide and 110-mile long dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee is part of the Florida Trail, a 1,400-mile long trail that is a National Scenic Trail. A well-maintained paved pathway along the majority of the perimeter, known as the L.O.S.T. (Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail), is used by hikers and bicyclists, and is wide enough to accommodate authorized vehicles.

Lake "O" is home to a host of wading, shore and migratory birds. If you choose one of our Birding by Boat trips, you'll increase your chances of seeing Everglade's Snail Kites, Peregrine Falcons, Roseate Spoonbills, White Pelicans, Swallow-tailed Kites, and a variety of gulls, terns, shorebirds, waterfowl, wading birds and song birds. Last year's boat trips yielded more species than the STA-5 tours! There are many scheduled tours, mornings and afternoons, with excellent tour guides.

TRIP ADVICE for Birding by Boat on Lake O: take personal sun protection, camera, field glasses, etc. These trips hold lots of great birding and photography opportunities. Each trip lasts approximately 2 hours and begins and ends at Roland and Mary Ann Martin Marina in Clewiston, where bathrooms are available. Expect some wind and a little spray.

STA-5

Located on The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, Storm Water Treatment Area #5 is quickly becoming THE place to bird in Florida. This impressive eight square miles of filter marshes was designed by the South Florida Water Management District to remove excess phosphorus from water flowing into the Everglades.

Travel by vehicle along the levee between the cells. Stop frequently to see pink clouds of Roseate Spoonbills, White Pelicans, and Purple Gallinules, Swallow-Tailed Kites, American Kestrels, Peregrine Falcons, various shorebirds and ducks, alligators, and more. Margaret England, a Florida Master Naturalist, leads the tour.

Stormwater treatment areas are man-made wetlands designed to clean up nutrients primarily from surrounding agricultural areas before the runoff reaches the Everglades. Levees and canals ring the perimeter of the treatment areas. The treatment areas are divided into several cells. Some have open water with submerged aquatic vegetation, and others have very dense cattail growth. The variety provides for varying degrees of water quality treatment to maximize the cleanup.

Witherspoon Mine Mitigation Wetlands combined with Ortona Indian Mounds

Witherspoon Mine Mitigation Wetlands, located on CR 78 in Ortona, Glades County, is a fine example of a successful wetlands mitigation project. Travel by bus to the site, and then walk about one mile around a marsh and wetlands. Expect to walk through grassy and sometimes seasonally marshy areas. Some spots are spongy and swampy. Expect about a 3 out of 5 in terms of walking difficulty in spots. Boots or sturdy shoes are recommended. The birding is GREAT! Historical sightings include belted kingfishers, vireos, hawks, ducks, warblers, wood storks, ibis, egrets, and caracaras. Bring a light jacket, or layers depending on the weather.

Don't let the terrain stop you from going on this wonderful birding tour. Pack your hiking shoes and bug spray and learn about birds, wetlands and local lore from tour leader Gene McAvoy . Gene is the Hendry County Extension Director and Regional Vegetable Agent IV for the UF/IFAS Hendry County Extension.

Ortona Indian Mounds

Ortona Indian Mounds are located in a lovely park with informational kiosks about the ancient civilization that once lived in this area. The park is home to the annual Ortona Cane Grinding Festival, held the first weekend in February. There are picnic pavilions and playground equipment in the shady oak hammock where the 0.8 mile trail begins, and a covered picnic table in a pretty spot along the hike. Walking difficulty and bug factor are both rated 2 out of 5. Restroom on site.

Known as "Ortona Indian Mounds Park," this important archaeological site is all that remains of a once-mighty village along the floodplain of the Caloosahatchee River. It is set in a remnant of scrub habitat, perhaps the southernmost extent of the Lake Wales Ridge, where the sand live oaks are thickly festooned with ball moss. Don't miss stopping at the kiosk, which offers several panels presenting the history and significance of this archaeological site. While less than a mile long, this walk takes you back more than 3,000 years, well before the Calusa paddled the Caloosahatchee in their canoes and settled here too.

The original complex is about the same age as the Miami Circle. The Calusa were known for building canals, and here near Turkey Creek, this settlement had an extensive canal system and a large number of mounds, including the highest point in Glades County at 22 feet above sea level. Only a portion of the original complex is left today, but this interpretive trail leads you through the hammocks and scrub to see these ancient mounds and canals.

Directions & Location

From US 27 in LaBelle, travel north on Highway 29 four miles from the 29/80 intersection, then east on Highway 78 (turn right). Follow it for approximately 5.9 miles, to Highway 78A to Ortona. Immediately before the historic Ortona Cemetery, the last turnoff on your left leads to this small county park and its significant archaeological site.

Larry Luckey leads the tour. Larry is the Glades County Property Appraiser and local historian for whom the park is named for his preservation and conservation efforts.

Fort Center Indian Mounds at Fisheating Creek WMA combined with Harney's Pond Canal

Located on The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail and listed as Fisheating Creek WMA East Entrance, the Fort Center historic Indian mounds and burial pond is a very interesting tour. The combination lake-side and Fisheating Creek's oak hammocks and cypress heads help rack up impressive bird lists. Well before Florida was touched by European settlement, ancient peoples settled along the banks of Fisheating Creek and constructed a series of earthworks as part of their village complex. They built a temple and burial mounds, middens, embankments, ditches, and a pond.

Archaeological excavations at the Fort Center site uncovered a wooden platform decorated with animal carvings, perfectly preserved at the muck at the bottom of the pond. The complex is thought to be from the Belle Glade people, circa 500 A.D., who built earthen mounds and actively cultivated maize. Finds of rare decorative objects adorned with metals salvaged from Spanish ships point to this village being occupied at least into the 1500s.

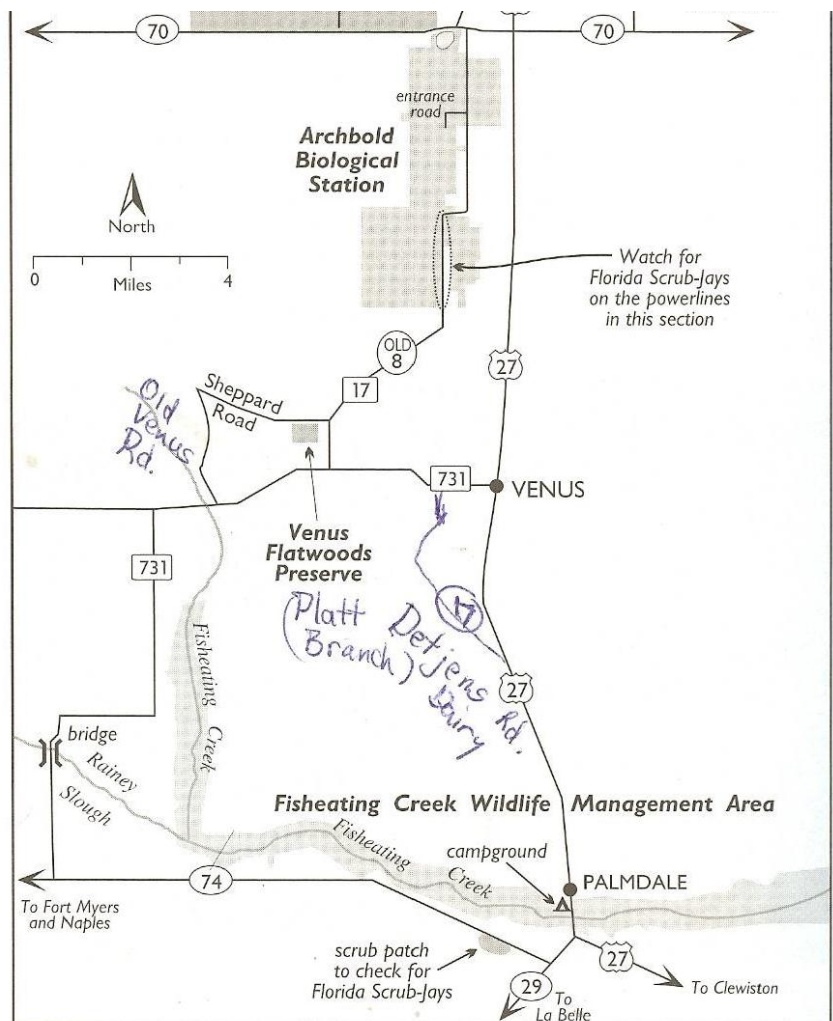
The archaeological complex opened to the public in 2008 and is now accessible via an interpretive trail at Fisheating Creek WMA, off Banana Grove Road near Lakeport. The name "Fort Center" comes from a Second Seminole War-era fort along Fisheating Creek, so there are layers of history in these woods.

Harney's Pond Canal

The best view of Lake Okeechobee is hidden in plain sight in the town of Lakeport at the Harney's Pond Canal Recreation Area. The walk is short, but the scenery is marvelous. When the bus parks, you'll want to hike across the bridge between two spoil banks to a boardwalk and viewing platform. The views of the Indian Prairie and marshlands around Fisheating Creek become increasingly beautiful as you walk up, up, up to the platform. At the very top, take in the panorama of canals, marshes, and the ribbon of open water in the distance.

Premier Loop Tour combined with Fisheating Creek Outpost/WMA West Entrance

Premier Loop Tour is right out of Bill Pranty's *A Birder's Guide to Florida*. The bus stops periodically all morning with opportunities to see Crested Caracara, Florida Scrub Jays, Eastern Bluebirds, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Burrowing Owls, Short-tailed Hawks, Swallow-tailed Kites



and wading birds. The tour is guided by one of Florida Audubon's PhD's, Dr. Paul Gray: our resident bare-foot birder!

Fisheating Creek Outpost/WMA West Entrance

Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area stretches for 40 miles along the course of the only free-flowing tributary to Lake Okeechobee. Framed by bald cypress swamps and hardwood hammocks, Fisheating Creek has long been valued for its scenic quality unmarred by houses and other human intrusions.

Strategically located in relation to Big Cypress Swamp, Okaloacoochee Slough, Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area, Lake Okeechobee, and the Lake Wales Ridge, Fisheating Creek is critical to the long-term welfare of Florida panthers, Florida black bears, swallow-tailed kites, whooping and sandhill cranes, crested caracara, and a number of other species native to the area.

At Fisheating Creek Outpost/WMA West Entrance, visitors can paddle or walk along the creek enjoying the scenery and the abundant wildlife, hunt for deer, feral hog, and Osceola turkey, fish, picnic, and camp.

Here's your opportunity to enjoy one of the most beautiful and remote landscapes in Florida. It's a wet wilderness, seasonally flooded when summer rains flow down Fisheating Creek toward Lake Okeechobee and the river of grass we call the Everglades.

After our lunch, you'll have time to hiking in a tropical wilderness, following a lush trail with its infinite shades of green, the same trails of early Native Americans and European explorers. Fisheating Creek Outpost/WMA West Entrance offers superb wildlife viewing including deer, turkey, wild hogs, marsh rabbits, alligators, gopher tortoise and more!

During birding, watch for Heron, Egrets, Ibis, Eagles, Crested Caracaras, Florida Scrub Jay and Red-cockaded Woodpecker and more! Enjoy exploring rich, diverse environments - marsh, cypress swamps, hardwood hammocks, longleaf and slash pine, cutthroat grass and Florida scrub

Fisheating Creek WMA and surrounding area offers all this and more. We explore some of the best places to hike in South Florida so come and join the fun!

The Tree Swing Trail at Fisheating Creek Outpost is a 2.5 mile hike through Fisheating Creek's cypress forest, beginning at The Hunter's Gate (west side of campground). There are four stops along the creek, eventually ending at the famous tree swing. This loop trail ends back at the starting point.

Private Ranch Tour of J7 Ranch

Your hosts, John & Gretchen Ward, have graciously opened their private ranch land to the Big "O" Birding Festival attendees to share the natural wonders found throughout their 5,800-acre working ranch. As the Ward's provide a private safari around their cattle ranch, enjoy up-close-and-personal sightings of Burrowing Owls, Swallow-tailed Kites, Snail Kites, Red-shouldered Hawks, Glossy Ibis, Wood Storks, and perhaps a glimpse of Roseate Spoonbills and Bald Eagles. Oh yes, and cows, too. Experience lunch served Florida "chuck wagon" style.

Take personal sun protection, camera, field glasses, etc. This trip holds lots of great birding and photography opportunities. Some moderate walking and getting on and off safari wagons required.

Dinner Island Ranch WMA

Located on The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, Dinner Island Ranch WMA is home to an incredible diversity of birds. A continuous turnover of species in response to migratory movements ensures birders ever changing experiences matched to the seasons. Expect to see Anhinga, Egrets, Herons, Turkeys, Quail, Kites, Hawks, Wood Storks, Crested Caracara, Owls, Kingfishers, Woodpeckers, Shrikes, Roseate Spoonbills and other wildlife.

Southwest of Clewiston in southern Hendry County, Dinner Island's thirty-four square miles of pastures, sloughs, pine flatwoods and oak hammocks form a vital link to surrounding wetlands that connect the Caloosahatchee River with the Big Cypress Swamp fifty miles to the south. In an area where wild landscapes are rapidly being converted to agriculture and residential and commercial uses, this connection secures habitat vital to the survival of the Florida panther and many other threatened wildlife species.

The Calusa Indians were probably some of the first visitors to the Dinner Island/Hendry County area, southwest of Lake Okeechobee. From A.D. 800 into the seventeenth century, these skilled hunters and fishermen inhabited the coastal regions of southwest Florida and traveled up the Caloosahatchee River in dugout canoes to reach interior wetlands associated with Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee River.

Agriculture and cattle ranching operations have flourished in the area since the 19th century. Today, agriculture is the base of Hendry County's economy. Sugar cane and citrus, followed by cattle and tomato farming are the county's most important commodities. Dinner Island was operated by the Hilliard family primarily as a cattle ranch; citrus and sugarcane production were much smaller enterprises on the property. The property came into public ownership in 2003.

Okaloacoochee Slough Wildlife Management Area

Located on The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, the Okaloacoochee Slough Wildlife Management Area in Hendry County provides more than 35,000 acres important habitat for the endangered Florida Panther, Bald Eagle, Roseate Spoonbill and the Crested Caracara. Its diverse natural communities include slough, marsh, cypress, wet prairie, pine flatwoods, oak hammocks, and oak-palm hammocks.

The Florida Forest Service manages the property as a state forest, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission manages scheduled hunts. The lands were acquired by South Florida Water Management District, Florida Forest Service, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The land is also historically significant. Sears Road, which borders the property on the north, is named after John Sears, of Sears and Roebuck, who owned a large sawmill there. He logged pine for railroad cross ties during the 1920s. By the mid-1930s, the property was cleared of most of the harvestable timber. Hunting leases and cattle operations followed. The property was logged again in the mid- 1980s. Today remnant sawdust piles, left from portable sawmills once used over the years, dot the area.

Look for recreational opportunities, such as wildlife viewing, hunting, camping, horseback riding, non-motorized biking and hiking on 39 miles of trails. Fish in the canals and some small borrow pits. Paddling is a possibility, but areas to paddle are limited. There are no designated launch areas.

Okaloacoochee Slough extends on either side of County Road 832 in Hendry County: Drive South on State Road 29 from LaBelle for about 9 miles and make a left turn onto CR832. The area starts about three miles from SR29.

Devils Garden Bird Park

Devils Garden Bird Park is a bird-lovers paradise. Within the 7,000 acres of this Florida wild birds nature park, there are several uniquely different settings. More than 100 species of Florida birds, including the endangered Snail Kite, can be seen in the wild at Devils Garden Bird Park.

Devils Garden is a large working ranch with vast open prairie, countless tree hammocks, and vast wetlands covered in birds. The normally rare Snail Kite thrives here due to an abundance of snails readily available for their picking. The property is littered with the shells of snails which have been feasted on by wild birds. In addition to Snail Kites, a vast number of other species such as Sandhill Cranes, Ibis, Limpkins, Roseate Spoonbills, Red-shouldered Hawks and even occasional Bald Eagles and Osprey can be seen during tours.

Elevated viewing areas are available from which you can see hundreds of Florida's wild birds. Miles of trails through oak heads and prairies show Florida the way it used to be.

Some birding locations are accessible only by guided ATVs. Your guide will take you to these more remote areas for viewing and photography opportunities.

Be sure to bring your binoculars and/or camera. You will also want a hat, some sunscreen, sturdy walking shoes which can get wet (although we'll try to keep your shoes dry), and sunglasses (preferably polarized). We recommend thin cotton pants if you have them, shorts if you don't. There are restrooms throughout the property and plenty of cold water on hand.

Seminole Tribe of Florida's Billie Swamp Safari "Swamp Buggy" Eco-Tour

Located on the Big Cypress Seminole Indian reservation in the Florida Everglades, Billie Swamp Safari "Swamp Buggy" Eco-Tour will let you witness first-hand the unique ecosystem on the edge of civilization and the solitary beauty of tropical hardwood hammocks, cypress domes, air plants and gum sloughs.

SEE: Native and exotic animals from alligators, crocodiles, deer, antelope and bison to razorback hogs, snakes and countless species of birds plus the fascinating indigenous and endangered flora of the Florida Everglades. The rare Florida panther has even been sighted at Billie Swamp Safari.

HEAR: The varied avian songs and calls of wildlife as well as other mysterious sounds of nature heard only within this wetland.

TASTE: Seminole traditional foods such as gator tail, frog legs and fry bread in addition to numerous native fruits, berries, and plants of the Florida Everglades including muscadine grapes, beauty berries and bay leaves (based on seasonal availability).

SMELL: The fresh clean air and the many native flowering plants and trees.

TOUCH: The sharp "blades" of sawgrass and the rough scoots on an alligator's back.

EXPERIENCE: the wonders of this amazing 2,200-acre eco-heritage wildlife park. Large swamp buggies travel comfortably high above the Everglades' wet prairie edge. Glide effortlessly on a watery trail aboard one of the park's thrilling airboats. Enjoy Snake and Alligator Shows as well as a Swamp Critter Show.

ENJOY: an authentic Seminole village with many native Seminole chickees, a beautiful boardwalk nature trail, live animal and bird exhibits, including a herpetarium, an alligator pit, a traditional council house, Swamp Water Cafe and a gift shop.

Boardwalk at Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum on the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki means a place to learn. This one-mile boardwalk winds through a beautiful 60-acre cypress dome lined with educational placards that explain the form and function of over 60 different species of plants. Stop in the native village and ceremonial grounds along the way. See warblers, vireos and woodpeckers, herons and hawks, Turkey Vultures and more. Catch rare glimpses of bobcat and bear along with unique native bird species plus migratory visitors. Take a rest at the clan pavilion and read about Seminole lineage and clan structure. The boardwalk also features interpretive text panels on local flora used by the Seminole for food and medicine. Plants and trees are listed in both Miccosukee and Creek languages. Among those featured are: Bald Cypress, Willow, Red Maple, Pop Ash, Cabbage Palm, St. John's Wort, Ferns, Air Plants, and Spanish moss.

Spirit-of-the-Wild Wildlife Management Area combined with Palm & Pines RV Park

Spirit-of-the-Wild WMA is located south of the Caloosahatchee River in Hendry County. Its 7,487 acres are a part of a growing mosaic of conservation lands undergoing long-term, state-of-the-art restoration to benefit the Florida Panther, Florida Black Bear and other protected species. The waters in marshy Canoe Slough flow north through the site to the Caloosahatchee River. The natural communities at Spirit-of-the-Wild also help buffer the extensive wetlands on the adjoining 34,722-acre Okaloacoochee Slough, an important source of water for the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve and the Big Cypress National Preserve to the south.

Over a century of flood control, agriculture and cattle ranching activities have altered water flow and the plant and animal communities in this region, yet the pine flatwoods, pastures and wetlands at Spirit-of-the-Wild continue to attract a variety of wildlife. The area is open year round for wildlife viewing, hiking, biking, horseback riding and seasonal hunts. Visitors can travel on a circuit of unpaved roads and catch glimpses of wading birds, Osceola Wild Turkey, White-tailed Deer and feral hog.

Spirit-of-the-Wild's mix of wetlands and uplands and its location immediately adjacent to the long, linear wetland known as Okaloacoochee Slough, create excellent wildlife viewing opportunities. Herons, egrets, ibises, Roseate Spoonbills and Wood Storks congregate at ditches and wetlands. Here the Crested Caracaras, Florida Sandhill Cranes, Eastern Meadowlarks and Killdeer frequent open pastures.

Scan fence lines for Loggerhead Shrikes and small prey impaled on barbed-wire. The regularly burned pine flatwoods host Northern Bobwhite (quail), several woodpecker species and resident and migratory warblers. Watch for White-tailed Deer and Wild Turkey in clearings and along the edges of woodlands and sloughs. Swallow-tailed Kites are a spring and summer specialty usually spotted in flight over open areas. Autumn blooms in wetlands and roadside ditches attract numerous species of butterflies.

Palm & Pines RV Park

In addition to being a very nice RV park and campground, Palm & Pines RV Park is a National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Habitat, and a great place for bird watching and communing with nature. Manager Donna Hodges will welcome us to the Park for a catered lunch stop at their State Road 29 South location in Felda. Palm & Pines RV Park is offering birders' discounts during Big "O" Birding Festival. 863-675-0286

LaBelle Heritage Trail

The city of LaBelle is located on the Caloosahatchee River in Hendry County, Florida. Named by Capt. Francis Hendry for his two daughters, Laura and Belle, the historic town features local food such as cooked swamp cabbage and local honey. The LaBelle Heritage Trail, a route combining both driving and walking, starts at Barron Park with a visit to a butterfly garden near the LaBelle Bridge. From there, the trail leads to the LaBelle Nature Park.

Community-minded groups and individuals have joined together to improve public access and usage of the LaBelle Nature Park. The ten-acre park is located at the end of Fraser Avenue adjacent to the Hendry House. South Florida Water Management District owns the property and leases it to the City of LaBelle.

The Trail incorporates stops at the Captain Hendry House, private homes, Fort Denaud, Wren Way, Bob Mason Park and River Park. While on the LaBelle Heritage Trail, look for Painted Buntings, Purple Martins, Florida Scrub Jays, Chimney Swifts, and many other delightful birds.

LaBelle residents Margaret England and Janet Papinaw, both avid birders, lead you on this fun and historic journey.

Port LaBelle Loop

Designed to feature waders and raptors, the Port LaBelle Loop begins with a walking trail near Port LaBelle Inn, site of the 2012 Big "O" Birding Festival "Registration Roost."

By vehicle, the loop continues on State Road 80 to Forrey Road, Cowboy Way East and back to Port LaBelle Inn. Many opportunities for terrific birding here since the loop encompasses several distinct environmental areas: with oak hammocks, water hickory and cabbage palms, ferns, sawgrass, flame vine, lantana, pepper grass and grapevines. The trees and the sky are home to numerous Warblers and Red-bellied Woodpeckers. You'll see migratory birds, wading birds, Eagles, Swallow-tailed Kites, and other raptors.

LaBelle residents Margaret England and Janet Papinaw, both avid birders, lead you on this visually appealing, nature-based birding loop.