

# Wildlife Viewing Information

## Before You Go

Do you already have a target list of animals you hope to see? Is there a particular habitat that interests you? Maybe you enjoy coastal areas and the chance to see shorebirds or dolphins, or fresh water marshes with their alligators and wading birds.

The key to successful wildlife viewing is to look in the right places. Every animal has basic needs that include food, water and cover and every habitat meets these needs in different ways. Some animals are quite picky in their selection of a home area. Gopher tortoises prefer dry, sandy areas; limpkins live primarily along river swamps and freshwater marshes. Use the Species Spotlight to help you locate the sites where you'll have a good chance of finding your target species. If you know what part of the state you'll be visiting, pick out viewing locations on the map and go to the site description to see what animals are found there.

In addition to habitat preferences, animals also have seasons when they are most viewable. Scarlet tanagers only pass through Florida during spring and fall migration, but summer tanagers nest here in the summer. Robins and common loons spend the winter months in Florida, while blue jays and cardinals live here year-round. Many state and national parks provide checklists that list species commonly seen during particular seasons. Time of day also influences animal movements. Though dawn and dusk are active times for many animals, owls, flying squirrels and bats are most active at night.

You may only see a few animals on a single visit to a site, but repeated visits to the same site during different seasons will increase your chances of viewing the resident and migratory species associated with it.

## Bird Disturbance: It's a Matter of Survival

We appreciate the beautiful sight of hundreds of birds taking wing as we walk a beach or cruise by an island in our boat or personal watercraft. But repeated disturbances inadvertently threaten the survival of our feathered friends.

Here's why:

### The Sandpipers

During the spring and fall migrations, millions of shorebirds make their way to Florida. A number of these birds stop at points along our coastline and remain throughout the winter. Many more simply stop over for some food and a brief rest before continuing their travels. These birds may have flown hundreds of miles before reaching Florida. Exhausted and hungry, they land on our shores pushed to the very limit of their physical abilities. The simple act of flushing them off their feeding and resting grounds burns up their reserves of energy. Weakened and vulnerable shorebirds with a reduced ability to feed may not complete their journey.

### Hérons, Egrets, and their Kin

Of the 14 kinds of water birds (like herons, egrets and pelicans) in Florida, only 4 are flourishing. Most of these "colonial" birds nest in large, multi-species groups. When wading birds are frightened off their nests, they may knock their eggs or young out of the nest or leave them exposed to temperature extremes and predators. If disturbed frequently, adults will abandon their nests altogether and often times the entire nesting colony may fail.

## **Beach-nesting Birds**

Many species of Florida's water birds nest right on the beach. The eggs and young are exposed and vulnerable. This group of ground-nesting birds includes gulls, terns, black skimmers, plovers, willets and oystercatchers. They have adapted to the rugged coastal environment of temperature extremes, hurricanes, high winds and coastal flooding. Barrier islands and sandbars are favored nesting sites because they afford protection from land predators; human disturbance and domestic animals are another matter.

Many places that once were isolated are now teeming with boat and beach enthusiasts (and their pets). When birds are flushed off their nests, eggs and young are exposed to the intense sun, cold of night, aerial predators like crows and gulls, or marauding dogs. On a hot summer afternoon, temperatures at ground level can rise to well over 100 degrees, and unprotected eggs of beach-nesting birds are virtually invisible on the ground and young chicks freeze in fear in a prone position when danger approaches; it's easy for unknowing pedestrians to crush the eggs or kill young birds accidentally.

## **How You Can Help**

When enjoying the water, remember that while you are there to recreate, other creatures' survival may depend on your behavior. Due to the high speed, maneuverability, sound, and ability to navigate in shallow waters, jet skis have an especially disrupting effect on many species of wildlife. Please follow these simple rules to minimize impacts on wildlife:

1. When you see a concentration of birds, either on the shore or in the trees, **PLEASE, keep your distance**. A good "rule of thumb" is to stay at least 500 feet away. Minimizing disturbance to concentrations of birds is the key to conserving them.
2. **PLEASE do not intentionally force birds to fly**. If you see birds on a beach, island, or sandbar, walk or steer around them. Again, avoiding disturbance to them is the best approach.
3. **PLEASE avoid running your boat or jet ski close to shore**, except to idle to or from a destination point. Because habitat destruction has resulted in an ever-decreasing amount of shoreline available to wildlife, almost all mangrove islands, beaches, mud flats, and other shallow water and shoreline habitats are important to feeding, resting and nesting birds.
4. Birds like herons, egrets and pelicans generally nest in the same places from year to year. Be on the lookout for large concentrations of birds (especially large white birds) in trees growing in the water or on islands, especially during the spring or summer months. Get to know where nesting colonies are located in your area. **PLEASE avoid these**

## colonies of birds during the nesting season.

5. **PLEASE keep pets leashed** when visiting the shore and never approach a bird colony accompanied by your dog. One loose dog can destroy a colony of ground-nesting birds in a matter of minutes.

6. **PLEASE spread the word.** If you see others disturbing wildlife, politely let them know about the effects of their actions. Many people do not realize that their actions may be harmful to wildlife. If you see someone intentionally and maliciously disturbing a bird colony, contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 1-888-404-FWCC (3922)

7. **PLEASE support posting efforts.** Some places are posted with sign warning that the area supports a bird colony and advising people to avoid that area during the nesting season. Honor these closed areas and encourage others to do the same.

### Learn to Detect Animal Sign

Many wild animals especially mammals are difficult to see in the field. Often they are active at night or at dawn and dusk and avoid humans. They do leave evidence of their presence and clues to their behavior behind in tracks, scat (feces), scrapes, scratches and other sign. Several excellent guides are available on reading animal sign including James Halfpenny and Elizabeth Biesiot, *A Field Guide to Animal Tracking in North America*; Olaus J. Murie, *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks*; Paul Rezendes, *Tracking and the Art of Seeing*.

### What to Take

Close up views of wildlife are especially rewarding and binoculars and telephoto lenses allow good viewing with minimal disturbance to the animal. The most important feature of a decent pair of binoculars is its ability to magnify and 'gather' light. All binoculars are described by a pair of numbers, such as "7 x 35" or "8 x 40," etc. The first number refers to magnification. A "7 x 35" pair of glasses will make objects appear as if they are seven times as close as they actually are. Pick binoculars that are at least seven power. Binoculars with very high power (over nine-power) are sometimes difficult to hold steady. The second number describes the diameter of the large lens that faces the animal. A larger number indicates that more light can enter the lens, giving you a brighter image in dim light.

Field guides are an essential part of wildlife identification. Field guides can be very general, such as "Birds of North America" or "A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies" or they may focus just on a particular type of bird, such as "Seabirds" or focus on a particular state or region. In addition to field guides on birds, you'll find guides to butterflies, reptiles and amphibians, fishes, shells, and even animal tracks. Coupled with a list of species commonly observed (often available for the asking at many parks and refuges), a good field guide will help you narrow the list of species you may encounter at a site and also provide you with more in-depth life history information.

You may want to keep a flashlight handy for viewing the eyeshine of animals at night. Eyeshine is light that is reflected off of a mirror-like layer in the back of the animal's eye. If

you go out at night, hold a flashlight to your forehead and look down the beam of light. You may see the bright yellow eyeshine of a raccoon or the greenish reflection from a frog.

Visitors to the outdoors should always consider their need for year-round protection from the Florida sun and mosquitoes, flies, ticks and chiggers. Summer heat and humidity are especially taxing on the uninitiated. Always carry along a hat, water, insect repellent and polarized sunglasses. The latter will reduce the glare from water surfaces and enhance the viewing of manatees, fish and other aquatic animals. Preparation is especially important for visits to sites that lack restrooms, water fountains and other basic visitor amenities.

### **When You Arrive**

Since wild animals generally flee when people approach a viewing area, here are a few ways you can encourage them to move in closer. If an on-site blind is available, climb in and wait for wildlife to settle back down – with time, they'll resume their normal activities around you. Your car and surrounding trees and vegetation can also function as a blind. Or you can sit quietly next to a tree trunk and wait patiently. When possible, move about on your own, rather than with a group. Refrain from moving in so close that you inadvertently disrupt feeding, resting and nesting routines. Always maintain a safe distance from dangerous wildlife.

To attract birds, try making a repetitive "psssh" sound, which imitates scolding birds and squirrels. A variety of small birds will usually move in close to investigate the source of the disturbance. Since prolonged calling can distract a bird from feeding or caring for its young, use this method for short periods only.

Florida has thousands of lakes and miles of rivers and coastal shorelines to explore. A canoe or kayak is a perfect way to view wildlife in these watery habitats, since animals are more afraid of a human on foot than they are of a boat. Quiet travelers may see alligators sunning themselves on banks or other species such as wading birds, ducks, otters, manatees or dolphins. You'll startle fewer animals if you crouch low in the boat and drift with the current. Bring your own boat or rent one at the many concessions located throughout the state.

You can identify many animals just by listening to their distinctive voices. Owls are active at night and are stealthy fliers. You're much more likely to hear their hooting calls than to catch a glimpse of them. The same is true for many other bird species, and for frogs and insects as well. You can learn the calls of birds and Florida frogs from tapes and CDs available in some bookstores and libraries.

For other elusive animals, it can be fun to be an amateur sleuth and learn how to interpret the clues the animals leave behind. Around wetlands and rivers, you may notice a tree limb that has been chewed to a point by a beaver or an embankment with a well-worn trail leading down to the water – evidence that otters frequent the area. In sand or mud, look for tracks or crawl marks. Check for tufts of hair snagged on branches or briars. Even the shape and content of droppings can help identify an animal. Use all of your senses and you'll have a pretty good idea of which animals inhabit a particular area, what they eat and their movement patterns.

## Ethics

It's rewarding to have close up views of animals, but it's easy for even the most responsible wildlife watchers to inadvertently put themselves, or the animals they seek, at risk. Keep the following tips in mind as you venture out into Florida's natural areas:

Every animal differs in how close it will allow you to approach before it pauses in its feeding, nesting or resting activities, or flees altogether. Such disturbances can be disastrous for animals, especially the cumulative effect of frequent disruptions, a common occurrence at beaches, waterways and other busy wildlife viewing sites. When disturbed, an animal uses up valuable energy reserves that are no longer available for other uses, such as migrating, tending to young, mating or escaping predators. A fleeing parent may abandon a nest and risk exposing eggs or young to temperature extremes or predators.

How can you tell if you're too close? Look for the obvious: Has the animal stopped feeding? Is it looking at you? Does it appear aggressive or skittish? Did the animal begin to move away or fly into the air? Is it dive-bombing you or circling overhead? Do you see distraction displays such as a bird exhibiting a "broken wing?" These behaviors are all progressive signs of disturbance.

If you see any of these signs, move away immediately. When possible, use binoculars or zoom lenses to extend your view. If an adult animal allows you to approach, something's wrong. It may be sick, injured or aggressive. If you're suspicious, contact the local site manager.

Corals are extremely fragile colonies of soft-bodied animals. It is illegal to collect them and they are damaged by touch. Boats should use mooring buoys rather than anchors.

Respect private property boundaries, even if the animal you are following does not. Obey posted signs near nesting areas and stay on roads, trails and paths to minimize habitat disturbance.

Resist the temptation to feed wild animals. Fed animals may abandon their natural, healthy diet, become dependent on human food and lose their fear of humans. Such animals can become aggressive or dangerous or may risk crossing busy roads to venture close to human habitations. Report people who attract wild dolphins or sharks by feeding them. As of Jan 1, 2002, they're breaking the law. You can call our Wildlife Alert toll free number 1-888-404-FWCC

Young animals are rarely abandoned by their parents, so if you find one that looks helpless, there's a good chance that the parents are nearby, waiting until you leave before they return. The longer you stay, the longer the youngster must go without food and the greater the risk that it will be spotted by a predator.

Finally, your trip will be more successful if you keep your pets at home. They may frighten or harm the wildlife you are seeking and many sites prohibit them altogether. It is against Florida law for you or your pets to chase, harass or harm wildlife.

## More Help

**Join a tour.** Many wildlife-viewing sites offer field trips or education programs that acquaint visitors with the animals and habitats located there. To observe sea turtles, for example, join a permitted public turtle walk during the nesting season (May – August). Organizations such as Audubon offer birding trips around the state. Check with the local chapters for schedule information or inquire about privately run tours offered by other groups.

**Ask a professional.** Most sites employ a biologist or manager who can direct you to productive viewing locations and can tell you what animals you're likely to see. Pick up animal checklists when possible and read recent entries in the site logbook if available. If you see something interesting, don't forget to record your sightings before you leave.

**Check out the resources at libraries, bookstores, nature centers and on the Web.** There are many excellent field guides, tapes and CDs available to help you fine-tune your identification skills. If you have access to a computer, you may want to visit an area's Web site before you travel and study its checklists and other descriptive materials.