



NATURE TAKES FLIGHT IN CHARLOTTE HARBOR & THE GULF ISLANDS

Florida Birding Vacation

CHARLOTTE HARBOR & THE GULF ISLANDS, Fla. – Birds are not the only ones flocking to Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands – the people who love to observe them are discovering the expansive outdoor offerings and the amazing array of avian residents of this section of Southwest Florida. Located along the Florida Gulf Coast portion of the North American Migratory Flyway with seven sites listed on the Great Florida Birding Trail (www.FloridaBirdingTrail.com), Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands offers abundant migratory and year-round birding. Traipse along deserted beaches, traverse walking and driving trails, paddle or cruise along mangrove-shaded rivers, or join in organized outings led by the local chapter of the Audubon Society.

Year-round, Charlotte County's wetlands, flatwoods, fresh and saltwater marshes, and estuary system are home to nearly 120 species of birds. For a complete listing, birders can download their own list at (<http://www.charlotteharbortravel.com/birding>). The area's pristine natural resources provide refuge to eight federally-listed and 22 state-listed threatened and endangered species including the red-cockaded woodpecker, wood stork, and the Florida Scrub-Jay. Peak birding starts in September and runs through spring when the population jumps to more than 190 species as migrants arrive to spend the winters.

On land, the 79,000-acre Babcock/Webb Wildlife Management Area, a member of the Florida Birding Trail system, boasts drivable trails through pine flatwoods and freshwater marsh habitats. The belted kingfisher's arrival signals the start of fall migration, followed by flocks of tree and barn swallows numbering in the thousands, goldfinches, warblers and several other neo-tropical species. These winter residents join bald eagles, ospreys, colonies of red-cockaded woodpeckers and Babcock/Webb's star attractions, the limpkin, a rare wading bird. Limpkins were almost hunted to extinction in Florida by the beginning of the 20th century, but with legal protection they are making a fair comeback.

Seasonal feathered visitors to Placida and Amberjack Park, also on the Florida Birding Trail, include white pelicans, one of the largest birds in North America. World-renowned bird photographer Arthur Morris (www.birdsasart.com) has created a photo essay on these rare, beautiful birds that return to

Charlotte County annually. The white pelicans share their winter home with semipalmated, snowy, black-bellied and Wilson's plovers; peregrine falcons; magnificent frigates, and ruddy turnstones, joining a year-round population of royal terns and ospreys.

For a birding-by-water adventure, join one of the area's experienced guides. King Fisher Fleet travels from the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve up the Peace River, where, from February through April, the river comes alive with mixed-species rookeries. Wood storks, snowy egrets, tri-colored herons, yellow-crowned night herons glossy ibis, and their chicks populate the small mid-river islands. Tours are narrated by experts from the Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center. (www.KingFisherFleet.com)

Coast silently through mangrove tunnels and around islands teeming with birds on one of Grande Tours guided Kayak Eco-Tours. Eco-tour pioneer Captain Marian Schneider offers many ways to see birds by kayak including the 2.5-hour favorite for beginners and families with easy paddling through remote, calm mangroves for encounters with a variety of birds, plus the occasional manatee and dolphin. The trip is guided by a Florida Master Naturalist.

Grande Tours also offers spectacular bird photography tours that have been recommended by renowned bird photographer Arthur Morris. From October through April, they travel to White Pelican Island in Gasparilla Sound where as many as 2,000 of these majestic birds roost, making it perhaps one of the largest concentrations of white pelicans in the Southeastern United States. **(Note: See accompanying guide for a list of birding organizations and best birding spots in the area)**

In addition to birding, visitors to Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands will enjoy the nearly unlimited outdoor recreational opportunities including shelling, hiking, bicycling, fishing, kayaking and geocaching.

At the end of a day filled with nature, visitors will find the catch-of-the-day straight from the Gulf on local restaurant menus. Favorites include waterfront ambience with an ever-growing selection of chef-owned and fine dining restaurants complementing steakhouses, ethnic cuisine and cozy bistros.

The selection of restaurants and pubs offering entertainment – ranging from jazz to reggae to country and everything in between – makes dining out in Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands a cultural experience.

When it's time to turn out the lights, Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands accommodates every taste and budget, from waterfront resorts and quaint inns to hotels and motels. For ideas, visit www.CharlotteHarborTravel.com

About Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands

Located halfway between Tampa and Naples on the Southwest Florida Gulf coast, Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands is a charming collection of nine coastal communities surrounding the state's second largest harbor. Florida's premier year-round eco-tourism destination, Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands offers a pristine unspoiled beauty that has served as the backdrop for seven major feature films as well as countless memorable vacations. A haven for outdoor enthusiasts, Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands has been named to SAIL magazine's "10 Greatest Places to Sail in the United States," ranked by Golf Digest as "Third Best Place to Live and Play Golf in America," and rated by *MONEY* magazine as one of the "Best Places to Live in the South." The city of Punta Gorda was named in September as one of "Top Ten Places to Retire Healthy" by U.S. News & World Report. Englewood was named as #2 of the Top Ten emerging travel destinations in the U.S. by TripAdvisor.com.

For information about area events, activities and attractions, contact the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau, 18500 Murdock Circle, Suite B104, Port Charlotte, FL 33948; 941-743-1900, or call toll free at 1-800-652-6090 for a free Visitor's Guide; or visit the Web site at www.CharlotteHarborTravel.com.

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