



**nature & adventure tours • nature store**  
**Bar Harbor, Acadia National Park, Downeast Maine**

This article was published in the January 19, 2012, edition of *The Bar Harbor Times*. In this week's column, Rich departs from discussing local observation in order to share sightings from a trip to Sarasota, Florida.

## **Nature Notes ....**

By Rich MacDonald

I am a northern person. My travels and explorations tend to take me to the colder latitudes. Anywhere in Maine. New York State's Adirondack Mountains. Cape Breton Island in northern Nova Scotia. Newfoundland. On occasion, though, I succumb to the allure of palms swaying in a warm ocean breeze, the pleasure of swimming with dolphins somewhere below and pelicans above, the joy of exploring complex mangrove ecosystems. So it was my wife Natalie, four-year-old daughter Anouk, and I found ourselves these past two weeks on the shores of Lido Key, near Sarasota, Florida. And so this week I present...Nature Notes South.

Palm trees are the most striking biota of the Sarasota County landscape. They line the streets and beaches. There emerge from the scrubby natural communities. Found in warmer climates, palm refers to a broad family of plants with leaves fanning out from a single point, loosely resembling an open hand: palmate. Much of the Gulf Coast is stippled with palms.

When close to salt water, it seems anything that is not sand is mangrove. The three types of Florida mangrove are very salt tolerant, having evolved various mechanisms for extracting fresh water from salt. Red Mangrove, also called "Walking Trees" for their appearance of standing, or walking, on water on its complex aerial root system, grow at water's edge, stabilizing sediment, creating emergent landscapes. The root system provides nursery and shelter to countless animals. This transitions into Red Mangrove, further stabilizing terra firma. This mangrove is identifiable by countless finger-like projections, pneumatophores, protruding from the ground surrounding the trunk. Furthest upland is the White Mangrove.

The tallest natural structure of the Sarasota County landscape, growing to over 100 feet tall, is the Australian Pine. This non-native species was introduced in the late 1800s for shade and to create wind breaks. It has a voracious appetite for water. With the water table so close to the surface, rather than send roots deep, they stay shallow, making them particularly susceptible to toppling during storms. Land managers are beginning to investigate removing them altogether.

Local naturalist Chad Propst asked if I saw many reptiles, especially snakes. Sorry Chad, no snakes, but we have an excellent look at an American Alligator. Standing atop a 40-foot spoils pile in a conservation area known as the "Celery Fields," looking for birds with my spotting scope, we spied a ten-footer hauled out. I lowered the scope to near ground level for Anouk, who had previously stated she wanted to see one this trip. "Yup, that's an alligator," she confirmed.

We saw two species of turtle: the Florida Softshell Turtle and the Florida Red-bellied Cooter. As the name "softshell" implies, its carapace is more leathery than the rigid shells we are accustomed to here on MDI. Both turtles frequent the myriad freshwater pools blanketing the landscape.

Small, darting lizards—Brown Anole—could be readily found. Originating in Cuba and the Bahamas, they can now be found anywhere in Florida, especially urbanized areas. The native Green Anole frequents tree trunks and the upper canopy of the forests.

Of course, for me, the jewels of this landscape are the birds. You cannot go anywhere without seeing some member of the charismatic avifauna.

While here on Mount Desert Island we are generally limited to the Great Blue Heron; in Florida, you do not have to walk far to see a nearly complete run of the long-legged waders. Most anywhere with open water, excepting exposed coastal beaches, you are likely to see numbers of Great Egret alongside the slightly taller Great Blue, yellow-slippered Snowy Egret, Reddish Egret, Tricolored Heron (if you are still using an older guide to birds, it may be listed as a Louisiana Heron), and Little Blue Heron. Wood Stork seemed to be secreted just a little deeper in the vegetation, often barely visible. Cattle Egret are most often the white wader found in fields and alongside cattle in pasture, as were the 14 Sandhill Crane I found.

Although Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron are primarily nocturnal hunters, I was continually surprised to see them perched at night along bridge railings, head angled down as if intently staring into the water for fish or amphibian prey. I never saw them dive, but they were so high up I could not imagine any other way for them to catch their meal.

All three members of the ibis family were present. On a kayak outing exploring the mangrove “tunnels,” those narrow, meandering, creek-like passageways separating clumps of densely intertwined Red Mangrove, White Ibis were abundant. They rapidly sewed their decurved (downward curving) bill into bottom sediments seeking crustacean food. Mixed in with Glossy Ibis further inland at the Celery Fields were four White-faced Ibis.

Squadrons of Brown Pelican were constantly overhead. The only Brown Pelican ever to make it to MDI escaped from captivity aboard a merchant vessel in 1901. With a 6½-foot wingspan, these stocky birds seem to defy gravity, casually floating on the merest breeze, until they find a delectable fishy treat, then they plunge-dive directly atop their fishy prey, making an enormous splash, filling their expandable gular pouch with water and fish. The former is strained out, the latter remains to be swallowed whole.

The Anhinga, like its more common cousin, the Double-crested Cormorant, have underdeveloped oil glands, so they perch with wings spread to dry out their feathers. Also called Snakebird, for its habit of swimming with only its sinuous neck and head exposed, the Anhinga is an excellent aerialist, too. Dozens would be kettling on thermals. At first glance I thought they were raptors...except their tails stuck out too far aft and their heads too far to the bow.

For me, the avian highlight was a scene right out of the Bar Harbor low-tide bar. A mixed group of Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone were feeding on the beach. The Sanderlings chased each receding wave, made a few quick stabs of their bill into the sand in search of food, then raced back to avoid the incoming wave. The turnstones meandered more casually, feeding just out of reach of the highest waves. Out of nowhere, a young Peregrine Falcon blasted through, scattering the flock. The Peregrine came up empty and went to sulk on a nearby rooftop, the shorebirds nervously returned to forage.

Sometimes, no matter how far we are from home, cameo events remind us just how small and connected the natural world is.

*Rich MacDonald runs The Natural History Center, located in downtown Bar Harbor, alongside the Village Green. If you would like to share your observations of the natural world that is Mount Desert Island, you may contact him at [Rich@TheNaturalHistoryCenter.com](mailto:Rich@TheNaturalHistoryCenter.com).*