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## When To Go

For the most part, the choice is obvious. Southern Florida is best experienced in winter. Few people need a guidebook to tell them that. Still, for ecotourists, there are at least a few reasons to consider visiting the Everglades, and especially the Florida Keys, during the summer.

First, though, the hard facts. Two seasons separate the calendar in southern Florida: wet and dry. During the wet season, from approximately late May to late October, temperatures consistently reach 90 degrees, while lows rarely drop below the upper 70s. Thunderstorms develop nearly every afternoon, especially on the southern Florida mainland, making the air thick with humidity. You can't actually cut the Everglades atmosphere with a knife. That's just a silly wives' tale. But on August afternoons it often feels as if you could.

Making matters worse are the biting insects, most notably mosquitoes and sand flies. If you plan on visiting a southern Florida natural area during the wet season, especially in the Everglades, prepare for the worst. Dawn and dusk can be brutal. And you should ready yourself for an onslaught if you venture into a hardwood tree hammock, mangrove creek, or low-lying coastal area before the first cold front of November rolls through. You'll usually be fine if you stick to the beaches and open water.

Summer is also hurricane season. Technically, the season runs from June through November. However, the large majority of tropical

storms and hurricanes materialize over the south Atlantic from late July through late October.

That's not to say you're likely to encounter a storm if you visit southern Florida during these months. In fact, you'd be quite unlucky if that were to happen. As of the start of the 2015 storm season, it had been 10 years since the last hurricane hit Florida. Still, it's important to be cognizant of hurricane season. Even the emergence of a tropical depression with the potential to track toward Florida can bring uncertainty to travel plans.

In contrast to summer, the dry season of November through May brings mild temperatures, cool breezes, drier air, and a refreshing dearth of bugs to the Keys and Everglades. During the most comfortable of those months, from November through the middle of April, daytime highs typically hover in the high 70s or low 80s, with lows, especially in the Everglades, dropping into the 60s. Slightly warmer evening temperatures can be expected in the Keys, where the surrounding waters keep the air more moist.

Southern Florida's seasonal cycles of wet and dry also have a profound impact on the Everglades landscape. Unlike points farther north, it is not the absence of leaves from the trees or the presence of snow on the ground that most distinguishes winter from summer. Rather, it is the absence of standing water.

Some 75 percent of the rain in southern Florida falls during the five-month wet season, turning prairies into swamps and shallow marshes into flowing rivers. Water levels in the greater Everglades region are often three to five feet higher during the peak of the wet season than they are in April or early May. That's a huge difference in a place where just a foot of elevation change can make the difference between a pine forest and a marsh.

For wildlife lovers, the wet/dry cycle offers another reason to visit southern Florida in the winter. During the summer, when freshwater is widespread, alligators, wading birds and all sorts of other Everglades denizens disperse into the broader hunting grounds, where they are difficult to view. During the winter, when the landscape dries, they

congregate in the remaining wet areas. Visit one of those areas and you're in for a show.

Still, there are definitely reasons to visit the Everglades and Keys during the hot weather months. One is the water, which is warmer and generally calmer in summer than in winter. Summer, in fact, is the peak season for diving and snorkeling along the Keys reefs.

Another is the flowers. Plant life takes center stage in southern Florida during the wet season. It's when the most spider lilies bloom in the grassy rivers, known as sloughs. It's when the largest number of orchid species bloom in the Big Cypress and Fakahatchee swamps. It's when the cypress trees have their needles.

The bird migrations of September and October offer still another delight to nature lovers. Hundreds of thousands of birds, maybe millions, make their way through southern Florida in the fall, en route to the Caribbean from points farther north. Warblers, hawks, and many more species stop in the Everglades, or along the Keys, to ready themselves for the long crossing to places like Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula. It's possible to see many of the same birds in March and April as they make their way back north, of course, but then you have to deal with the crowds.

Speaking of crowds, the absence of them is another reason to visit the natural areas of southern Florida, or at least the Keys, during the summer and fall. Only the hardy will enjoy the Everglades from June through mid-October, though you'll encounter the fewest people then. If you go, embrace the heat of the day to stay clear of bugs. Aside from open water, your best bet is often the higher ground of the pine forests, where shade is prevalent but the foliage is thin enough for breezes to pass through, dispersing bugs.

The Keys are much more tolerable. Mosquitoes can be avoided on or near the open water, as well as in developed areas, where the local government spends upward of \$10 million annually on mosquito control. Meanwhile, ocean breezes make the heat more bearable, though not necessarily comfortable.

Things still get busy during the summer in the Keys, especially on weekends. Weekdays, though, are usually fairly calm. September

through November, meanwhile, are the slowest months of the year. Prices plummet as the highway clears out. Go to the Keys or the Everglades in November and you might just combine good weather with bargain prices and quiet waterways, beaches, and attractions.

## Birding Southern Florida

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Southern Florida's subtropical climate, unique ecology, and strategic location within the North American/Caribbean migratory routes combine to make it a prime destination for birders, especially during the spring and fall migrations. In fact, publications routinely name Everglades National Park, where more than 350 species of birds have been spotted, as one of the top birding destinations in the United States.

Wading birds get the most attention throughout the greater Everglades and the Florida Keys, and for good reason. A century ago the beautiful plumage of species such as snowy egrets, great white herons, roseate spoonbills, and more were literally worth their weight in gold. Hunted no more, those species and others can now be seen on shallow water mudflats, in mangrove islands, in cypress swamps, along the shores of lakes and ponds, and in all kinds of other southern Florida locations. Even pink flamingos occasionally make a visit from Cuba and other Caribbean locales to the flats of Florida Bay.

Nevertheless, wading birds are far from the only feathered charm in southern Florida. Nesting osprey lurk on mangrove coastlines, swooping to the water to grab fish with their impressive talons. Magnificent frigatebirds, a large tropical seabird, soar majestically over the Keys year-round. Dry Tortugas National Park has the lone breeding colony of sooty terns in the United States. They show up 80,000 strong during a typical winter and spring. The Big Cypress swamp and the Everglades' Taylor Slough are home to the endangered Cape Sable seaside sparrow. The Middle Keys sees one of the largest falcon migrations on the eastern seaboard. Barred owls perch over the Fakahatchee Strand. The locally endangered snail kite, another bird of prey, flies over the

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A white pelican flock gathers on the mud flats of Florida Bay, near Flamingo. By permission of Garl Harrold, [www.garlscoastalkayaking.com](http://www.garlscoastalkayaking.com).

Everglades. White-crowned pigeons, with their neck of distinctive iridescent green, reach the northern edge of their range in southern Florida and nest in the hammocks of the Lower and Middle keys.

Those are just a few examples of why as long as you pay attention, you'll see plenty of interesting birds simply by being in southern Florida. But if you want the best viewing, or to see some of the less common species, it's advisable to venture into wild spaces.

In the Big Cypress/Tamiami Trail region, the Big Cypress Bend and Kirby Storter boardwalks offer excellent birding, as does Loop Road, where the habitat ranges between pineland, cypress swamp,

hammock, and prairie. Definitely stop and look for birds at Sweetwater Strand, and don't forget to look high in the trees for hawks.

Everglades National Park contains an almost unlimited selection of excellent birding sites. Look for purple gallinules, a rainbow-colored bird of the freshwater marshes, at the Anhinga Trail; woodstorks and roseate spoonbills at Paurotis Pond; and the secretive mangrove cuckoo along the Snake Bight hiking trail.

The Keys, too, have numerous outstanding birding spots. Try Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park for migrant songbirds, such as warblers. Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park in Key West is a nice place to check out some of Florida's beach-dwelling terns and to look above for magnificent frigatebirds. Mid-September to mid-November is an exciting time for birders to visit Marathon's Curry Hammock State Park, where the organization Hawk Watch International sets up a seasonal counting site. One of Curry Hammock's frequent migratory visitors is the peregrine falcon, a once-endangered species that has recovered to a population of 2,000 to 3,000, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The best birding in the Everglades and Florida Keys comes during the migrations of September/October and March/April. Wading bird nesting season, typically coinciding with the January to April dry months, also presents excellent viewing opportunities.

An outstanding resource for more information on birding in southern Florida is the Tropical Audubon Society website: <http://tropicalaudubon.org/birds.html>.