The Limpkin

Newsletter of the
Space Coast Audubon Society of Brevard County, Florida

December 1 2025, Volume 70, Issue 2

Limpkin Winter Edition

Dee Fairbanks Simpson, Editor

Welcome to the December Limpkin. Featured articles in this month's Limpkin are:

- Upcoming Space Coast Audubon Events
- Birding at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge by Kay Stahl: Read all about the refuge including how it got there, and what you can see and do there.
- Common Loons of Green Lake by Jeff Lamothe: Read about Mark's experiences with Loons (not birders, the actual birds!)
- Ecuador 2025 Part 1 by Matt Heyden: Read Part 1 of Matt's (often hilarious) adventures in Ecuador.
- Is Florida Doomed to be a Duck Desert? By Mark Wallace: Read Mark's thoughts on why we are seeing fewer ducks.

Upcoming Space Coast Audubon Events

Please to go https://www.meetup.com/space-coast-audubon-meetup/ for details of all coming events.

- **Monday, December 15, 2025,** Merritt Island Christmas Bird Count.
- **Friday, December 19, 2025, 6:30-9:00 pm.:** Monthly Meeting - Chips, Chirps, Cheer and Chocolate. Holiday Social and Giving Back. Rockledge Presbyterian Church, 921 Rockledge Dr · Rockledge, FL
- **Saturday, December 20, 2025:** Cocoa Christmas Bird Count.
- **Saturday, January 3, 2026:** South Brevard Christmas Bird Count.
- **Weekly: Every Saturday starting Jan 3, at 9:00 a.m.:** Bird Walks at Sams House at Pine Island, 6195 N Tropical Trail, Merritt Island, FL, US
- **January 21-25:** Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival. Click here for details.
- **Sat, Mar 7, 2026 · 8:00 a.m.:** Beginning Birdwatching - Rotary Park, 1899 South Courtenay Parkway, Merritt Island, FL. Kate Wells, PhD, Naturalist and Environmental Program Supervisor at Rotary Park will lead.
- **Sat, Apr 4, 2026 · 8:00 a.m.:** Beginning Birdwatching- Veterans Memorial Park, Merritt Island Brevard Veteran's Memorial Center, 400 S. Sykes Creek Parkway, Merritt Island, FL, US. Kate Wells, PhD, Naturalist and Environmental Program Supervisor at Rotary Park will lead.
- **Sat, May 2, 2026 · 8:00 a.m.:** Beginning Birdwatching - Rotary Park, 1899 South Courtenay Parkway, Merritt Island, FL. Kate Wells, PhD, Naturalist and Environmental Program Supervisor at Rotary Park will lead.

Birding at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge

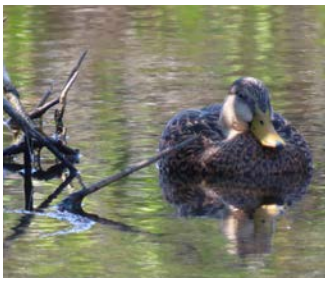
By Kay Stahl

Once in Central Florida semi-tropical hardwood forests, pine flatwoods, scrub, wetlands, swamps, marshes and sand dunes covered the land. Remnants of these survive at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Fast forward to 1963 when the refuge was officially designated, largely due to the efforts of Alan and Helen Cruickshank. Today there are over 140,000 acres of impoundments, wetlands and terrestrial habitats available for the public to use and enjoy.

At least 360 species of birds have been observed on the refuge since it was created by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The 5.5 mile Blackpoint Wildlife Drive (mostly one way) is the major location for viewing fresh and salt water impoundments and marshes. A few years ago the drive was named the best birding site in Florida.

Wading birds like herons, egrets, ibises and wood storks are seen year around - more so in the winter. Eight species of herons are usually observed. Reddish egrets and roseate spoonbills are highlights of the drive and are commonly seen. A small flock of American Flamingos have been present in the Indian River since the hurricanes of 2024.

40 species of waterfowl have been seen on the refuge, mainly from October to April, except for the mottled ducks that are permanent residents. Flocks may number in the 1,000's. Commonly seen are teal, pintails, wigeons, shovelers, scaup, ringnecks and mergansers.



Mottled duck at MIWR

Up to 43 species of shorebirds have been spotted on the refuge. These are small to medium sized birds seen on mudflats or wading in shallow waters. During the spring and fall migrations they may be found in flocks of hundreds, but some will winter on refuge waters and a few nest on the area. They can be difficult to identify, particularly in their drab winter plumages.

Others observed on the drive include rails, bitterns, terns, coots and gallinules, and raptors (including bald eagles). Normally more than 2 dozen pairs of eagles raise their young on the refuge. The 2 nests visible on Blackpoint are fairly distant and hard to see. You may be lucky and spot a group of the huge white pelicans that winter on the refuge. They come here from out west.

In the terrestrial habitats, including the hardwood hammocks, pine flatwoods, scrub and sandy ridges many other families of birds can be found including woodpeckers, doves, flycatchers, jays, swallows, thrushes, mimics, wood warblers, sparrows, finches and blackbirds. On rare occasions you might experience a fallout of warblers when the trees on Oak Hammock are full of these migrants. There are three hiking trails where the endemic Florida scrub jays live. These tame birds with their unusual family behaviors are the only bird where you must be in Central Florida to see one.

White-eyed Vireo at Oak Hammock Trail

On the beaches of the adjacent Canaveral National Seashore gulls, terns, shorebirds and pelagic seabirds such as jaegers and shearwaters can be spotted. When the winds are right hundreds of northern gannets fly near the shoreline.

Salt Marsh Skimmer at Blackpoint

Other activities available at the refuge include nature photography, butterflying, wildflowering, hiking, biking, fishing, crabbing, limited hunting, kayaking and canoeing. Blackpoint Wildlife Drive is restricted to birding and photography. In the Haulover Canoe manatees are present except during the coldest part of winter. They can be viewed at the Manatee Observation Deck. Mammals are present and you might be fortunate to see a bobcat or an otter crossing a road.

You need to be aware that there are plenty of large alligators and 3 species of poisonous snakes (and in summer) many mosquitoes on the grounds. If you're cautious these are not a problem.

The refuge Visitor Center is open Tuesday thru Saturday where you can get advice, maps, checklists and see a video of the refuge. It has a nature gift shop where you can purchase books, shirts and hats, and drinks. There are guided birding tours on Blackpoint Wildlife Drive in the refuge's minibus available for a small fee on Thursday, Friday and Saturday mornings.

Common Loons of Green Lake

By Jeff Lamothe

Long before I borrowed my first pair of binoculars and began birding, I was fascinated by the Loons on Green Lake. In 1963 my dad purchased a camp on Green Lake in Dedham Maine. The lake is where I spent my summer years as a boy. We hardly ever went on a vacation because we always just went to camp. The summers were full of boating, fishing, swimming and campfires. And of course, the usual chores required to keep an old cedar log cabin in working order. Never tiring of the wonder of this lake, I continued to summer there for the next 60 odd years. The loons were always there and although I marveled at their eerie evening and early morning calls, I didn't realize until some years later how special and not so common they are.

Over the years I learned a few things about loons' calls, nesting habits and migration, some from observation and some from research. Loons have several different calls and many variations of each call. I read that calls are for greetings and warnings and generally keeping tabs on each other. Although I have never really figured out which call does what, I have enjoyed being awaken in the middle of the night by their unique wailing and primordial calls.

Loon photo courtesy of Barry Rosen

During the summer, months loons are usually seen in pairs or small groups of 3 or 4. They are not particularly skittish, so a slow-moving canoe or kayak can get close enough for a good look. Later when a breeding pair is swimming with chicks, it is best to give the family a lot of space. Each year most lakes in Maine perform a state sponsored and regulated loon count to monitor the health of the local population. Green Lake's average count over the past several years has been 20 adults and 1-2 chicks per year. It is a concern, as the chick count is below average for the state. Loon nests are on islands or low-lying shore areas and are susceptible to flooding. As the lake gets more congested, boat wakes and human intrusion into their nests are becoming a problem.

As summer wanes and the sun gets lower in the sky, the loons gather in larger groups known as"rafts". They do this to socialize after breeding season and to prepare for migration. Ann and I were sailing a while back when we were becalmed. After a few minutes we found ourselves in a loon "raft" of 17 mostly adults. They drifted into us and then they dived and drifted out, no big deal to them but a life experience for us.

Local birders have told me that as long as the it has not completely iced over, the loons stay on the lake. They are of the opinion that the loons then fly to nearby open water. Green Lake is located approximately 30 miles from Acadia National Park and Bar Harbor Maine, both locations are coastal. Several years ago, I was in Bar Harbor in February and the Loons and Common Eiders were a common sight I think the loons we see in Florida are coming from the northern lakes in the Midwest where there is no ocean option like in Maine.

Loons are always a treat to find in Florida with their majestic posture and full white throat but to fully appreciate these birds they must be seen on their natural breeding grounds on northern lakes.

Ecuador 2025 Part 1

By Matt Heyden

Greetings readers. Some of you have been reading these adventures for years and some are new. You do need to know that I tell it like I saw it, and at times it can be uncomfortable. Quick background. This is our 8th trip to Central and South America, and the first repeat. Lora designed this expedition to go difficult places without getting us killed. She booked the medical evacuation insurance just in case. Sounds dangerous, doesn't it? It could be. However she selected The Magic Birding Circuit in Ecuador, which we had done a shorter version of years ago. But why?

I'm tired of running into other tours and their busses and their birders and photographers. We both agree that any money we spend in other countries has to DIRECTLY go to land owners that protect the bird habitat and supports the local residents that do the work. The Magic Birding Circuit.....is just a family...that over 30 years has purchased 4 properties, most more than 800 acres and built birding lodges on each one....with incredible birds. Hundreds and hundreds of life birds. And OMG...they are building a new one....in the lower Amazon.

Most of you know I write long. This will be in several parts. Let me take you to Ecuador, and save you a fortune! This is the adventure of a lifetime, beginning birding in Quito at 10,000 feet, birding down the west slope of the Andes to 6,000 feet, down to 3,000 feet, and back up to 10,000. Then we head down the east side of the Andes toward the upper Amazon and work at 6,000 feet.

My life insurance terminates in just 3 years. If she doesn't kill me off before that date.....she gets ZERO! So, she arranged a special hike above 13,000 feet to go after some damn chicken or something.

When I wrap this up, you will understand what this family has done to make it the trip of a lifetime.

Part 1: Ecuador after 13 years. Getting to San Jorge Hacienda

For this trip we used Copa airlines with a hub in Panama. Copa has been very reliable for us over the years and American has been very problematic for us. Panama has built a new terminal which is modern. It even has a drinking fountain that works, unlike the old terminal which is still in use. Drinking water is something I will address several times, because in Central and South America you never, ever drink tap water unless you are assured of the safety. Not even to brush your teeth.

Landing in Quito, Ecuador has changed. They have a new airport. The old one involved a bizarre pitch maneuver in order to land because Quito is basically the bottom of a volcano caldera. It is surrounded by steep mountains, so taking off and landing used to be let's say abrupt! Landing there now is similar to most other airports.

Somewhere near Quito
(Dee's photo from Nov '23)

Getting through immigration and customs was easy but slow, and when we got out…..our private driver was waiting and waiting. He insisted that he would deal with our luggage. I insisted that he not. He was half our age…and this means he would be no match for the way American hoarders pack!. We handled our bags running through the traffic and following him to a tall off road truck. It was raining….but the driver got the bags into the back seat so that they stayed dry. This would be the last time we would handle our luggage until we returned to the airport on the way home.

Quito has more than 3 million people living at this altitude. I felt the altitude years ago…and guess what? It's no worse. Hmm. Well, we didn't take any high altitude medication this time, and I am avoiding the cocoa tea which also helps, or so they say. But, Lora insisted a month ago that we both add elliptical cardio to our gym workout.

San Jorge Hacienda is way up the mountains looking down at Quito. This means a somewhat hectic drive through narrow streets and heavy traffic. Being a car nut….I notice we are in a pickup truck from China, lots later on that change. The massive hacienda is more than 150 years old, and always freezing cold even though we are at the equator. Upon arrival, as before, are 2 staff members waiting at the bottom of the stairs to welcome us and take our luggage up to our room.

On the equator, there is only 12 hours of daylight, year round. This means breakfast before sunrise, and dinner after sunset. We've been running since 2 am, and it's now 8pm, and we are whisked to the dining room for a dinner prepared just for us. It's formal….as it always is on the Magic Birding Circuit. Linen napkins, at least 2 table cloths, too many knives, too many forks, too much food, and an attendant dressed beautifully watching and lurking in case you need something. This happens all over South and Central America, and when we are the only folks in the dining room, ….we find ourselves whispering because I just feel so awkward.

I had forgotten that the staff starts cooking several hours early in the kitchen. Regardless of how remote the lodge, every lunch and dinner will have a different very complex home-made soup served elegantly as one of the courses. All Ecuadorian cuisine, but delightful. The food is arranged beautifully on the plates with things that I don't even know if I should eat…or are decorations. By the time we get back to our room, it might have come up to 60 degrees. The only source of heat is a small space heater when the fire place isn't burning. It's the same room we had all those years ago. I'm cold. I put on a hooded sweatshirt and crawl into bed with several very thick wool blankets. I lay there looking up at the ceiling telling myself that I couldn't breathe….looking for the oxygen masks to automatically drop down!. Realizing I was trapped, I simply told myself to breathe slower, and deeper…..and drifted off to sleep.

The lodge is magnificent in many ways. It is absolutely full of very old antiques….and none have been moved in 13 years. The dining room is very tall and full of paintings by Dr. Cruz, the owner of the Magic Birding Circuit. Lots of wood sculptures, and fossils. Newspaper articles about Dr. Cruz and the lodges are framed on some of the walls, and have gone yellow over the years. Dr. Cruze started the Magic Birding Circuit more than 30 years ago as a botanical preserve. He wrote the book on the medicinal plants of Ecuador. Dr. Cruze was a veterinarian in the states and was born there. He probably saved my life 13 years ago when I got sick, very sick in the Amazon due to tea that wasn't boiled properly at a road side stop. This episode has made me extremely cautious this trip. That said, it is important to note that at no time did anything served at these lodges cause a problem….it's when you are out and about that you have to watch. But…I never drink the water anywhere anymore unless I have a strong endorsement of it's safety.

The first morning, breakfast is in the dark, at 6 so that we can go on a birding hike around the property. Oh, here is comes….each of us is asked how we want our eggs prepared. Cheese, vegetables, scrambled, fried, etc. There is always some kind of special empanada course to begin with…..and fresh squeezed fruit juice and a plate of fruit. It's a spectacular breakfast, and we are joined by Kathy and her husband Pat from Michigan, in their 70's, Sonya the emergency room nurse practitioner and her husband Justin both approaching 50, Shafar from Israel about 10 years younger than us, a new driver Jose, and our guide Luiz perhaps in his mid 30's.

Jose and Luis will be with us every day all day for the next two weeks. (when I am done with them, they will need counseling!) After breakfast the two of them make the first attempt to kill us by marching us up the slopes above the lodge. Hint: look on the internet at sunbeams and sword bill hummingbirds for a sample of what is easily found at this lodge. Pat and Kathy have wisdom, so when they ran out of air, they birded back down at the lodge. This isn't a problem. This staff has to deal with this all the time. As a result, there are bird feeders abundant, but more than that…native plants feeding the insects and the insects feeding the birds. We are above the pollution, above the pesticide and herbicide….you know, birdy heaven!.

Luis uses this little intro as a hardiness test, and to watch the group interact. He will have to satisfy all 7 of us…all different with different goals and desires. Onward to the van. Our luggage will be shipped by staff in a different vehicle to the next lodge. The 7 customers and 2 employees will use a JAC van which is a 12

passenger, dual rear wheel, rear wheel drive diesel with a manual transmission. This powertrain is not available in the U.S. This brand is from China, and not available in the U.S. It looks exactly like a Mercedes, Sprinter, or Freightliner van. It's a Chinese copy. It's almost new….and there are no shoulder harnesses on the back seats…..no pollution devices…..it's the way it is.

We would be traveling on the Ruta de Quinde, which is slow, sometimes dirt, with small towns, one of which is Nono. Our driver, Jose is very young, yet is absolutely a master at the horrible traffic getting out of Quito. I don't have to drive, and I'm in heaven. I'm going through the heart of a city…and watching, watching, watching everything. It's daylight. Quito is awake. Busses everywhere. Crowds and crowds of well dressed folks waiting for busses. The sidewalks are full of food vendors actually cooking right there. The young working women and men are dressed as Europeans. The children…ARE ALL IN UNIFORMS. The homeless folks are laying around and the smell of pot is everywhere. Oops….that's Cocoa Village. Nowhere in Ecuador did I smell pot, or see a homeless person or a person begging. In 4 lanes of stopped traffic…folks are walking between cars with food, deserts, fruit to sell, or wash your windows. No pressure, no aggression. No horn honking, no road rage. And this takes us to the many miles of single lane roads cut into the side of mountains.

In Ecuador, people are used to making vehicles pass each other on these single width stone roads cut into mountains. They know they all have to work together. Vehicles pass side by side with so little room that mirrors have to be pulled in. No yelling, no gestures….just a gentle horn beep, beep…of thanks with a wave.

Jose is 24 and fully licensed as a professional heavy vehicle operator. The drug cartel that was rousted from Columbia…..has moved into northern Ecuador. So there are road blocks conducted by armed police in most small towns for inspections. Jose just has to flash his credentials…and we are on our way.

Chestnut-breasted Coronet, example of a Typical Spectacular Hummingbird in Ecuador (Dee's photo)

We will bird intensively all day. Luis does this trip twice per month….and knows exactly where the birds are that he wants us to see. At this point, my birder readers are saying…"yeah, yeah, another birding trip"….Well no. The four pieces of protected conservation lands that this family owns….HAVE MORE THAN 52 SPECIES OF SPECTACULAR HUMMINGBIRDS….without even discussing the hundreds of others. And most of these are visible from the lodge observation decks with no extensive hiking. Got it?

At lunch, we find ourselves at a river where we can pull off, enjoy our packed lunches, and bird. Luis sits back and relaxes, and I see a hint of "the tattoo". I ask Lora if she remembers the story, and she does. Could it be?

We are heading to the Tandayapa lodge heading down the west coast of the Andes toward the Pacific. We will be at about 6,000 feet, and the breathing will be easier. We stayed at this FABULOUS lodge last time. The dining room is open air over looking a huge valley….and not one house to be seen. The family owns everything you see. The bird feeders are mind numbing….and the cameras are shooting like machine guns.

Our "room" is a private building, with two walls of glass, and the room is the size of a two car garage. This was the cheap room. On the Magic Birding Circuit, we don't wear our shoes in the buildings. The mud stays outdoors. And we will be muddy. Believe it or not, Ecuador went through 7 years of drought….and now it's raining…..and just like every other mountainous country…there are landslides, lots and lots. And to get things rolling…earth quakes…..let's just say numerous.

Silver-throated Tanager

We get settled and head to the dining room…which is a HUGE OBSERVATION DECK for tanagers, humming birds, and barbets….just to get

you started. And then I heard it. Justin referred to Luis as Jorge. I just knew what I wanted was coming true. At dinner, I came right out and asked Luis if he had a tattoo of Quito on his arm. He was surprised, said yes, and then asked me when I had seen it. I explained that many years ago, his father told us what his son had put on his arm. And I said: "you are Doctor Cruz's son….aren't you?". He admitted it. Well, he is the "heir apparent" to this massive birding conservation project. He is not just a bird guide. Educated at Cambridge…… this young man is one very, very skilled cookie. What I didn't tell him was that some folks that had done this trip before actually had the younger Cruz (him) ….AND RAVED ABOUT HIM. I was hoping that we would get to meet him…..but to have the next owner of these lodges, the man that knows the miles of trails….all the bird songs….and where they are….be our guide…..for the entire 2 weeks……what more could I ask for?

Is Florida Doomed to be a Duck Desert?

By Mark Wallace

We used to get far more ducks wintering in Florida than we do now. I remember going to Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge during the Space Coast Birding Festival once about ten years ago and finding thousands upon thousands of Northern Pintails. We still get Pintails, but nowhere near that many.

The problem, it seems, is that as the climate warms, the ducks can spend the winter farther north in North Carolina or Chesapeake Bay. The ducks haven't completely deserted us. Some winters are duckier than others. If they have a cold winter up north, we'll get more ducks down here. Still, I miss the ducky days of yore.

I'm hoping that this won't be a permanent problem. I've always thought of wildlife populations as being habitat limited. There has been so much habitat destruction that wildlife numbers have been dramatically reduced. So, if fewer ducks are coming to Florida for the winter, then there is enough food and habitat to support millions of ducks that isn't being utilized. You would hope that the birds would adapt to exploit all that food and habitat.

One possibility is that duck populations will increase over time to use the winter resources up north and the habitat down here in Florida as well. It is possible, though, that duck populations are limited by breeding habitat, not by wintering habitat. Still, you would think that climate change would open up breeding habitat farther north too.

Northern Shovelers, MINWR

Another possibility is that birds that normally stay south of Florida will expand their range north so that they can take advantage of the habitat here that the ducks are no longer using.

Not all duck species are being affected in the same way. One of those AI things tells me that at least 12 least twelve duck species are wintering farther north. These include American Black Duck, Northern Pintails and Northern Shovelers. Mottled Ducks are here year round and Blue-winged Teal aren't changing their habits as much. That agrees with what we've been seeing here locally. In bad years, it seems that Blue-winged Teal are about all we get.