



Unexpected Opportunities

by Andy Long

Finding and making photographic contacts can lead to great photography.

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On this trip, a group of volunteers watch and count the collection of birds.

lead to some great shooting. Most “insiders” are very helpful and don’t have any problem with passing on information about where to find a hidden location or a specific bird. Even when you think you know an area very well, someone else probably knows a spot where something new or a unique opportunity can be found.

This was the case recently when I contacted Mauri Peterson, the president of the St. Petersburg (Florida) Audubon Club, and she passed on my e-mail address to another club member who then told me about an excursion scheduled later that week. It was being led by an environmental specialist from Honeymoon Island State Park. After an exchange of e-mails, I arranged to be included in a trip to an outer island with several people going to do some bird and nest counting. I offered to provide some images, and I qualified to join the group.

What resulted were images of a peregrine falcon that I never expected to get, since I had planned a trip to Florida simply to shoot osprey, waders,

As a photographer, you can have lots of opportunities come your way that you didn’t expect or even know existed. A phone call or an e-mail to someone who’s involved with subjects you find interesting can lead to an excursion you hadn’t anticipated. For example, if you like doing bird photography, contacting someone who belongs to a local Audubon club that you’re planning to visit can

and shorebirds. My images also provided a bonus to the local environmental specialist who discovered that his newly redesigned sign didn't work as planned. The falcon found a way to perch on top of the triangular sign, a base that gave the predator a great view from the edge of a protected area. The nesting area had been roped-off to serve a variety of birds--including snowy plovers, oystercatchers, and more. The specialist had thought the triangular shape of the sign would prevent predatory birds from perching there to search out an easy meal. However, once he saw my photos, he decided he would have to give the sign new thought. He figured he would probably have to move the sign up higher from the top of the PVC pipe to which it was attached. (Knowing the ingenuity of wildlife, I suspect they'll still find some way to perch nearby to find a meal.)



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This shot showed the environmental specialist that their new sign didn't work as well as they had hoped for keeping predators from sitting around the nesting area.



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A peregrine falcon prepares to take off on a chase of a nearby fish crow that was chased from the area by an oystercatcher.

Honeymoon Island State Park has several environmental specialists, each of whom goes out a couple of days per week both on the island with open access to visitors as well as on several of the other nearby barrier islands. While the outer islands have limited public access, they do receive visitors other than those who go out with the environmental specialists. Located within sight of the coast, the small barrier islands give boaters a great place for a less-crowded picnic/day at the beach. Part of the visitors' job, of course, is taking a bag along for trash.

Something new and interesting is found every year as the specialists do their research on the islands. This year, an eagle's nest was taken over by great

horned owls for nesting and raising their young. At least one of the eagles still frequented the area, lighting on an island tree to look for food in the surrounding Gulf of Mexico.

My journey also provided the specialist with images of snowy plovers that are typically very tough to find on beaches frequented by people. The numerous rookery islands with their limited access are the only spots in the area where they can be found. My report of seeing about ten to twelve snowy plovers let the environmental specialist know that the usual number of nesters was already present on the island.

Although their population is small, it's a good sign

when the numbers of snowy plovers aren't decreasing. My count of the nesting sites occurred before nesting had actually begun, as well, so the totals could increase over the weeks before eggs are laid.



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It's a good sign to see the snowy plover in the closed area on the island.

As I shared news with the birders on the trip to do the counts, I learned about a pair of Sandhill Cranes with two babies nesting at a municipal golf course and a pair of baby great blue herons on the nest in a park. Time and distance prevented me from traveling to photograph the cranes, but I stored the information for a future visit to the area at the same time of year.

One detail to keep in mind when you're talking with birders about where to find good photo opportunities is they see things differently from photographers. While they're content with looking through binoculars or a scope at a bird that's a hundred yards away, we photographers want to be close enough to fill the frame as much as possible with the subject. Remind the birders of your needs while you're talking or see if you can contact a member who also does photography. Otherwise, you might find yourself in a location where the birds are too far away to shoot.

Also, ask if the location is better suited for photography in the morning or evening. It's no fun to take the time to reach a destination in the morning only to discover that light reaches the area only in the evening. You've automatically lost a morning of shooting there or at another location that day. To check the information you receive from the birders or to fill in gaps, you can schedule a mid-day scouting trip during your down time to see if the birds in your target area are accessible for good photography and what time of day is would be best for a visit.



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Several oystercatchers were picking out sites in the area in preparation for nesting season.

You may find yourself depending on birders for new ideas. For example, during my trip this year, the typical songbird migration was not taking place because of the wind direction. I needed to find other subjects to photograph. My contacts with the Audubon members helped me fill in these gaps. Inevitably, even when you're visiting an area that's known for an abundance of bird

activity, you'll run into times when you have few subjects to shoot.

In almost any place that's good for bird photography, you can find an Audubon Club in a nearby town. Most have websites on which you can find a person who might be willing to provide information. While Audubon Society members deal primarily with other members from other parts of the country, they're just as willing to pass on their local knowledge to photographers. And once you've made an initial contact, you'll have a much easier time reaching other members of the club. Different members have their own experiences from the spots they frequent, and who knows where their suggestions will lead.

Another way to find good bird-shooting spots is to talk with people you encounter while you're out shooting. A big lens will usually attract others with cameras, and by talking with them, you can find out about other sites in the area. An exchange of business cards with locals who know what's happening in the area can also provide resources. Remember that what goes around comes around. If you're willing to pass on information about subjects you found and where you found them, others will do the same for you.

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