

A bald eagle is perched on a tree branch, looking to the right. The eagle has a white head and neck, a yellow beak, and dark brown feathers on its body. The background is a clear blue sky with some bare tree branches visible.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Coinciding migration
finds cruisers among
the 'showy' species.

BY MARK & DIANA DOYLE



Welcome to the world of migrants. As Intracoastal Waterway travelers we're all a small part of a huge migration along the Atlantic Flyway, the major corridor between the Arctic, Caribbean, and South America. The ICW, also known derogatorily as the "Ditch," is actually a diverse collection of bays, sounds, rivers, creeks, cuts, and canals through some of the best wildlife habitat along the Eastern Seaboard.

Twice a year, hundreds of bird species transit this corridor, moving with the seasons and weather patterns. Each fall, waterfowl such as geese or swans hop on this turnpike in the Arctic Circle and exit at the ICW's Currituck or Albemarle Sound. Many of the smaller insect-eating birds, the swallows and warblers, exit further south in Florida. And like you, your avian companions transit during favorable wind conditions. No sense burning scarce energy bucking a headwind!

With all this movement, there are plenty of birds to see during a fall transit of the ICW. And we're not talking about "boring gulls." Take a careful look around you while under way, and you can experience birds that rival any wildlife eco-tour. Here are some readily seen, yet often missed, showy species on the ICW.

ROSEATE SPOONBILLS

Even boaters that are not particularly interested in wildlife find it hard to not "ooh-and-aah" when a flock of Roseate Spoonbills flies overhead. Sometimes mistaken for flamingos because of their bright pink color and large size, Roseate Spoonbills are certainly the showiest bird species along the ICW. Yet it is surprising how many veteran ICW travelers haven't seen them.

Once hunted to near extinction for their fashionable feathers, they are now on the rebound. Look for Roseate Spoonbills in small flocks in Florida. **(See Hot Spots.)** They are common along the Tolomato River near St. Augustine. They also congregate at spoil island roosts along the north side of the ICW just as you exit Haulover

Canal heading southbound toward Titusville. Their bills are indeed shaped like flattened spoons, which they sweep back and forth to strain small food from the water.

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHERS

Have you ever tried to open a live oyster? Trust us, it's not easy. An oyster shell can even break a knife blade; that's why you need a specially designed oyster-opening knife. But there is a wading bird that opens oysters with its bill: the oystercatcher.

The American Oystercatcher is a large chunky black-and-white wader in a clash of colors: a heavy red bill, light pink legs and, if you look closely enough, a bright yellow eye ringed with red. This bird is all about garish!

American Oystercatchers are very common along the ICW—thanks in part to the abundant oyster-shell spoil banks created by dredging. Look for them along the spoil banks south of Lockwoods Folly, North Carolina, through Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge south of McClellanville, South Carolina, or along Seven Reaches just north of Isle of Palms.

BALD EAGLES

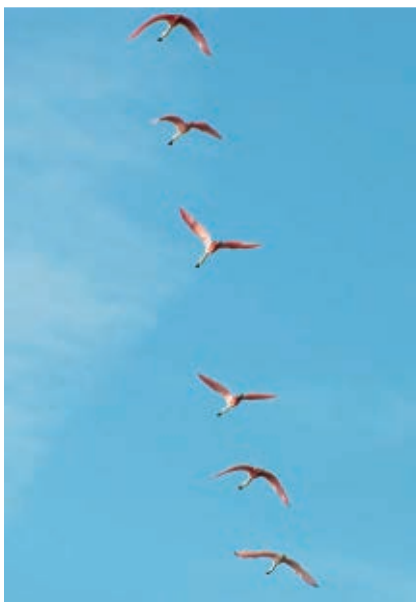
No ICW transit is complete without Bald Eagles. You don't need to travel to Alaska anymore to see lots of eagles! Unlike Ospreys, which move south as the weather turns colder, Bald Eagles stick around. Look for Bald Eagles perched on dead tree snags overlooking the ICW, especially along Virginia Cut and the Alligator River-Pungo River Canal. Obviously adult Bald Eagles are easy to identify with their pure white heads and tails contrasting with black wings. Immature Bald Eagles lack the white head and tail; they are dark brown overall.

Seen in the air, Bald Eagles are easy to distinguish from Ospreys and Turkey Vultures, both also common along the ICW. When backlit by the sun or high overhead, all three raptor species have a very different flight profile. An Osprey has narrow wings with a strong crook at the wrist. A Turkey Vulture soars with its wings in a strong vertical "V," called



Mark Doyle

Above: Photograph your bird sightings to aid identification. A geo-tagger (top of camera) remembers the precise location. Below: Although there are only 880 nesting pairs in Florida, sharp-eyed ICW travelers can expect to see Roseate Spoonbills.



Field Guides

The Sibley eGuide to the Birds of North America (\$19.99), an app based on the popular field guidebook, for iPhone, iPad, and Android.

iBird South Guide to Birds (\$4.99), a field guide app focusing on Virginia to Florida, for iPhone, iPad, and Android.

Birds of the Southeast Atlantic Coast (\$7.95), a lightweight, waterproof, laminated folding guide to 64 species from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to Merritt Island, Florida.

SeaBC Sea Bird Count

If you “bump” along the ICW, or continue on to the Bahamas, Caribbean, or Gulf of Mexico, consider participating in the “SeaBC” Sea Bird Count this spring or next December.

Participation is easy: simply tally or photograph the birds you see during a one-hour watch. The birding-aboard community at Facebook.com/Birding.Aboard will help you identify and report the species.

This citizen science project, in its third year, is organized by a group of nine cruisers from around the world, including Wendy Clarke, Diana Doyle, Brenda Free, Yvonne Katchor, Beth Leonard, Katharine Lowrie, Devi Sharp, Jeanne Socrates, and Dorothy Wadlow. All data goes to Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s eBird database (www.ebird.org), where it becomes a resource for scientists and citizens worldwide.

a dihedral. It also tends to teeter on its dihedral wing position, side-slipping with a wobbly flight. A Bald Eagle has powerful stable flight on very flat wings. Its wingspan is so flat and long it looks like a soaring plank of lumber.

HOOT IN THE NIGHT

Your ICW birding experience doesn’t stop when the sun goes down. At a quiet anchorage on a calm night, you will definitely hear owls. In our experience, nearly any non-urban anchorage along the ICW has owls calling. Although owls don’t migrate per se, the hatch-year birds roam for new territories in the fall, causing the residents adults to advertise loudly that their patch is already taken.

You’re most likely to hear one of the granddaddies of the large owls, the Great Horned Owl. Listen for them taunting you with a call that sounds like “You awake? Me tooooo.” You also may hear the Barred Owl, a common resident of the ICW’s floodplain forests. Their typical hooting call has a cadence that sounds like “Who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-allllll?” with a distinctively southern drawl on the “y’all.”

AWE-INSPIRING FLOCKS

Autumn is also the season of big flocks along the ICW. Even if you don’t look at individual birds, you can’t help but notice the sheer quantity of birds in groups. During summer breeding season, most birds split into pairs and spread out, but when breeding is over,



Diana Doyle

Exotic-looking birds, like White Ibis, are incredibly common along the ICW.

SOME HOT SPOTS

Timing is everything, especially since you are chasing a moving target. After all, we are talking about migrating birds here. That having been said, here is a small sample of places where the authors have had good luck in the past.



Great Egrets, Tricolored Herons, Little Blue Herons, and Snowy Egrets: Near the Estherville Minim Creek Canal (statute mile 410 to 415) in South Carolina.

Bald Eagles: Virginia Cut (statute mile 12 to 28) and the Alligator River-Pungo River Canal (statute mile 105 to 126) in North Carolina.



Roseate Spoonbills: Tolomato River (statute mile 763 to 770) and near Titusville (statute mile 872) in Florida.



American Oystercatchers: South of Lockwoods Folly (statute mile 323) in North Carolina, Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge south of McClellanville (statute mile 430 to 450) in South Carolina and Seven Reaches just north of Isle of Palms (statute mile 455).


it's time to group up into migrant flocks. It's not too dissimilar from boaters, who gain safety, comfort, and knowledge in a flotilla.

In terms of numbers, Tree Swallows absolutely take the high count, forming flocks that number in the thousands. Catch sight of a fast-flying individual bird and you'll see its pure white belly and iridescent blue-green upper side. In the fall, Tree Swallows swarm like locusts

over the water, swirling and spinning in black masses, then surrounding your boat as they feed or dip-drink.

In the morning, expect rush-hour traffic in the avian highway. Flocks of ducks, most commonly scaup and scoters, are on the move then. And overhead, notice the hundreds of mid-sized birds streaming overhead, most likely mixed flocks of American Robins and Red-winged Blackbirds.

Even the large birds form flocks in the fall, creating quite a spectacle. Expect showy groups of Great Egrets, the large all-white wading bird, as well as flocks of Tricolored Heron, Little Blue Heron, and Snowy Egret. Near the Estherville Minim Creek Canal look for flap-and-glide flocks of White Ibis showing black-tipped wings and downward-curving scarlet bills. With the big-sky grass horizon, and the abundance of ibis and egrets, it looks like the opening scene of an African movie.

This fall, as you head south with fellow snowbirds, take some time to look and listen for your avian compatriots. You may think you know the ICW, but these coast runners have navigated this route for millennia without charts or a GPS. As you move your vessel north in the spring and south in the fall, you become one small part of the global movement of birds, migrating along the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. 

Diana Doyle



Left: Green Herons are tightrope acrobats, balancing on docklines to access their favorite fishing holes. Right: You'll likely see Ruddy Turnstones tamely skittering underfoot at marina docks.