

## Places to go birding near Port St. Joe and Apalachicola, Florida

In the town of Port St. Joe there is a park near the lighthouse with a boat ramp and 2 ponds. A variety of birds can be seen there. Heading west from there on Hwy 98, check out the bay flats for shorebirds. Scan the waters with a scope. Turn right onto Hwy 30A about 2 miles west of Port St. Joe. This parallels St. Joe Bay. Stop at several places whenever you see marsh and look for bald eagles, waders and shorebirds. After about 6 miles turn right (west) toward Cape San Blas and St. Joseph Peninsula. Stop at Salinas Park on both sides of the road shortly after you turn. The park on the left has a boardwalk to the beach (closed as of 2020), where you may see piping and snowy plovers, gannets, gulls, shorebirds and various terns. On the right side of the road is a county park with two long boardwalks into the bay where you are likely to see most anything, including rails in the marsh. White pelicans can sometimes be seen there as well as other unusual birds. After leaving there, continue heading west. There is a very narrow area with large boulders on the left. On the right is another marsh where you can see different waders and ducks. This is also a good area to look for raptors, since they follow the coast when migrating. Peregrine falcons and merlins are seen in winter but also in migration. Stop at the Buffer Preserve Deal Tract on the right for a ½ mile walk to the bay through pine and scrub habitat. The trail leads to the bay and there is a side trail going to an oak hammock. Turn around and come back. Continue driving west to St. Joseph Peninsula State Park. Just inside the outside gate is a small parking lot to a nice walking path that goes through some wetlands and old Indian middens and hardwoods to the bay beach. You can get a map at the pay station. As of 2020, the road ends at Eagle Harbor due to hurricane damage. Inquire beforehand whether the road into the rest of the park has been repaired. After you leave the park you might want to take sort of a side trip to Indian Pass by driving east on 30E and making a right turn that dead ends at the pass. You should scope out the area looking for American oystercatchers and other birds. A private boat is available (\$10 fee) to take you across the pass to St. Vincent Island, which is also a great birding spot but is about 8 miles long and there are no facilities there. Going back to 30E, head east back to Hwy 98 to Apalachicola, crossing the long bridge over the river. Just over the bridge is the road leading to another bridge to St. George Island. The state park on the east end of the island is the best place for birding but stop along the way frequently at other places. Inside the park, there is a road on the left leading to a scout camping and picnic area. This is an excellent place for migrants in the spring and fall, since there are lots of small oak trees. It is listed on eBird. There are usually other birders there who can show you around. If you want to continue going east on Hwy 98 along the gulf, there are sometimes oystercatchers on the oyster

bars in the fishing villages. **Bald Point State Park** near Panacea can be good for all sorts of birds. In Panacea, you will want to check out **Mashes Island Road** just as you cross the bridge into town, and **Bottoms Road** just past town on the right. Both these roads dead-end but are good for all sorts of birds along the way. Mashes Island Road has a park on the right where you can drive down and park and walk out on the nice boardwalk. There is the gulf on one side and marsh on the other side. If you go that far, you might as well go a bit further to **St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge**. We saw 132 species on a 2-day trip to this area in 2015. This is a very popular area for birding. Stop at the visitor center to look at the log for recent bird sightings and their locations. There are frequently groups of birders there you could join. If you have time, take the jungle boat tour at **Wakulla Springs State Park** a few miles north of there. Manatees are a frequent sighting there and the bird life is abundant. Limpkins, absent for several years due to disappearance of apple snails, are making a return.