

The Venice Rookery



The Venice Rookery is one of the world's premier destinations for the Bird Photographer. This bird sanctuary sits quietly amidst the densely populated areas of western Florida between Tampa and Sarasota, in the town of Venice. This Mecca for the Nature Photographer is located within a few short blocks of a busy Wal-Mart, and a Burger King. Such an unassuming a location, that most residents may never realize, that such a productive oasis of bird life is within their midst. Bird photographers and nature lovers from around the world, flock to this small, unobtrusive island, to witness its avian wonders.

The Venice Rookery offers the nature photographer an opportunity to photograph colonies of nesting Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets, and may yield opportunities to photograph other species such as the Snowy Egret, Anhinga, Cormorants, White Ibis, Black-Crowned Night Heron, Common Moorhen, Pied-billed Grebe, Wood Stork as well as a plethora of other small visiting birds. The Venice Rookery may yield all this and more, and yet remains extremely accessible to all visitors.

This magical place of natural wonder is located just off Florida's busy Highway 41, in Venice, Florida. The rookery is on an island, which sits in the center of a small man made pond. The island has been overrun with Peppercorn plants, this bush provides an ideal nesting area for the many species of birds, but the real secret of success, the magic that really makes this small island such a wonderful and productive rookery, is the pond's resident alligator! Most visitors to the rookery are not aware that there is a resident alligator in this small lake. Few visitors to the pond will actually see the alligator, but if it were not for the guardian alligator this rookery might not be. The alligator offers the nesting birds protection from egg stealing raccoons, and other would be predators. Yes, occasionally the alligator may take a young fledgling or two, if the birds wonder too close to the water's edge, but for the most part the alligator offers the nesting birds protection from predators that would ransack the nesting colonies.

The Venice Rookery has a long cleared grassy area on one side of the pond's bank; typically this is where the photographers line up to photograph the bird's activities on the island across the pond. There are overgrown trees and shrubs on the opposite side of the pond, thus restricting access for photographers. This overgrowth should be looked upon as an advantage for the photographer providing a nice backdrop for photographing the birds. The pond is approximately one hundred fifty feet long by a hundred feet wide; the island is perhaps fifty feet long and twenty-five feet wide. Tripods are set up on the grassy bank of the pond and the photographers shoot across the water at the birds' nesting activities. The birds are about fifty to seventy-five feet away and protected by water (and the alligator). I would recommend one bring their longest lenses and a good sturdy tripod. Lenses of 400mm, 500mm and 600mm will provide the magnification required to successfully photograph bird behavior on the island rookery. I have had wonderful success with my 600mm; and it does not hurt to pack a tele-converter or two, along for good measure. This should provide you with the means to get some frame filling images of the young hatchlings.



The birds are constantly flying to and from the island as they go about their daily routines. Having a second camera body with a moderate length telephoto lens, or mid range zoom lens can be an ideal combination to great action stopping photographs of the birds as they get close to you. I would also recommend the use of fill flash at the rookery, fill flash can help tame some of the harsh shadows and provide that magical catch light for your subjects that adds dramatic life to the image.

The Venice Rookery is for the most part a morning shoot, although magic can and does occur during any part of the day. I have found that the best lighting at the rookery is within an hour or so after sunrise. The light will remain favorable for several hours as the sun continues to rise high in the sky and the light becomes too harsh. Sunrise will be to your back as you face towards the rookery, providing you with warm, wonderful frontal lighting on your subjects. I try to arrive early usually around sunrise, this allows me the opportunity to scout the nests, and determine which nest may be more active, and which nests may have young. I do this before the lighting becomes favorable for photography

At the Venice Rookery, you will have the opportunity to photograph lots of various bird behaviors and activities; from nest building, (the Great Blue Herons are almost always building and adding nesting materials to their nests), to foraging, feeding of the young, and mating displays (in late Florida spring look for the Great Egret's beautiful mating display). These are just a few of the behaviors you may have the opportunity to experience and photograph while at the Venice Rookery. Some of the most excitement I have had at the Rookery, is photographing the birds in flight. This is the ideal location to photograph those action stopping aerial flight shots of Great Egrets, Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets and other birds and they fly to and from their nesting island rookery. Try to find a vantage point that will allow you the opportunity to frame your subjects with a pleasing non-obstructive background.

Should you arrive late in the day, you may have the opportunity to shoot some wonderful silhouettes of the nesting Blue Herons and Great Egrets. Concentrate on photographing the birds that are nesting high in the Peppercorn bushes, look for a clear outline of the birds and hope for a wonderful sunset.

Bring along plenty of Compact Flash cards, or film, as to the photographic opportunities will be many. I also find it helpful to bring along a pair of binoculars. One can use the binoculars to scout out the nests and entertain yourself with avian antics when you are not shooting images.

Good Luck and Happy Shooting!

Directions

The Venice Rookery is located just off Route 41, a short block north of Jacaranda Blvd. The entrance road is an Annex between a Florida State Highway Patrol building and the Sarasota County Building.

To get to the Venice Rookery from Interstate 75 in Florida, take Exit 35, head south on Jacaranda Boulevard, approximately 5 miles to the intersection of Highway 41, at the intersection turn right, heading North on Route 41, work you vehicle rather quickly, but safely into the left lane, preparing to turn left in a very short order onto the first small street on your left, this street is the Annex between the Highway Patrol building and the Courthouse. Follow the winding road back a few hundred yards, the rookery will appear on your right with a parking area across from the rookery on your left.