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BIRD IS THE WORD

When Lincoln Soule of Denver, Colorado, made a trip to Florida's Sanibel Island five years ago, he wasn't scouring the beach for seashells as many visitors do. Soule, a dedicated birder, was focused on a bird that caught his attention. "It was early in the year to be in mating plumage," he recalls. "So I was checking my bird book when this fellow walked up to me and asked, 'Wanna go on my cruise?' I thought, cruise? Who is this guy?"

"This guy" — who Soule affectionately calls "crazy" — is Sanibel resident Ken Burgener, and the cruise he was recruiting for turned out to be the first-ever voyage of Carefree Birding, which sailed in 2009. Since then, Burgener and his wife, Linda Warschauer, have organized a dozen Carefree Birding cruises, with several more upcoming. Traveling mostly to the Caribbean and Central America aboard Celebrity, Royal Caribbean, and Carnival ships, the cruises have carried groups of 20 to 30 birders — binoculars, cameras, and bird lists in hand — in search of colorful, melodic, and otherwise alluring winged and feathered creatures.

But at the point when Soule met Burgener, Carefree Birding was just a fledgling's chirp of an idea that hadn't yet flown the nest. Soule and his wife decided to take a flyer and became Carefree Birding's first sign-ups. Since then, they've joined three more birding cruises and are planning more, including an anticipated one to Alaska.

Burgener conceived the idea for Carefree Birding while in Cozumel on his first-ever cruise. "I got off the ship, went to a park and spotted six 'lifers,'" he says of the birds he had never seen before that were added to his life list. "I thought, 'That was easy!' And, he soon realized, carefree. Previously he had led Audubon Society birding trips in the Florida Everglades, which typically started in the pre-dawn hours and often stretched late into the evenings.

So, the Carefree Birding concept was born: Board cruise ship, unpack gear, get a full night's sleep, disembark when the ship reaches port, spend no more than five or six hours birding, return to ship and relax, meet to discuss the following day's excursions, have dinner with other birders, repeat next day. On sea days, watch for birds from the deck, play bird trivia games and compete in bird photo contests for small prizes, attend birding lectures and video and slide shows, dine again with fellow birders, relax as needed.

"We're carefree!" Burgener reiterates, admitting that "I'm basically a lazy guy. We don't chase birds or climb mountains. I tell people that if they want to go in search of one particular bird, then this isn't..."
PYGMY KINGFISHER
the trip for them.” Most group members are in the 50-plus age range, Warschauer adds, and “don’t want to spend 10 hours a day on the trail.”

Minnesota resident Chip Munson — who also first met Burgener by happenstance, at a restaurant in Belize — backs this up. “When they say ‘carefree,’ it really is,” he says. “Once we were heading up a mountain in 90-degree heat and 90-percent humidity, and Ken said to the guide, ‘We’re Carefree Birding! This is not carefree!’ We turned right around and headed back downhill.” And because the group is tied to the ship’s itinerary, they’re never out birding before 8 a.m.

That’s not to say Carefree Birding passengers don’t see plenty of birds. Local guides — all expert birders — take group members on portside expeditions in such birding paradises as Belize, Panama, and Costa Rica. (While the expeditions each cost extra, Carefree Birding donates all the money beyond expenses to local causes, such as a birding station in Honduras.) Soule, who calls his three cruises “both personally and ornithologically rewarding,” says that he has added about 160 bird species to his life list, including nine of 11 indigenous species in the Cayman Islands — and met a lot of new non-feathered friends as well.

But perhaps his most memorable Carefree Birding event came during a “wet, cold, windy” cruise to New England and Canada aboard Royal Caribbean. “A pair of peregrine falcons had made their nest right on the ship’s rock climbing wall,” he marvels. “We saw a peregrine pluck another bird right off the water; it was a real National Geographic moment.” Burgener — always ready with a camera — captured it all on video, to be used in future onboard presentations.

Two-time passenger Box Wexler of central Florida says that his highlights have included getting on the back roads while in port, “so we’ve seen not just birds but also more of the local culture than on typical excursions — not to mention some sloths, snakes, and monkeys.” Wexler’s wife, Mary, adds that Carefree Birding “makes it easy for you; they’re well-organized, the guides keep everyone engaged, and we only walk about three miles a day, so it’s enjoyable for everybody.”

Well, maybe not everybody. Soule recalls one couple — “extremely serious birders,” he says — who swore they would never take another birding cruise due to the time constraints. “The big advantage birding cruises have (over land-based tours) is that there’s a new habitat every day,” Soule points out. “The downside is there’s a new habitat every day; you can’t go back.”

While Warschauer contends that “a few hardcore birders have come and enjoyed it,” she says that most of their group members “just love nature and the outdoors, and are fun, easygoing, and non-competitive. They help each other out.” Still, most are devoted birders — the accepted term over “birdwatchers,” which refers to folks who “look out the back window at robins and cardinals,” says Burgener —
BIRDS OF A FEATHER...

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and many keep life lists, trying to spot as many of the world's 10,000 known species as possible. "They're like excited kids when they see so many new birds," Warschauer says.

Burgener got hooked nearly 20 years ago when he was sitting in a hot tub and glimpsed a black and orange bird that sparked his curiosity: "We call that a 'spark bird,'" he notes. Since that time, he's witnessed a big upsurge of interest in birding, to the extent that some manic birders are ready to fly off on a moment's notice in pursuit of a rare sighting anywhere in the world.

Warschauer acknowledges that "birding isn't a cheap sport." Birders often stock up on expensive gear like high-powered binoculars and scopes, and some spend a substantial amount on travel. Burgener notes that Carefree Birding cruises cost much less than small ship charters, so they attract a wide range of passengers, from affluent professionals and retirees to those of more moderate means. (One couple, who met in prison — both as prison employees — are affectionately known as "the jailbirds.") Group members have haled from around the United States and Canada, and are predominantly couples, though often only one of the two is a birder. "But most spouses at least enjoy the settings, the non-touristic places we go, the interactions with locals," Warschauer says.

Still, Burgener is quick to volunteer the information that all is not well, completely carefree during the voyages. "Do you want to know the hardest thing about Carefree Birding?" he exclaims.

"It's getting people off the ship and into the vehicles! First you have to steer everyone through the departure lounges and shopping centers and past the other tour sellers and taxi drivers, then hunt down the vans we've hired. The first 20 minutes are anything but carefree." Then he quickly adds: "But once everyone's in the right vehicles and we're off — then we're carefree! And we haven't lost anyone yet."

For more information on Carefree Birding, call (954) 766-2919 or go to carefreebirding.com.

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