



Bottlenose dolphins jumping behind our boat

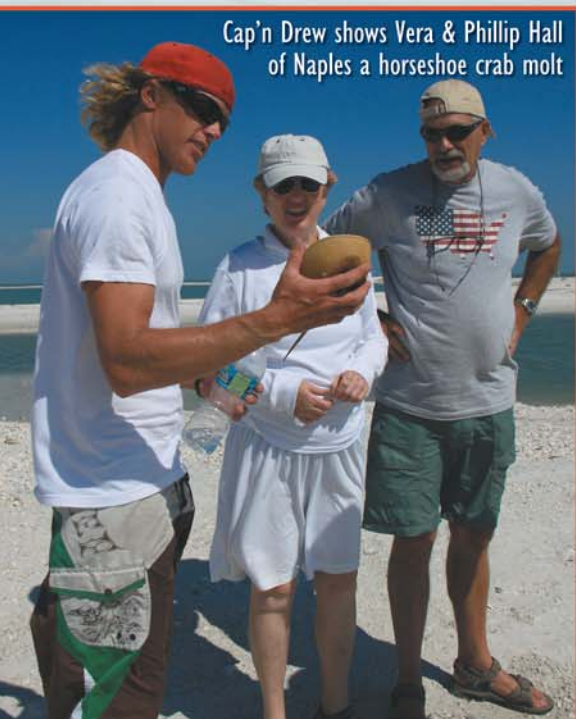
It's not a Zoo Out There... It's Way, Way Better!

Vacationing (or living) on Marco Island provides a fantastic opportunity to experience the uninhabited 10,000 islands just to the south of us. This Memorial weekend, we had the pleasure of accompanying Captain Drew Naeckel of Everglades Area Tours, and another couple from Naples, on a 2 hour eco-educational tour.

We left Marker 8 restaurant in Goodland (only 10 minutes from Marco) at around 3pm on a cloudless afternoon and all these pictures were taken on that tour. We stopped at a sand shoal that has been deposited over the last five years and is now showing signs of vegetation. This is an island in the making and demonstrates the changing face of our local shoreline.

What we liked about the tour... (in addition to the wildlife, shelling and views, which go without saying)

- Captain Drew was very personable and is one of the best guides we have met in SW Florida, with extensive knowledge from having lived on Marco and been on the water for 17 years.
- Good sized boat, but limited to 6 passengers.
- Comfortable captain's style seating, enabling you to swivel 180°s to watch anything the Captain points out.
- Not a fixed tour following a rigid path, but adapted by Captain Drew and his passengers, depending on the tide, season, weather and his local knowledge of what is happening.
- Close to Marco but closer still to the rest of the 10,000 islands.



Cap'n Drew shows Vera & Phillip Hall of Naples a horseshoe crab molt



Everglades Area Tours' easy to board boat beached on a sandbar just south of Cape Romano

What we saw...

There were lots of **bottlenose dolphins** and seeing them jumping and diving in the wake of the boat takes some beating! Captain Drew told us that on one particular island at low tide, he often sees dolphin herd mullet onto the beach and then hurl themselves onto dry land to catch them. Sounds like something from National Geographic!

Drew tracked a mother **West Indian manatee** and calf in Gullivan Bay for some time, enabling us to get a great view of these gentle giants. We found the molt of a prehistoric looking **horseshoe crab** that Cap'n Drew explained looks like a complete version of the animal that shed it. Apparently they preceded the dinosaurs by millions of years.

We came across a **Least tern** chick just at the wrack line on a remote island, trying his best to look like the rest of the beach! We also saw other terns nesting and chicks starting to run around. These birds winter in South America from Venezuela to Brazil, but come here to breed.

The **shelling** on this island was amazing and included a great specimen of a fragile **Angelwing**. Cap'n Drew held up what looked like a snake but turned out to be the **egg mass of a lightning whelk** containing dozens of discs attached by a common string.

We learned how to identify the difference between the **red and black mangrove trees** (only distant relatives) and how vital they are to the entire ecosystem in the 10,000 islands and beyond. In addition to the photos shown we also saw a **loggerhead turtle**, a **spotted eagle ray**, **osprey**, **cattle egret**, **great egret**, **brown pelican** and many other **wading and shore birds**.

As Cap'n Drew told us... "It's not a zoo out there" so no one can guarantee what you'll see, but in our experience the only fences and cages you'll find out in the 10,000 islands are to protect the nesting birds from human beings, allowing you to enjoy the birds' aerial feats and family life from a safe distance, and chicken wire around a loggerhead turtle's nest, protecting the eggs from raccoons. And, of course, you won't be one of a crowd - even on this busy holiday weekend we were just about the only humans in sight for most of the trip.

Everglades Area Tours offer several eco tours daily from Calusa Marina in Goodland and sunset trips, weather permitting, from nearby Marker 8 Restaurant. Cap'n Drew is just one of four extremely experienced licensed USCG Captains and Florida Master Naturalist Guides that may take you on your eco trip through the 10,000 Island. Some of these trips are extended to 3½ hours and can also include seine netting, which is especially popular with families with children.

For more information visit EvergladesAreaTours.com or call 239-695-3633.



Least Terns and their chicks



Cap'n Drew with egg mass



Angelwing shell



Little Green Heron in a red mangrove



Black mangrove



Horseshoe crab molt



West Indian Manatee