



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 16 Number 1

Spring 2010

Cold January Weather Affects Sea Turtles

It started slow with one animal on January 4, two the second but by day four we were up to 276 animals and it was clear this cold spell was going to be tough on sea turtles. Sea turtles are not equipped to handle cold water and when the prolonged period of near freezing temperatures arrived in early January, sea turtles were severely affected. We have learned from past cold snaps that the waters of Mosquito Lagoon provide habitat for several hundred juvenile sea turtles. The animals ranged from the size of a lap top computer to the size of a wheelbarrow (15- 150 lbs), but the most ever recovered from past cold weather was 350 turtles. We theorized the local waters did not support more than this number and any day the numbers of turtles affected by the cold would start to drop.

In the past 30 years there have been five similar events where the water temperature in the lagoon dropped below 50 degrees. This is too cold for the sub-tropical sea turtles. Mosquito Lagoon, because of its shallow depth, is notorious for stranding sea turtles. On cold windy nights the shallow water temperature drops rapidly causing the cold blooded reptiles to go into shock. When these conditions occur, refuge staff board air boats and head into the lagoon in search of turtles floating at the surface. When encountered the lifeless turtles are wrestled into the boat, shuttled back to a boat ramp and loaded into waiting trucks. The trucks transport the turtles to the maintenance facility where they are off loaded, examined, numbered, measured and placed in a heated room where they can begin to warm. The indoor facility provides a temporary holding area, but they need to be returned to saltwater soon. The lagoon waters were still too cold, so a network of 20 marine aquariums stretching from the Keys to Tampa Bay and coastal Georgia offered to house them. The turtles were loaded into covered trucks and transported to all points north, south and west. By January 8, the water temperature bottomed at 46 degrees and 386 turtles had been recovered. We assumed the operation was about over. But on January 10, another wave of cold temperatures arrived and the water temperature plunged to 39 degrees. For the next four days we recovered an unprecedented 1,750 additional turtles! Up to this point most of the turtles had been in the smaller range. But many of the new turtles were much larger, averaging 50-150 lbs. with some animals over 250lbs. What do you do with this many large turtles? It was clear there was not adequate aquarium space to house them and the decision was made to transport the turtles south and release them to ocean where the water temperature was in the mid 60's.



Gregg Bailey, Refuge Park Ranger, observes rescued sea turtles.

Photo by Sandee Larsen

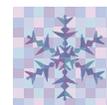
By January 14, the water temperature began to warm and the stranding event was over. But over the next several days, the turtles had to be returned and once again were loaded into trucks and were released on the refuge.



**Refuge volunteer transporting sea turtles.
File Photo**

Over the ten day period of January 4-14, 2,148 turtles were recovered from the waters of the refuge. Most were green sea turtles and most came from Mosquito Lagoon, but a significant number were recovered from Indian River, Banana Creek and Banana River. About 10% of the turtles eventually died from the cold and about 40% of the turtles were returned to the waters from where they came.

Continued on page 3.....



President's Message

Greetings from MIWA! At the time of this communiqué, it remains cold and ducks and other migrants have not yet begun the trip back north. However, something tells me that change is coming soon in the form of "hot".

Visitations to the Refuge and Bookery are up from a year ago. Even with Shuttle launches and a prolonged bridge closure, sales are good. In addition, the birding festival held at the end of January proved to be a financial success for MIWA. Sales of author-signed books, tee shirts, and other items grossed nearly \$6,500. On behalf of the MIWA board, I would like to thank all the volunteers who helped make this event such a great success. I would especially like to thank our Book Store Manger, Sandee Larsen for all the planning and work she put into this festival. Her tireless work ethic and organizational skills made the show a smooth running success. Thanks also to Sandee's husband, Ed. Not only did he donate his time and back, but his van as well. Again thanks to all!

This years Southeast Regional Friends Conference will be held at Chassahowitzka NWR Complex in Crystal River, Fl on April 9-11. I will be attending with one of the board members and the refuge liaison. Sessions at the conference include Citizen Science Programs, Invasive Species, Youth Initiatives, Getting Funds from Congress and the usual exchange of ideas, news and viewpoints. I am very excited about attending this conference and will provide a report in the next Habi-Chat. For now try to stay warm and come visit us on the refuge whenever you get a chance.

Jim Pedersen, MIWA President



MIWA President Jim Pedersen
Photo by Carol Pedersen



The purpose of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association is to promote conservation, awareness, and appreciation of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and to provide assistance to Refuge programs.

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The Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA) is a nonprofit, cooperating association for the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. The *Habi-Chat* is published quarterly. For MIWA information, call **321-861-2377**.

Newsletter Editor Carol Pedersen **Technical Consultant** Cheri Ehrhardt

Habi-Chat **Committee** Cheri Ehrhardt, Sandee Larsen, Carol Pedersen, and Dorn Whitmore

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Cold January Weather Affects Sea Turtles



Volunteers wet down distressed sea turtles.
File photo

Continued from front page

Frigid water temperatures stunned thousands of sea turtles throughout the state. If left unaided, most of these turtles would not have survived. Many would have been attacked by predators, been hit by boats or simply drowned. Rescuers worked feverishly for more than a week to save the immobilized animals, rescuing and eventually releasing nearly 80 percent of the affected sea turtles. FWC biologists are confident that most of the sea turtles will not suffer long-term impacts from the stunning event.

Additional good news is emerging from those who have been working diligently to save the animals. Rescue of the sea turtles by the FWC and its many partners could prove beneficial to the animals in the long term.

"We've been able to tag many more turtles than ever before, which enable us to learn about their biology," said Dr. Blair Witherington, FWC biologist. "It's a great opportunity for data collection; it's unprecedented to have access to so many turtles at one time."

The majority of the sea turtles affected by the cold weather are green turtles, a federally listed endangered species. Other species include Kemp's Ridley and hawksbill, both endangered, and the loggerhead, a threatened species. Scientists will use genetic information obtained from the turtles to better understand where these turtles originally hatched. Biologists also will collect valuable information on size, geographic distribution, health status and other factors. Tags on released turtles will provide biologists with useful information for years to come, including where they travel and their rate of survival.

The sea turtles were taken to staging areas, where biologists assessed their conditions. Metal tags were placed on the sea turtles' front flippers and various data were obtained. From there, the sea turtles were either transported to rehabilitation facilities or returned to the sea if they were healthy and water conditions were suitable.

"The tremendous effort put forth by all of our partners, volunteers and FWC staff has been a life-saver for sea turtles," said FWC Chairman Rodney Barreto. "I'm extremely proud to be associated with this agency and all the wonderful organizations and people who stepped up in this time of need. With the enormous outpouring of help on this, together we managed to take a potentially tragic situation and turn it into a win-win for science and most importantly, for sea turtles."

Private and corporate citizens alike contributed to the effort, with many businesses providing necessary equipment and services at little or no cost.

"As a global company headquartered in Florida, we are especially aware of the need to protect all of Florida's natural resources, so this was an easy decision to provide Ryder trucks for transporting these animals," said Rich Mohr, director of rental for Ryder in Miami. "We very much appreciated the opportunity to assist with the conservation of the sea turtle."

Dorn Whitmore, Supervisory Ranger

Annual Bird Count a Success

We had another super Christmas Bird Count this year on the Refuge. On a cool 40 degree morning on December 21st, 40+ dedicated field observers from all around the USA gathered at 5:15 a.m. at the Visitor Center for last minute instructions and area assignments (and some doughnuts and coffee).

The annual Audubon Society Christmas Counts have been going on in our country for 110 years. Data collected on these counts provides valuable long-term information on species numbers, distribution and trends.

We all gathered back at the Visitor Center at 6 p.m. to tally our observations. Tired, muddy and bug-bitten, we all agreed that it had been another wonderful day on the Refuge.

- Some highlights of this year's count: Total Species Observed: 165... last year we had 175
- Some of the Unusual Species sighted: American Black Duck, American Pipit, Broad-winged Hawk and Ash-throated Flycatcher

Thanks go to Dorn Whitmore, MIWA, the Refuge staff and all of our super volunteers!

Ned Steel, MIWA Board Member



MIWA Board Members & Refuge Bird Count Compilers, Jim Pedersen and Ned Steel
Photo by Sandee Larsen

Biologist Corner



Thanks to all who helped on “Operation Mouse Trax2”. On February 23rd and 26th some 60 staff and volunteers joined together on our Southeastern Beach Mouse survey. Volunteers and staff placed track tubes designed to detect beach mice along the entire stretch of beach from the south end of Cape Canaveral Air Force Station to the north end of Cape Canaveral National Seashore, a distance of 38 miles! This level of effort would not have been possible without the cooperation and dedicated efforts of many people, representing many organizations. Biologists and volunteers from Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Merritt Island Wildlife Association, Innovative Health Applications, NASA, Cape

Canaveral Air Force Station, Cape Canaveral National Seashore, St Johns River Water Management District, and Volusia County Parks and Recreation all worked together to place survey stations along this protected portion of the beach mouse habitat. The goal of the project is to determine the distribution of beach mice along our beaches and to discern what habitat conditions are required for long term survival of the species.

Frequent visitors to the refuge may have noticed recent scrub restoration activities near the Visitor Center and along SR 3 near Haulover Canal. This work is part of the refuge’s larger scrub restoration and management program. Many years of fire suppression activities have resulted in the invasion of undesirable wetland hardwood trees and high pine densities. In some cases, these areas can be restored with the application of prescribed fire alone. In other areas, trees need to be mechanically felled prior to burning. In these scrub landscapes it is important to be able to reintroduce a fire cycle that mimics natural fire as closely as possible. Ultimately, these scrub landscapes will be maintained and kept alive with the application of fire alone, until then please excuse the look while we make repairs to the landscape.

Mike Legare, Merritt Island NWR Biologist

Refuge Fire Management Teams Earns Recognition

Jacquelyn B. Parrish, Acting Regional Director of the Southeast Region, presented a group award for “Sustained Excellence in Fire Management” for years 2005-2009 to the Southeast Region’s Fire Management Team. This award recognized our refuge fire team for their service and dedication to Fire Management Programs. Congratulations MINWR Fire Crew, thanks for your hard work and dedication to our Refuge!



Refuge fire Crew in action.
Photo by Refuge Volunteer, Betty Salter.



Goodbye to...

.... **Ben Hornsby** – Our Refuge Forestry Technician has taken a new position with the Forest Service near Savannah. Good luck Ben!

.... **Glen Stratton** – Our Refuge Fire Management Officer has been promoted to the Regional Fire Coordination Office in Atlanta. Congratulations and good luck!

.... **Fred Adrian** – Our Refuge Forester is retiring after 35 years. If you have attended a Brevard Watercolor Society Art reception here at the VIC, you may remember Fred. He and his wife have provided acoustic music for the event. Good luck Fred. Thank you for your service.

.... **Christine Box** – Seasonal MIWA Sales Associate has taken full time employment in Rockledge. Thanks for your hard work this season, congratulations and good luck!

.... **Tom Mertins** – MIWA Environmental Educator will be returning to his hometown in Waukesha, Wisconsin and will return next winter. Thanks for another great season of programs at the Refuge!

.... **Gregg Bailey** – Refuge Park Ranger is going to the first iron works in the USA at the Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site in Massachusetts and will return next season. Have a safe trip; we’ll see you next winter!



MIWA Minute

With winter over, we are all looking forward to warmer weather but regretting the migratory birds heading back north. Winter is our peak season, but with bridge closures and freezing temperatures, the Refuge Visitor Center (VIC) was quieter than normal. Still, sales remained brisk, thanks to hard core birders and lost tourist.

I want to thank Andrew & Rosemary Georganna of Titusville for their generous donation of \$500 to MIWA. Rosemary volunteers at the VIC desk, and has a deep love of turtles. Thank you so much, we will put your gift to good use!

MIWA is happy to announce our newest Life Members, Jim Salyerds of Titusville and Arthur & Virginia Wycoff of Williamsburg, VA. Jim is a local nature lover that has supported MIWA for years. Arthur & Virginia are also long time supporters. Thank you, Jim, Arthur & Virginia, for becoming a Life Members; we will do our best to keep you up to date with all MIWA happenings.

For information on volunteering at the Refuge, contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668. Feel free to call MIWA's direct line, 321-861-2377 if you need membership, retail information, or would like to make a donation. I'll see you at the Refuge!

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager

MIWA Memberships Grow & Go Green

MIWA would like to thank all our members that have given their time and talent to make the Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge a better place. MIWA is the largest "friends" group in the refuge system, ending 2009 with 1,323 members! Being big comes with a cost.

In an attempt to become an even "greener" association, MIWA will now e mail membership renewal requests. To see when your membership expires, check your membership card or the mailing label on your Habi-Chat. We will e mail renewal notices and snail mail notices on recycled paper and envelopes. If you would like to receive announcements via e mail, please send us your e mail address to:

habichat@merrittislandwildlife.org. Feel free to send in suggestions on how to improve our membership program. We would love to see our student membership grow. Please consider gifting memberships to student family members. It's a great way to teach our youth the importance of conserving wild areas. We look forward to another year of educational, fun programs.

Again, thank you for another successful year.

Chris Fairey & Sandee Larsen, MIWA Membership Committee



**Nick Clark, student member
School File Photo**

Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival Booth Sales



**Volunteers, JoAnn Heenan & Kathy Eichinger set up and man the booth.
Photo by photographer, Ray Scory.**

If you were lucky enough to attend this year's festival, you could not help but notice MIWA's busy booth. Manned by MIWA staff and Refuge Volunteers, sales were brisk from opening day through Sunday's closing. Sales exceeded last year's figures and totaled \$6,431.67!

MIWA held 8 book signings that included authors: David Sibley, Pete Dunne, Kevin Karlson, Kenn Kaufman, and Bill Thompson 3rd (along with his beautiful daughter, Phoebe). It was wonderful meeting the authors and mingling with visitors.

Thank you to volunteers: JoAnne Heenan, Kathy Eichinger, Curtis & Patricia Arnold, Al Brayton, Mel & Dot Fringer, Trudy Metzger, Joanne Napieralski, Jim Pedersen, Ned Steel, & Jim Butts for manning, setting up & breaking

down the booth. And last but not least, a BIG THANK YOU to my love, Ed Larsen, for lugging the stock and use of his new van! You're the greatest baby!! So...until next year,

I'll see you at the Festival!

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager



**David Allen Sibley autographs his books.
Photo by photographer, Ray Scory.**

Redfish (*Sciaenops ocellatus*)

Mention Mosquito Lagoon in almost any place in the fishing world and those you are talking with immediately think of redfish. The redfish, or red drum, is the most popular game fish within the lagoon system. In fact, the Mosquito Lagoon and Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge are worldwide angling destinations to target this particular fish. The pristine flats that cover miles of our area make it perfect area to sight fish for this species. The fish's design makes it a top predator in these conditions. Add it all up and the result is thousands of people coming to our area every year.

There are many reasons that redfish make a perfect sight-fishing target. First is their ability to hunt prey in shallow water by feeding on bottom dwelling prey (shrimp, crabs, snails, worms, etc.), they often have a portion of their body above the water; hence the term "Tailing". Secondly, Redfish accept a wide range of baits, lures and flies. These shallow, grassy, often-clear water areas offer redfish a place to hunt, spawn and survive in almost perfect conditions. All of this is also what makes our local redfish so different than any others in the world.

Mosquito Lagoon and the Indian River have the only known inshore breeding schools of redfish. Instead of moving offshore, like all other redfish in the world, our fish stay inshore and spawn. Every year, usually between July and September, huge schools of breeding fish can be located. These fish will often be 20 pounds or larger. The fish will stay in these schools breeding and eating, for weeks on end. Once spawning is complete and the fertilized eggs hatch, the fry will find cover in the mangroves, grasses and any other structures that they can find. Over the years the fry grow, until reaching maturity and the process starts over again.

To have consistent success on our redfish requires more than luck. It requires patience, stealth and the ability to cast accurately. This is true whether you are throwing live bait or using a fly rod. Patience is required to search and locate fish. It is not uncommon to pole a boat for miles, looking for signs of fish and getting into the proper position for a cast. Poling is still the preferred method for approaching redfish, as it offers the most stealth. Once you have the position, an angler needs to make a cast close enough for the fish to see the offering, but not close enough to spook it. There is a fine line between the two, and experience on the water is the best teacher. When everything comes together the resulting bite and fight will be worth all of the effort.

The redfish population has seen its ups and downs. Before the blackened redfish craze, they were often thought of as a nuisance fish. Once the redfish craze started, their numbers were decimated. In 1991, Florida banned the use of gillnets and later, the redfish was designated as a sport fish. This ended the commercial harvesting of this fish.

Loss of habitat is facing every single species in Florida. This is no different for the redfish. Runoff and pollution kill have killed sea grasses that the redfish depend on for food and breeding. The destruction of mangroves along the shorelines remove much needed protection for the redfish fry and juvenile redfish. All anglers can assist in this by making sure they do not leave trash on shorelines or in waterways. Volunteering to help re-plant mangroves is another way that everyone can help. Also, make sure that you do not over fertilize your yard or plants; sooner or later, all of that can end up in the waterways.

The breeding habits of our redfish also enhance the danger to them. Sure, most people want to target large fish. Finding the breeding schools, where there can be hundreds of these fish is an easy way to target them. However, putting too much pressure on breeding schools causes them to break-up or to stop spawning.

The last danger that I will mention is anglers themselves. I refer to those that do not feel the need to follow regulations that have been put in place and those that operate boats in a manner that endangers the fish. Redfish regulations, including size limits and bag limits were put in place to insure that there would be a future stock of fish for generations. By keeping illegal fish, anglers threaten the future; sure it may be just one fish to a single angler, but think about how many anglers there are. Boat operation is another aspect that is completely up to the individual. Although a flats boat may run in four inches of water, why endanger the wildlife that also inhabits that area, I cannot fathom a single reason to run a boat through water that shallow. Besides destroying the grass beds, there is always the risk of actually striking and killing wildlife.

Redfish are an important part of our ecological and financial systems here in the Mosquito Lagoon and Indian River. While I encourage everyone to get out and enjoy fishing for them, please remember to do so responsibly. With a little effort, we can make sure that future generations will get the chance to enjoy these fish too.

Tight lines and screaming drags:

Captain John Tarr

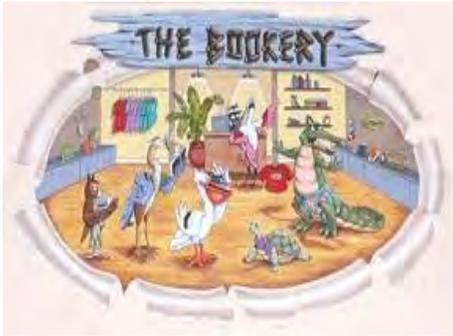


Redfish Tackle Guide:

Spin/Plug gear in the medium weight design. Reels should hold 150-200 yards of 8-12 pound line. Rods should be heavy enough to throw 1/8 ounce to 1/2 ounce jigs or plugs.

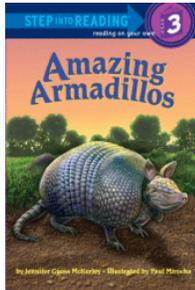
Fly Gear in 7-9 weight line designations are ideal. Reels should be saltwater resistant and capable of holding 125-150 yards of 20-pound backing

New Items in



Amazing Armadillos

By Jennifer Guess McKerley...\$3.99
Step 3 series by Random House
Great reading for grades 1-3
A beautifully illustrated and informative publication that any child would love.
A must have.



Woodpecker Puppet

Folkmanis\$21.99
Beautiful, realistic puppet for children of all ages. Includes educational info. A great addition to your puppet collection or as an educational tool..



Autographed Publications

Please stop by for autographed books by Pete Dunne, Kenn Kaufman and David Allen Sibley. They will go quickly and make great gifts!

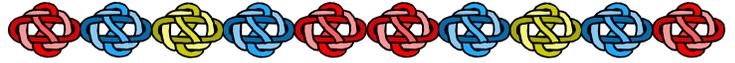
For retail information, call the MIWA Office at 321-861-2377

Visitor Information Center Hours

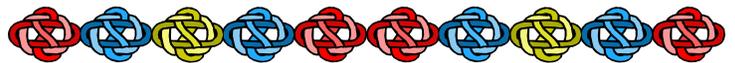
Monday through Friday
8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Saturday and Sunday*
9:00 am – 5:00 pm

*VIC is closed Sundays from April – October
The Refuge is open daily from sunrise – sunset, except during Shuttle Launch/Landing operations.

Habi-Chat has email! If you would like to be on our mailing list to receive MIWA announcements, please add us to your safe senders list and send a request to HabiChat@MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org



Donations in remembrance of loved ones and friends can be sent to:
MIWA, P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781



Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Supporting the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge
Joining is simple. Just fill out this form and mail it to the Merritt Island Wildlife Association at P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781 or join online at www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

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Email _____

Type of Membership:

- Seniors and Students – \$10
- Individual – \$15
- Senior Couples – \$15
- Family Membership – \$20
- Supporting Membership – \$50
- Senior Couple Supporting – \$75
- Life Membership – \$250
- Patron – \$1000
- Optional – Donation \$ _____

Total Enclosed _____

Make checks payable to MIWA. For credit card payments please call the MIWA office at:

321-861-2377.



Spring Refuge Programs

G.P.S. Family Fun Hunt - Saturday, April 10, at 10 a.m.

Learn how to use a GPS unit and go on a virtual geo-caching hunt, a game where you use a GPS unit to find locations around the Refuge. Bring your own GPS or borrow one from the Refuge.

Photo Presentation "Spectacular Wildlife of Brevard County" - Saturday, April 10, at 1p.m.

Local Photographer, Joel Reynolds, will present his photos of Brevard County wildlife, including images taken at the MINWR and Viera Wetlands. He will relate some of his wildlife experiences, including how he improved his photography over the last 10 years. Nature lovers plus photographers, both amateur and advanced, will appreciate his eye for capturing wildlife at its best.

Trash Bash at Haul Over Canal - Saturday, April 17, from 9 a.m. to 12 pm

Meet at the entrance to Bair's Cove Boat Ramp at Haul Over Canal to help clean up litter. Trash bags, latex gloves, hand sanitizer, and water will be provided. Recommendations: Bring sun screen, wear closed shoes, and long pants. Sponsored by Keep Brevard Beautiful.

What Is This Fungus Among Us? - Saturday, April 24, 1p.m.

Dr. Jay Barnhart, an "Avid Amateur Mycologist" will give a photo presentation about the fungus found in the Space Coast Area. Learn about mushroom facts, fables, and folklore.

Please call **321-861-5601** to make reservations and for program information.
Please visit the Merritt Island NWR Calendar of events for additional program listing at:
<http://www.fws.gov/merrittisland/Calendar.html>



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