



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 17 Number 1

Spring 2011



Southeastern Beach Mouse
USFWS File Photo

Southeastern Beach Mouse Research

This spring Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) staff, volunteers, Canaveral National Seashore and Innovated Health Applications biologist collaborated on a survey to learn about the habitat requirements of this imperiled species. The southeastern beach mouse is a small, nocturnal mouse with a current range limited to a 25-mile section of beach front habitat on Merritt Island. Isolated populations at New Smyrna Dunes, Archie Carr, Pelican Island, and the southern half of Sebastian Inlet State Recreation Area complete the entire current range of the species. Historically, this mouse ranged from Ponce Inlet to Hollywood Florida, but habitat degradation, fragmentation, development, predation from feral cats, and catastrophic storms have reduced the population. These threats and the loss of 75% of the historic range of the species prompted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the southeastern beach mouse as a threatened species in 1989.

In an effort to learn more about conservation needs of this species, a survey was designed to sample the population and this was the third year of that effort. The survey consisted of placing about 500 PVC tubes at locations on the Refuge and Seashore. These tubes are like small snack counters for beach mice. Mice walk into the tube, walk across an ink pad, and then walk across a piece of felt paper to eat a few seeds, and then walk out. The tubes are then collected and the felt paper examined. The tracks left on the paper determine the presence of the species. This information will help the Refuge model the “preferred” habitat for the little mouse. Our goal with this project is to identify the habitat conditions that sustain the population and the best management practices to ensure long-term survival of the species.

Mike Legare, Wildlife Biologist, Merritt Island NWR, USFWS

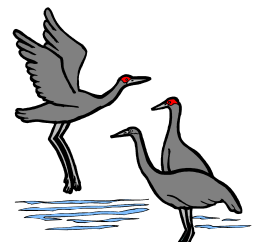
2010 Annual Bird Count a Success

We had a great Christmas Bird Count on your Refuge again this year. On a cool 42 degree morning on December 20th, 44 dedicated field observers from all around the USA gathered at 5 a.m. at the Visitor Center for last minute instructions and area assignments (and some doughnuts and coffee provided by MIWA).

The annual Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count has been in our country for the last 111 years. Data collected on these counts provide valuable long-term information on species numbers, bird distribution, and long-term trends.

We all gathered back at the Visitor Center at around 6 p.m. to tally our observations for the day. Fueling activities were being conducted on Pad 39 on the count day, so a usually productive habitat area was off-limits to us. Even though we were tired, muddy, and bug-bitten, the 44 observers all agreed that it had been another wonderful day on the Refuge.

- Some highlights of this year's count: Total Species Observed): 155....last year we had 163
- Some of the Unusual Sightings this year were: Wilson's plover, black-legged kittiwake, black-throated green warbler and 1,600 American white pelicans!



As always, our thanks to Dorn Whitmore, the Merritt Island NWR Staff, MIWA, and all of our volunteers.

Ned Steel, MIWA Board Member

MIWA Named Beneficiary of Jeanne Vance Trust

MIWA is proud to be one of eleven charities awarded a donation from the trust of Jeanne Vance. Trustee Carol Foley contacted the MIWA office in December to announce the news. Jeanne Vance, of Melbourne, was a Supporting MIWA Member since 2002. She loved nature and enjoyed reading our newsletter. MIWA received \$14,272 from the fund in December, 2010.

Jeanne, a very generous lady, supported many local charities. Her donation will be earmarked towards the purchase of a tour bus for our Refuge. I know she would love to give local students and residents an opportunity to tour the refuge and learn of all its wonders. Her gift will be passed to future generations, spreading her love of nature.

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager



President's Message

Hello from the Refuge. Save for the fact that we need more water in our impoundments; the Refuge is hopping with wildlife and visitors. Many of the bird species are beginning to show off the beautiful courting colors. You need to come and take a look.

On behalf of the MIWA Board and all its members, I would like to thank our NASA liaison, Mario Busacca, for his service to our organization. It is because of individuals such as Mario that the congenial relationship between technology and nature has been so long lasting. Mario, we wish you all the best in the future. Mario is being replaced by John Shaffer from NASA's environmental planning group. We welcome John to our Board, and hope to continue this wonderful relationship with NASA.

As many of you know, we have been providing MIWA members-only trips for quite a while now. They have been lead by Tom Mertins who is a great environmental coordinator. Basically, we have one trip left in April. The trips are announced ahead of time via email only. If you have not received announcements, please call 321-861-2377 to be sure we have proper contact information.

Refuge beginning bird tours are offered on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays from 9 am to noon. Bird tour season runs from November through March, and are free to all MIWA members. Keep this in mind for next season.

Again, come see us on the refuge. While there, you might as well visit our well-stocked, beautiful bookstore. In addition, I would like to personally thank each and every one of you for your support.

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.

President	Jim Pedersen
Vice President	Dan Click
Treasurer	Jim Butts
Secretary	John Tribe
President Emeritus	George English

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Sam Beddingfield, Warren Camp, James Clark, Chris Fairey, Darleen Hunt, Robert Hutchison, Dan LeBlanc, Forrest McCartney, Truman Scarborough, Lee Solid, Ned Steel, Diane Stees, Laurilee Thompson, Jim Tully, John Turcot and Charlie Venuto

Refuge Manager Layne Hamilton **USFWS Liaison** Dorn Whitmore
NASA Liaison John Shaffer

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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MIWA Birding Festival Booth

MIWA staff and volunteers manned a triple booth at the 14th Annual 2011 Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival. We stayed busy throughout the event answering Refuge questions, handing out pamphlets, promoting membership and selling retail. Six book signings were held at the keynote speaker site and in the booth. Authors promoted were: Donald & Lillian Stokes, our good friend Kevin Karlson, Louise Zickefoose, and Laura Erickson. We left late every night exhausted but our efforts paid off. Sales of \$8,544.08 were collected-beating last year's sales by \$2,112.63!

Thank you to volunteers: Jo Ann Heenan, Kathy Eichinger, Jim Pedersen, Stacy Shriner, Andi Mathews, Trudy Metzger, Al Brayton, Connie Foreman, Mel & Dot Fringer, and Bill Nunn for assisting with the set up, manning and breaking down the booth. And as

always, a "BIG THANK YOU" to my hubby, Ed Larsen, for his muscle power and the use of his new van! You are the greatest!

If you missed this year's event, please attend next year. The exhibit area is free to the public, with over 90 vendors presenting their woodworks, art, photography, binoculars, shirts, miscellaneous retail, and live animal displays!

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager



Set Up Volunteers: Kathy Eichinger, Ed Larsen and Jo Ann Heenan
Photo by Sandee Larsen, MIWA



Donald & Lillian Stokes at Book Signing
Photo by Ray Scory, Refuge Volunteer



Author, Kevin Karlson with a happy fan.
Photo by Ray Scory, Refuge Volunteer



Biologist's Corner - Eastern Indigo Snake

One of my favorite species on the refuge is also one of our most difficult to observe, the eastern indigo snake. While some folks cringe at the thought of seeing (let alone holding!) any snake, the indigo is always a people pleaser. While doing research on indigos on the Refuge about 10 years ago, I had the pleasure of doing indigo programs for children and adults. I know that when people learn about indigos, they LOVE them.

The eastern indigo snake is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Indigo snakes historically occurred throughout much of Florida, west to southern Mississippi and southern Alabama, and north to southern South Carolina. The species is now believed to occur only in peninsular Florida, with isolated populations in the Florida panhandle and southern Georgia.

Several factors have led and still contribute to indigo snake population declines. Indigo snakes were once heavily collected for the pet trade, which is now illegal. Tracts of land large enough to support populations of indigo snakes are becoming rare due to habitat destruction and fragmentation from human development. Fragmented landscapes have roads with vehicles, non-native predators, such as dogs and cats; and more people, all of which contribute to higher mortality rates and increased extinction risk. Fragmentation of the land also interrupts several natural landscape processes (e.g., wildland fire and surface water flow), which are essential for maintaining suitable habitat conditions for the indigo snake and many other species.

We need to learn more about the life history and ecology of the eastern indigo snake to better manage lands for indigos, and to develop land management plans that can contribute to the long-term survival of this species. However, data from research on the Refuge indicates that indigo snakes on Merritt Island NWR experience significant mortality from crossing roads, which is likely the largest threat to indigos throughout their existing range. Mitigating for such mortality can be very difficult for land managers, but we can all contribute by being careful while driving on the Refuge, maintaining safe speeds, and watching for wildlife.

Mike Legare, Wildlife Biologist, Merritt Island NWR



Melissa Bolt with an Indigo Snake
USFWS File Photo



Male Painted Bunting
Photo by Cary Salter

MIWA Minute

It is our busy season at the MINWR Visitor Center. And, with the waterfowl numbers down on Black Point Wildlife Drive, thank goodness for the seasonal visit of the popular species, the *painted bunting*. Numerous birders and photographers have waited patiently to get a good picture of the males and females at our Visitor Center feeders. And they have not been disappointed! Sighting up to six buntings feeding at one time, hundreds to thousands of photos were taken. A few buntings have still been seen daily at the time of writing this article. Thank you to feeder builder, Robert Hice, Jr. Your hard work has certainly paid off!

I am happy to announce a donation of \$1,000 from **United Space Alliance** (USA). USA is our main supporter of environmental education programs at the Refuge - donating monies ear-marked for these programs for numerous years. Without their support, MIWA would not be able to fund an Environmental Educator or the numerous Refuge environmental education programs attended by local students. Thank you USA! Your generosity is appreciated by MIWA, the Refuge, all the Brevard students that benefit from your funded programs, and local communities.

I also would like to announce our new Sr. Couple Life Members and Life Members: **Don Doerr** of Merritt Island, **Evelyn & Steven Snell** of Cape Canaveral, and **Barbara Jones McClure** of Merritt Island. Don has been a member since December 2009 and is an avid nature lover. He also graciously sent in a \$50 donation towards our van purchase. Thanks Don! Evelyn & Steven, members since January 2006, are also crazy about nature and the Refuge. Thank you for your support all these years! Barbara, a new member joining via our website, wrote in "*After having experienced the beauty of the refuge and the graciousness of your volunteer guides and paid employees during the recent birding event, I feel this is one of the best investments I will ever make. Thank you so much for all you have done and will do in the future.*" Thank you for the kudos Barbara! We will continue to keep up the good work for the Refuge we love.

In closing, thank you to all of our members. We could not give so much to the Refuge without your support. I'll see you at the Refuge!

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager

Black Rail Tour on the St. Johns NWR

On Thursday, March 3rd, ten lucky MIWA Members were treated to a tour of the St. Johns NWR, guided by MINWR Biologist, Mike Legare. After meeting at the Refuge gate, Mike loaded the group in the back of his pickup where we sat on hay bales. Off we went in search of the elusive black rail. We slowly drove two miles into this beautiful area, watching for wildlife and enjoying the fauna of the salt marsh. It was cool and luckily rather breezy, keeping the mosquitoes at bay. Flocks of the yellow rumped warblers flew by. A meadowlark was sighted near the roadway. Winds swept across the tall thick broom grass, making waves across the wide horizon. The yellow-orange sun slowly set as we made our way into the Refuge.



MIWA Members at the Refuge Gate
Photo by Sandee Larsen, MIWA



Mike Legare Loads the Tour Group
Photo by Sandee Larsen, MIWA

We stopped at a crossroad and disembarked. Mike gave a talk on the history of the Refuge, then we hiked half a mile into the nesting site. Mike played an audio recording of the rail (Kee-Kee-do, Kee-Kee-do) and we quietly waited for a reply. In the distance we could hear a Virginia rail calling. Two marsh hawks were spotted by members flying in the distant sky. Again, he played the call (Kee-Kee-do, Kee-Kee-do). No luck. The evening breeze was too strong, not good conditions for a black rail sighting. No worries, we leisurely returned to the truck. On the way to the gate, we spotted a short eared owl sitting in the middle of the road and watched a young opossum running along the roadway.

We had a great time, even without sighting a black rail. It was an honor to be allowed to tour the area, which is closed to the general public. Thank you, Mike, for taking time to lead us on this great adventure. We hope to try another day to spot the elusive black rail.

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager

2nd Annual Florida Scrub-Jay Festival

The Annual Florida Scrub-Jay Festival is a public outreach project started by the Northeast Florida Scrub Working Group. This event seeks to promote conservation and increase awareness of scrub habitat and the plight of the threatened Florida scrub-jay. This year's festival was held at the Sandler Educational Outpost Pavilion at Merritt Island NWR.



Florida Scrub-jay
Photo by Tom Dunkerton, Volunteer



Volunteers in action!
Photo by Bill Nunn, Refuge Volunteer

Countless volunteers, Refuge and KSC staff, and environmental groups across the state of Florida all worked hard to foster enthusiasm and curiosity from each of our visitors to the festival.

We at the Refuge cannot thank all involved enough for the many hours and months of preparation that went into making this festival possible. Whether you pulled a wagon full of hay through the scrub or showed up bleary eyed before the sun came up; we could not have done it without you!

Stacey Shriner, Public Use Intern, USFWS



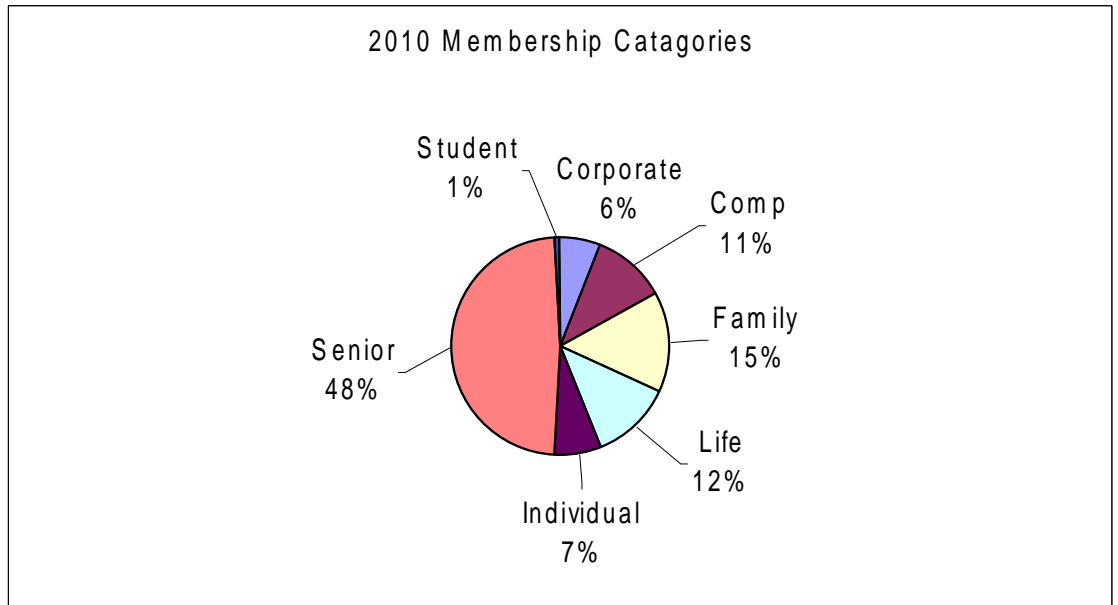
Campfire Story Time
Photo by Bill Nunn, Refuge Volunteer

Thank You MIWA Members

On behalf of the entire MIWA Board, we want to thank all the members for their support this year. Your support has allowed us to assist the Refuge in any projects that so many get to enjoy. Without your help, this would not be possible.

MIWA continues to grow and we are the largest friend's group association in the entire United States. We ended 2010 with 1,209 members, with 174 new members for 2010. You can see from the types of members, that senior members are the largest group.

Membership Categories	2010
Corporate	74
Comp	134
Family	179
Life	143
Individual	84
Senior	585
Student	10
	1209



We look forward to another great year with all of our members and encourage you to let us know if there is anything we can do to provide more information about MIWA or the Refuge. Please join us at the Refuge when you can. *Please note: check your mailing label for your membership expiration. Renewals are now sent via e-mail. If you have not received an e-mail notice, please call 321-861-2377 to update your record.*

Chris Fairey, MIWA Membership Chair



Ladies enjoying the Tea Social
Harbor Pointe Social Committee

Tea Social Contributes to MIWA

\$200 was donated to MIWA for Refuge programs by the Harbor Pointe Condominium (HPC) Social Committee. The ladies held a Tea as part of a social gathering at the HPC. As an American Culinary Federation certified chef for many years and a former Disney chef, the social committee asked me if I would participate in the tea/culinary demonstration. I agreed on the condition that all proceeds would go to the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINW). Since this is our backyard, we wanted to give back to the wildlife community that adds so much joy and pleasure to our lives. A BIG thank you for all you do to keep the MINWR a very special place in our community.

Marianne Hunnel, ACF Certified Chef

Friday Trail Team Spring Cleans MIWA!

The Friday Trail Team (FTT), headed by Refuge Volunteer Kathy Eichinger, is hard at work again! The project on Friday March 11th was to help clean and organize the Gadwall (MIWA's storage shed). MIWA and the Refuge has been sharing the storage space which gets filled with festival & retail displays, refuge tents, chairs and tables, etc. With so many people using the space, it gets disorganized quickly. It did not take long for the FTT to wipe down and sort the contents. Thank you for helping me and MIWA keep a handle on things!

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager



The Gadwall looks new, thanks to the FTT!
Photo by Sandee Larsen, MIWA



Hello to...

.....**Steven Trull** - Biological Science Technician, has accepted a 4 year term position working with Refuge Biologist, Mike Legare. He is originally from Pensacola with 10 years in the military. He comes to us from Canaveral National Seashore where he was active in the Turtle Nesting Program. Steven has a degree in Biology from Carson-Newman College. Welcome Steven!

.....**Patrick Pearson** - Fire Management Officer, arrived at Merritt Island in January.

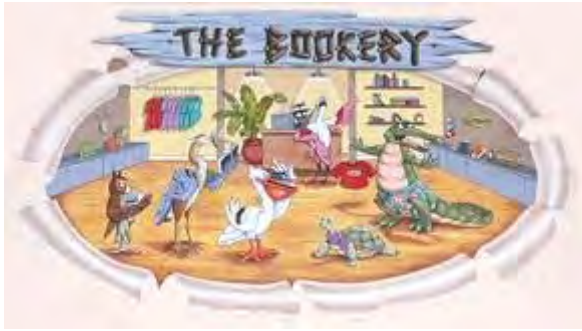
He came from the Regional Office in Albuquerque, NM where he was the Regional Fire Specialist. He also served as the Fire Management Officer at the South Texas Refuge Complex. Welcome Pat!

Goodbye to...

.....**Gregg Bailey** - Park Ranger will be traveling home at the end of April to New Hampshire. He will be working for the National Park Service again at Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site (1st successful USA iron works). Good bye and thanks for your hard work. Have a safe trip home, see you next winter!

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**

New Items in



At Home with the Gopher Tortoise
By Madeleine Dunphy.....\$9.95
The story of a gopher tortoise, a Keystone species, and the different kinds of animals that depend upon it for survival.



Felina's New Home-
By Lorain Wlodarski & illustrated by Lew Clayton..... \$8.95
Felina the Florida panther's forest is shrinking! Not only are the trees disappearing, but a busy road with fast-moving cars makes it hard for animals to get to food on the other side. Readers learn about six threatened or endangered animals.



Turtle Summer
By Mary Alice Monroe
Barbara J. Bergwerf.....\$8.95
Turtle team members spend their summers watching and caretaking the turtle nests. This photographic journal shares the joys and memories of a turtle team mother and her daughter's Turtle Summer.



**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.



Record Visitation at VIC for the Discovery Landing

Visitor Center attendance hit a new record on Wednesday, March 9th during the Space Shuttle Discovery's final landing. Over 1,000 visitors stopped at the Center trying to find the best site to view this historic event. Most visitors headed out to the Seashore, but over 100 stayed and watched Discovery fly by the Center and land behind the tree line. The crowd cheered and took hundreds of photos. It was a bitter sweet day, we were happy to see the shuttle land safely – sorry it was the final landing. We wish the Discovery an honorable retirement, hopefully at a museum where it can be viewed and enjoyed by all.

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 _____

Phone Number _____

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.



MIWA Member's Only Spring Tours

Seminole Rest Tour

When: Sunday, April 17, 2011 Time: 10 am to Noon

Leader: CNS Ranger Leslie Peters

Group Limit: 20

Join us for a historic tour of Seminole Rest. Leslie will give a guided tour of the house and grounds. Her talk will cover history from archaic to present times. **Meet at Seminole Rest.** Bring a bag lunch and eat on the porch or visit nearby restaurants afterwards! Group size is limited.

Please RSVP to the MIWA office at 321-861-2377.

Directions to Seminole Rest: from US1 in Oak Hill, turn east at light at Halifax Ave, then north on River Road to the Palm Ave entrance (about 1.5 miles from US1)

Key West & Dry Tortugas

When: April 29th through May 2nd, 2011

Leader: Wildlife Refuge Specialist, Dorn Whitmore

This 4 day 3 night trip will feature a boat trip from Key West to Ft. Jefferson during the peak of the nesting season. On a good day you can see up to 70 bird species, many of which could be life birds.

On the next day, there will be a variety of outdoor activities to choose from, including: a bike trip through Key West, kayak/snorkel adventure, and admission to the Butterfly Conservatory. The price varies (eg, single or double occupancy) and includes transportation and lodging. You pay for optional day trips and meals. A \$300 deposit is required and the deadline for registering is April 1. Please

RSVP to the MIWA office at 321-861-2377.

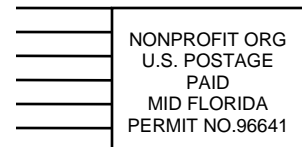


Merritt Island Wildlife Association

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www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org



Please check the expiration date on the address label and, if expired, renew your membership today via form on page 7!

