



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 18 Number 3

Fall 2012

Sea Turtle's Slow Road to Recovery

What a wonderful year 2012 has been for sea turtles throughout Florida and Brevard County. First, every two weeks I compared loggerhead nesting numbers to last years and at each check point they were way ahead of last year's numbers. Second, we managed to remain under the predation rate goal of 6% even with more predation activity. Third, while some records were exceeded, timing of the nests laid may produce better hatch success rates. Finally, loggerheads on a grander scale are appearing to stabilize but many more years of data are needed before any changes are made to threatened or endangered status.



Leatherback Sea Turtle Hatchling
Photo by Steven Trull

hog are the primary nest predators. In fact, coyotes were responsible for nearly half of the predations this year. We have not lost any known nests to storms, beach erosion, or sand shifts.

Many people hoped for another record high year. This year started early and fast but it has slowed down to a trickle of greens. Whereas, last year started slow and kept coming in late. Our six mile stretch of beach will end up with the third highest year for loggerheads, the fourth highest for greens and the highest for leatherbacks. This year should produce a much better hatch success rate due to starting and stopping earlier. I still have a lot to excavate but the early trends are looking good. Our neighbors both north and south have showed similar trends to ours this year.

Loggerheads have been in a decline for many years but have stabilized over the last couple of years including this one. Sea turtles are a long lived species, so many more years of data is needed to know for sure if they will remain threatened and endangered. To all co-workers, volunteers, friends and families who assist sea turtle research directly or indirectly, physically or monetarily, thank you and keep up the good work!

Steven Trull, Biological Science Technician U.S.F.W.S



Morning Sighting of Green Sea Turtle
Photo by Steven Trull



Green Sea Turtle Hatchlings
Photo by Steven Trull



Improved Parking Area at Manatee Deck
Photo by Candice Stevenson

The Improved Manatee Deck is Now Open

There's room for you at the Manatee Deck! We now have 16 paved parking spots including 2 handicap accessible spaces and one space for buses or RV's. Since 2010, the gravel road leading to a wooden deck has transformed to a paved road and parking leading to a concrete deck with interactive signs. The road and parking lotpaving was coordinated through Federal Highways and paid for using the Refuge Roads Program.

The manatee deck is a must see! Hurry in while the water is still warm!

Candice Stevenson, Refuge Operations Specialist



MIWA President's Message



Dan Click, MIWA President
File Photo

Our annual meeting is rapidly approaching – Friday, October 26. Please plan to attend to hear the latest news on the state of MINWR, a brief summary of MIWA's activities and plans for our continued support of the Refuge in the coming year, and a keynote presentation by Dr. Marc Minno on "Imperiled Butterflies of Florida". We promise an enjoyable and informative evening.

In early August the Board held our annual "Blue Sky" meeting to set the general plans for MIWA's activities and Refuge support in the coming fiscal year (beginning Oct. 1). We will continue funding a number of ongoing Refuge programs and will focus especially on increased support of environmental education activities and facilities. You'll hear more at the annual meeting, along with the

initial planning for next year's celebration of MINWR's 50th anniversary.

Our Association has lost three long-time leaders in the past year: Jim Pedersen (our immediate past president), LTG Forrest McCartney (former KSC Director and founding member of the MIWA board), and Sam Beddingfield (also a founding member and original NASA leader – employee number 3, as he liked to note). We'll discuss their contributions to MINWR at the annual meeting, and proposed ways to memorialize their service.

We hope to see you enjoying the Refuge and MIWA member events, and at the annual meeting.

Dan Click, MIWA President



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	Dan Click
Vice President	Craig George
Treasurer	Diane Stees
Secretary	Vacant
President Emeritus	George English

Board Members

Jim Butts, James Clark, Chris Fairey, Darleen Hunt, Robert Hutchison, Truman Scarborough, Lee Solid, Ned Steel, Laurilee Thompson, John Tribe, Jim Tulley, John Turcot and Charlie Venuto

Refuge Manager/USFWS Liaison Layne Hamilton
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** Sheri Girard, Sandee Larsen
& Carol Pedersen

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A Call for Self Control

Fall brings cooler weather and extremely enjoyable fishing weather. Fall also brings dreams of monster redfish. Mosquito Lagoon and the north end of the Indian River are known around the world to have the only schools of inshore, breeding redfish schools. It is one of many things that make these bodies of water so unique. In every other part of the world, redfish swim offshore, gathering in huge schools to spawn. However, here, where the fish are landlocked, they have evolved.

Every fall, huge redfish gather in the shallows. Schools can range in size from a few hundred to a thousand. The fish will start at around 20 pounds and go up from there. It is definitely a spectacular sight to see these fish in such shallow waters, backing, fining, tailing, and making way for the next generation of redfish. Unfortunately, this unique life cycle also brings unique problems.

Anglers from around the world will respond to the spawning event by hiring local guides, chasing their dream to catch big reds on light tackle, in shallow water. Guides, wanting to meet their clients' demands, will go out, day after day, for hours on end, chasing these fish, determined to land a memory. It sounds perfect. But, after years of this activity, it is being found to be far from perfect.

These fish are gathered to spawn. Spawning fish are relatively easy targets, for two main reasons. First, spawning fish are extremely protective. They will devour other small fish and crustaceans, which they perceive as a threat to the spawning activity. Pinfish, crabs, and even shrimp will be pounced upon before they eat eggs. This is no different than any other species protecting its nest or den. Anglers use this to their advantage by casting baits into the schools, which usually results in an immediate hook-up. Second, spawning activity takes a lot of energy. This results in an increased food intake; again, making any offering almost an instant hook-up. So far, the idea of giving fish extra food doesn't sound too bad. However, there is the problem.

In nature, when a redfish eats a pinfish to protect the eggs, it isn't attached to a hook. They eat it and keep on swimming and spawning. Add a hook to that pinfish and the redfish eats and then takes off to fight for its life. This activity disturbs the entire school, which feels threatened and takes off. This can make successful breeding difficult. Now, if the fish you hook happens to be female, she might even dump her eggs before the actual spawning event takes place. In any case, it disrupts the natural process and reduces the number of successfully fertilized eggs.

A reduction in properly fertilized eggs has a dramatic impact on the next generation of redfish. Yes, they fertilize tens of millions of eggs. Yet the numbers are just as staggering for the number of eggs that will never hatch or fry that will never reach it to even four inches in length. The impact of years of fishing these schools can already be seen. Guides complain every year that the spawning schools are getting smaller, the huge schools of "rat" reds that we found for decades are now reduced to 1/10th of their normal sizes, and the overall fishing has declined.

This doesn't mean that you cannot chase your dream. All it takes is a little responsibility. Guides are not excluded! Go out, catch a fish or two out of the school and then leave them to their spawning activities. Really, there is no excuse for reading articles about people hammering a school of breeding fish to the tune of 20-30 fish a day, out of a single school. It is irresponsible and the damage is irreversible for several years. Use a little self-control and you can make sure that these schools will be around for generations to come. The future of our fishing is at stake!

Captain John Tarr, MIWA Board member

MIWA Sponsored Derelict Blue Crab Trap Cleanup

On August 18, twenty-five volunteers met at Bairs Cove Boat Ramp to participate in a Derelict Crab Trap Removal Event in the refuge waters of the Indian River and Mosquito Lagoons. A derelict crab trap is one that is lost and cannot be relocated by its owner or is illegally abandoned. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) authorize volunteer derelict crab trap removal events from state waters.

So why remove derelict crab traps? The traps are a hazard to both marine life and boaters. Derelict traps continue to capture animals long after they have been discarded and research shows that derelict crab traps are a hazard to animals such as dolphins, manatees, sea turtles, and fish. They can also damage sensitive habitats and be a navigational hazard. It is for these reasons, the refuge staff and volunteers decided to conduct a crab trap cleanup of refuge waters.

Volunteers captained several boats and combed the waters for traps. Although the algae bloom and the higher water levels made it difficult to find traps, several were recovered. Camaraderie between the volunteers, views of the manatees at Bairs Cove and knowing we were helping the environment made this event a pleasant one. Thank you to MIWA for providing snacks for this event and to the volunteers for participating.

Please note that it is against the law to tamper with traps, trap contents, lines or buoys that do not belong to you (even if the traps are derelict or in the water during a closed season) and can result in fines and criminal charges. If you are interested in assisting in a derelict crab trap removal, contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668.

Nancy Corona, MINWR Public Use Ranger



MIWA Minute



It has been a hot and buggy summer. With the visitor center quiet, and refuge wildlife scarce, I am looking forward to the return of our winged and human snowbirds!

Thank you to Oviedo photographer, **Melodi Roberts** for her donation (valued at \$360) of eighteen 5X7 matted original photographs. These color or black & white images are for sale in the Bookery and are a great addition to our stock.

I am proud to announce our newest corporate sponsors; **BNY Mellon- Orlando, Downtown Gallery** and **URS at KSC**. Via their community support program and lead by **Roman Quitariano**, BNY Mellon employees held a refuge clean up in April, afterwards the company pledged their day wages to MIWA. Funds of \$1,315 were donated! Thank you for supporting MIWA and the Refuge and keeping our precious habitats pristine! The Downtown Gallery held the fourth annual “Art for Wildlife” exhibition and reception in January, resulting in donations of \$738.40! Thank you owners **Heidi & Jeff Thamert** for hosting the event and to event artist **Jim Boland** and all gallery artists for donating a portion of their sales to MIWA! Thank you and welcome to URS. Employee **Pete Eggert** has been a huge support and promoter of MIWA and the Refuge for years. URS’s support of \$500 puts them at the Sea Turtle Corporate Membership Level. We can’t thank you enough for your participation! And, last but definitely **not least**, welcome to InoMedic Health Applications, Inc. (IHA). Their corporate support of \$250 places IHA at the Scrub Jay Corporate Support Level. Thank you IHA, your assistance to Refuge programs and support is truly a gift! If your company has a community support program, please consider including MIWA as a recipient. All funds received go towards Refuge programs and projects.

I am very pleased to announce our newest Life Members; **Patricia Tierney and Mike Benik**. Patricia is a Merritt Island resident with a passion for nature! Mike is a recent retiree from IHA and is a true nature enthusiast. Welcome

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 to make a donation.

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



Pete Eggert of URS awards MIWA Board Member, Ned Steel, corporate support funds. Photo by Sandee Larsen



Bill Robb with Gator at Refuge Program
Photo by Bill Nunn

Refuge Summer Wildlife Programs

During the summer months the Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA) sponsored a variety summer wildlife programs for families. The topics of the programs included owls, the gopher tortoise, reptiles and raptors. I was fortunate to participate in these educational and enjoyable programs.

Owls were brought in from the Florida Wildlife Hospital (FWH). The guest speaker spoke about these majestic birds’ natural history and what threatens their survival. It was very interesting to see what the “owl’s meal plan” was by examining the owl pellets.

The gopher tortoise plays a huge ecological role within many southern U.S. habitats and is particularly prevalent on our refuge. The FWH led a presentation on how the gopher tortoise burrows provides habitat for many species of wildlife.

The next presentation included live snakes, turtles, and an alligator. The children and their parents were able to touch the snakes and a muzzled juvenile alligator, while other species were for “eyes only”. The alligator snapping turtle was the largest and most aggressive reptile. I would be more worried about running into this turtle than running into an alligator!

Wild About Birds, Inc. brought in several raptors such as the American Kestrel, Red Shouldered Hawk and the Eastern Screech Owl. The guest speaker spoke about each species, including facts on behavior, anatomy, and how it plays a role in their survival.

In conclusion, a bat power point presentation was given by the staff at Bat Belfry’s. The group also experienced seeing live bats, and was amazed by the similarity of the wings to the human hand.

There were approximately 35 participants attending the program of which many were returning families. Thank you MIWA members for supporting these educational and entertaining summer programs.

Aaron Burgess, Visitor Service Intern

Loss of Our Refuge Friends



Jim Pedersen
Photo by Carol Pedersen

The Merritt Island Wildlife Association Board of Directors and the Refuge have suffered great loss this year with the deaths of Jim Pedersen, Sam Beddingfield, and Forrest McCartney.

Jim, our recent past President, was a dedicated and beloved educator who brought so much to the Refuge through his leadership and hard work on so many projects like the Blackpoint Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project. He will always be remembered for his great sense of humor and his willingness to undertake any job, including cooking hot dogs for the many volunteer activities.

Sam, a renowned pilot and NASA engineer and manager was a charter member of the MIWA Board of Directors. He had

many ideas for the improvement of the Association's efforts to educate and entertain our visitors. Sam not only brought many guests to the Refuge, he also was an active volunteer at the Valiant Air Command and the Space Walk of Fame. Even as his health was failing he was a frequent visitor to the Refuge.



Sam Beddingfield
File Photo

Forrest, an Air Force Lieutenant General (Ret.) and former Center Director of Kennedy Space Center was a proud member of the Association and the Board of Directors. As Center Director he led the Center during the Return to Flight of the Space Shuttle following the Challenger accident. Forrest, also a past president of the Association, brought management direction and insight to the Board and invaluable government and corporate contacts and persuasion to obtain support for Refuge projects.

They will be missed and have left a great legacy of providing support to the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge they loved so much.

Warren Camp, MIWA Board of Directors



Forrest McCartney
File Photo

Species in Focus: Bald Eagles

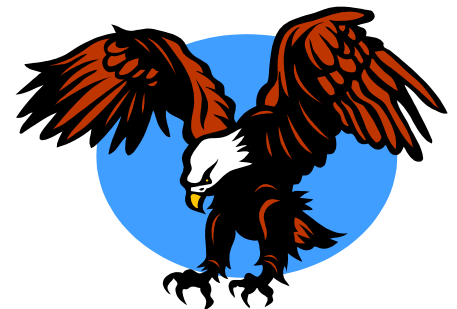
As the intense Florida summer slowly and reluctantly gives way to fall, it marks the beginning of the birding season in Florida. Just like the many visitors that will soon make the journey themselves, feathered fowls of all shapes and sizes start to make their way south to avoid the cold weather of the north. Among them is the American Bald Eagle, many of which make the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR) their winter home. These majestic birds of prey come not only to escape the northern drop in temperatures but also to breed and raise their young on the habitat that the Refuge provides.

Mature Bald Eagles are *enormous* birds, the female being the larger of the pair, with a body length of anywhere from roughly 2 and 1/3 to 3 and 1/3 feet, and a wingspan of nearly 6 to 7 and 1/2 feet. When it comes to feathers, Bald Eagles are dark brown in color, with a white head and tail. Juveniles look quite different up until about their fifth year, instead having brown feathers with white speckles.

Bald Eagles are opportunistic feeders, eating anything they can get their talons on, be it mammals, fish, birds, and even carrion. Ben Franklin actually disapproved of this trait in our national bird, saying that the Bald Eagle is a bird of 'bad moral character'. However, in a world governed by survival of the fittest, we can't judge too harshly those who take every opportunity to improve their chances, can we? After all, even humans eat carrion, though we tend to put it between two pieces of bread and smother it in ketchup before we do!

There are several locations on the Refuge where historically the public has been able to see active Bald Eagle nests, particularly at Black Point Wildlife Drive and the Pine Flatwoods hiking trail. The primary location is the nest off of Black Point Wildlife Drive, between Stops 11 and 12. There is a viewing platform set up at this location, along with a PVC pipe pointing out the Eagle's nest in the distant trees. Come join us on the Refuge and keep an eye out for any sightings of our national bird on the MINWR!

Sheri Girard, MIWA Bookery Staff



GPS Family Hunt Program

The Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge provides several opportunities for families of all ages to explore the refuge. The Family Discovery Packs (Jr. Birder, Family Discovery and GPC Family Hunt)



Maddy and Nick Fairey having fun on the refuge!
Photo by Chris Fairey

provide an exciting way to have fun and learn about the many wonderful things going on at the refuge.

My two grandchildren and I went on the GPS Family Hunt. The Refuge provided a backpack with instructions, GPS locator, and binoculars to explore the refuge. There are two versions (1 ½ hours and 3 ½ hours) of the GPS hunt that uses the GPS unit to locate places where you can observe nature and find out interesting facts about the refuge. When you complete the hunt, you turn in your instruction sheet and back pack at the visitor's center.

We had a great time, learning about GPS way points, Refuge facts, and the opportunity to see many different kinds of wildlife. This is a unique activity that any family would enjoy.

The refuge visitor's center staff was very helpful in explaining how the GPS unit works, way points, providing binoculars, and providing useful hints for the hunt.

Next time you are at the Refuge, try out one of the Family Discovery Packs. Don't forget your hat, water, sunscreen, and bug spray. Contact the refuge visitor's center for more details 321-861-0668 (Nancy Corona).

Chris Fairey, MIWA Board Member



Chris Fairey with his grandchildren at the Refuge VIC
File photo

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Space Coast Kayak Fishing Club
United Waterfowlers of Florida
Joanne Walter
Rosalie Wolf and Tom Quinn



Hello to...

.....*Aaron Burgess*, a Visitor Service Intern from Coral Springs, FL joined us on July 9, 2012 and will be with us until January 31, 2013. He has a degree in Environmental Studies

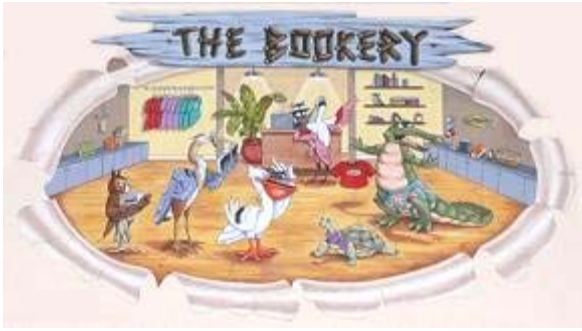
from Florida State University. Aaron is pursuing a career in natural resource management and/or environmental planning. We are happy to have you, Aaron!

.....*Stephanie Trapp*, a Biology Intern from Tinley Park, IL joined us this August and will be with us until May, 2013. She received a degree from Humboldt State University in Applied Vertebrate Ecology and Conservation Biology. Her future outlook is to further her education in graduate school. Welcome Stephanie!

Call for Silent Auction Donations

It is that time of year again! MIWA is requesting donation items for our upcoming annual meeting fundraiser. Gift certificates, artwork, handmade items, and anything with a nature theme are needed. All donations are tax deductible and will be displayed with your name or company name. Drop off items at the MIWA office at the Refuge VIC. Contact the MIWA office at 321-861-2377 for info.

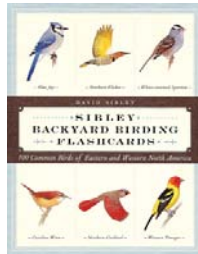
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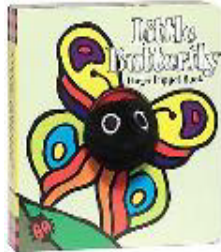
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Puzzle..... \$15.95
1,000 piece color puzzle with
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idea! Made in the USA by White
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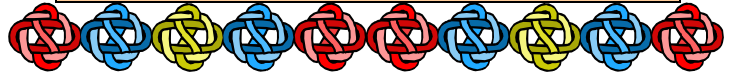
*For retail information, call the
MIWA Office at 321-861-2377*

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.

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



Gifts in remembrance were donated by...
...Warren Camp, Robert L. Crippen, George English,
Richard & Louise Smith, Diane Stees &
Jay & Peggy Honeycutt

in memory of **Gen. Forrest McCartney**
...Warren Camp in memory of **Jim Pedersen**
...Diane Stees in memory of **Sam Beddingfield**

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

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Type of Membership:

Seniors and Students – \$10

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Supporting Membership – \$50

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Patron – \$1000

Optional – Donation \$ _____

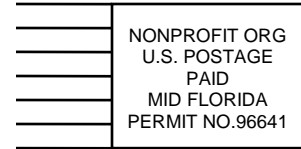
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Merritt Island Wildlife Association
 P.O. Box 2683
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Please check the expiration date on the address label and, if expired, renew your membership via page 7 today!



2012 MIWA Annual Meeting



Join us for an evening of fun while helping support the Refuge!

When: Friday, October 26th, 2012

Time: 6:00 p.m. (Reception begins at 5:30)

Where: The Debus Center at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex

Cost: \$25 per person (includes dinner & program)

Sponsored By: Delaware North Companies Parks & Resorts @KSC, Inc

Guest Speaker: Dr. Marc Minno will present
 "The Imperiled Butterflies of Florida"



Florida Wildlife Hospital Animal Display
 Corporate Tables Available
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Watch your mailbox to RSVP by mail via response card
 or phone at 321-861-2377
 by Monday , October 15th, 2012