



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 12, Number 1

Spring 2006

Refuge Update

If it seems the Refuge is busier than usual, you are right. Over 7,500 more visitors have come through the Visitor Center this year as compared to last year. In March alone we've had more than 14,000 visitors in the VIC, an increase of 15% over last year! More visitors mean higher sales and MIWA's sales grew \$12,000 thus far compared to sales over the last year.

Because of the increased visitation, the Refuge will keep the Visitor Center open for the first two Sundays in April. This may help off set the anticipated impact of the Max Brewer Bridge closure from April 17 - May 8. The County is replacing several spans of the bridge during this three week period. This means visitors will have to make a 40-mile journey to get to the Refuge. We expect visitation to drop sharply due to the bridge closure.

Visitors entering from the north will be able to enjoy the newly rehabbed Shiloh Marsh Road. The road snakes along the edge of the Indian River Lagoon for a distance of 12 miles and affords one of the most scenic drives on the Refuge. While one road opens another closes. Repair work is ongoing on the Bio Lab and Catfish Creek roads. Both suffered erosion from last year's storms and, with repair work wrapping up, the roads should reopen in April.

Another major construction project is taking place on the Hammock trails. The Refuge found funding to fix the trails damaged by the storms. The boardwalk on Oak Hammock Trail is being replaced and Palm Hammock Trail will be rerouted to bypass one section of boardwalk which could not be replaced. Palm Hammock has reopened and repairs on Oak Hammock will be complete by June.

Before the sultry temperatures of summer arrive, take the time to walk a trail or enjoy the views along Shiloh Marsh Road.

Dorn Whitmore, Refuge Operations Specialist, USFWS



Crews from Brevard Workforce replace boardwalks damaged by the 2005 storms.

Photo by Dorn Whitmore

Historical Tour – A Bushwhacker's Delight!

Thirty MIWA members were hailed as "survivors" of the annual Refuge Historical Tour on Saturday, January 14th. The exciting event was led by Refuge Operations Specialist Dorn Whitmore. It proved to be quite a workout! Dorn led us to our first stop, the Dummitt homestead to discuss the origin of Indian River fruit and how homesteaders lived on Merritt Island. Then it was off to the Old Haulover Canal site to get a glimpse of the colorful past of boat haulers and merchants. Afterwards, we bushwhacked to the Sugar Mill ruins for a talk on sugarcane processing.

The road to Ross Hammock Indian Mounds proved to be slightly scary as we ventured over a bridge with a large gap, only to find that the road was blocked by downed trees. All voted to hike out to the site, which was at least a mile away. We hiked through muck and climbed over numerous tree trunks. It was well worth the effort to view the mound and surrounding area.

Thank you to Dorn for an adventurous day and to the members for sticking it out!! We are the champions of hiking tours!

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



MIWA members make their way past a fallen tree.
Photo by Joel Reynolds

MIWA Minute

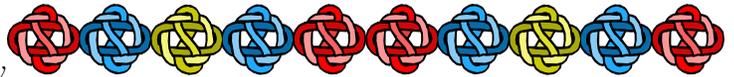
Things have been busy at the MIWA office and Bookery Nature Store. Sales have been fantastic and VIC visitation is up from last year!

MIWA has formed a scholarship program to provide funds for Refuge interns. We have earmarked over \$3,000 to supply weekly stipends for interns working in the Refuge's Public Use Program. Six internships have been completed since forming this popular program. If you or any college student is interested in participating, please contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668.

We are proud to announce awarding Refuge Planner *Cheri Ehrhardt* an Honorary Life Membership for volunteer computer support for the MIWA office computer. Cheri's expertise kept our system up several times during the season and was greatly appreciated! MIWA welcomes our newest Life Members, *Nan Wilson and Gary Stevens* of Titusville, FL. As Life Members, Cheri, Nan, and Gary will receive benefits including: discounts on field trips, educational programs and purchases at the Bookery Nature Store.

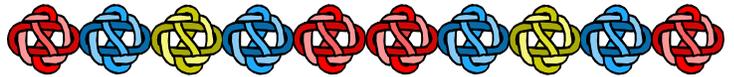
And a big THANK YOU to *Warren Camp, Clay Hutchison, Jim Pedersen, and Ed Larsen* for installing carpet, shelves, paneling and lights in MIWA's new Gadwall storage shed. The new storage area is conveniently located next to the VIC and has been a much needed addition for our Bookery stock. Thanks guys!

If you would like to make an in-kind or monetary donation, please contact the MIWA office at 321-861-2377. See you at the Refuge!
Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



*A donation in memory of
Chuck Mason was donated by
George English*

*Donations in remembrance of loved ones
and friends can be sent to:
MIWA, P.O. Box 6504, Titusville, FL 32782*



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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NASA Liaison Mike Sumner

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 Brad Sloan **Technical Consultant** Sandee Larsen
Habi-Chat Committee Brad Sloan, Sandee Larsen,
Dorn Whitmore, Cheri Ehrhardt

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Update: Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project

We now have all the funding necessary to accomplish the Project. Dorn Whitmore obtained the services of a local engineering firm to provide the documentation necessary to get the required permits from the St. Johns River Water Management District. NASA Kennedy Space Center, through MIWA Board Member Jim Butts and our NASA Liaison, Mike Sumner, has agreed to provide the necessary poles we need for the project. The Space Center is replacing its wooden power poles with concrete ones and has a surplus of wooden poles, which are exactly what we need for our handicapped access tower, walkways, and observation blinds. Once we receive the permits, we will begin moving dirt at the Cruickshank Trail parking area, where the permanent restrooms will be located. We are also in discussions with Florida Power and Light Company about the possibility of support in erecting the poles. We are planning an unveiling of a temporary sign at the entrance of Black Point Wildlife Drive sometime in April. We will invite representatives from the contributors to the project and, of course, MIWA members.

Warren L. Camp, BPWDEP Project Leader



Snowy Egret Takes Flight on Black Point Wildlife Drive.
Photo by Joel Reynolds

Black Point Wildlife Drive Receives Grant

MIWA is a recipient of a Keep Brevard Beautiful Xeriscape/Beautification grant. This project is being led by Refuge volunteer John Boucher. John designed the plan, submitted the proposal and is supervising the project, leading a great group of volunteers informally known as the "Thursday crew". As an extension to the Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project, the grant is funding native plant vegetation along the Black Point Wildlife Drive. The plants are providing an attractive landscape both for visitors and for wildlife, particularly perching birds, and hopefully inspiring visitors to plant similar landscapes in their yards. The plantings are also providing screening for waterfowl and other marsh creatures.

John Boucher, Refuge Volunteer



Beverly and Dave Ousley of "Fly Away Friends".
Photo by Bob Armbruster

"Fly Away Friends" Visit

Beverly and Dave Ousley of the Debbie Thomas "Fly Away Friends" stopped in at the VIC on December 19, 2005. Afterward, they drove Black Point Wildlife Drive to look for birds and scope out the area of the new Wild Birds Trail. The "Fly Away Friends" are providing some funding for the Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project. Thanks for coming by the Refuge!

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



CCP Update!!!

Many of you are patiently awaiting the arrival of the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Merritt Island NWR. And the rest of you are saying, "CCP what???"

Well, very soon now the US Fish and Wildlife Service will be releasing the Draft CCP and EA for public review and comment. The Management Direction Chapter of the CCP implements the preferred alternative and provides guidance for future management activities, outlining goals for wildlife and habitat management, resource protection, visitor services, and refuge administration.

If you are interested in submitting comments on the Draft CCP and EA, you can request to receive a CD or paper copy of the plan. If you have not already done so and if you would like to receive a copy of the plan, please email MerrittIslandCCP@fws.gov or call 321-861-0667 with your name, mailing address, and preference of a CD or paper copy. Otherwise, you can visit one of our local libraries, the internet, or the Visitor Center to view a copy. Comments should be sent in writing with your name and address to Merritt Island CCP, PO Box 6504, Titusville, FL 32782-6504; or MerrittIslandCCP@fws.gov; or 321-861-1276 (fax).

Feel free to contact us with any questions or for more information.

Cheri M. Ehrhardt, AICP, Natural Resource Planner, USFWS

The Eagles Have Landed



Bald Eagles in Nest with VAB in the Background.
Photo Courtesy NASA/KSC

On a crisp morning on the east coast of Florida, an American icon prepares for its maiden voyage. A thin layer of fog stretches lazily between the palmettos, slowly burning away in the morning sun. The tension mounts until the moment approaches. Then, with a sudden burst of movement, the great bird leaps from its launch pad, rising above the treetops and gliding away on the breeze.

This scene plays out every spring at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida, but it's not a sleek space vehicle that's taking off this morning: It's a fledgling American bald eagle.

Kennedy is best known as a gateway to space. Its landscape is dotted with towering launch pads and support facilities filled with high-tech hardware. But the launch complex has a wild side. The space center shares a boundary with the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1962 and operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuge provides a protected habitat for migratory birds and endangered and threatened species.

"Even though it is a very unusual marriage between technology and nature, the marriage has lasted more than 40 years," explains longtime ranger Dorn Whitmore. "And one of the species that really benefits is the bald eagle."

Merritt Island is a stronghold for eagle nests, Whitmore continues. About a dozen pairs of the majestic birds make the refuge their home; some stay year-round, but most migrate north for the summer. Around September, they begin arriving one by one. They can be seen sitting atop high towers, trees or utility poles, keeping a wary eye out for their mates. Eagles maintain bonds with the same mate for life, only taking up with a new mate if the previous one dies or fails to arrive at the breeding ground.

When a couple reunites, they must reclaim their territorial nest, occasionally booting out birds that moved in during their seasonal absence. This can be a battle, and the eagles don't always win.

Once the nest is reclaimed or rebuilt in a nearby tree, the birds prepare to expand the family. They add to their nest and line it softly with blades of grass. In late November or early December, the female lays an egg, sometimes two. The downy eaglets hatch around Christmas.

Like any newborn, a newly hatched eagle is dependent and needy. The youngsters stay in the nest, spending most of their time with their mother, while their father hunts for food -- although mom occasionally takes off to hunt on her own for awhile. It takes about three months for a young bird's "flight feathers" to grow in.

"They'll just jump up on a day with a strong breeze, and hover above the nest in the wind, flapping their wings," Whitmore says. "Then, pretty soon they'll take that first flight, and leap out and take off."



Young Eagle Waiting for Food.
Photo Courtesy NASA/KSC



Mother Bald Eagle Feeding Her Eaglet.
Photo Courtesy NASA/KSC

Around April, the family's time together comes to an end. After caring for each other and their young for several months, the adult eagles leave separately for the journey north. All of the youngsters, still immature and lacking the signature white head and tail feathers of an adult, usually accompany one parent. Whitmore suspects they stay with their mother, learning the best places to live and eat so they'll be prepared to establish their own nests and families when they reach maturity around their third or fourth year.

It will be months before the parents see each other again. But every year in early fall, they'll reunite at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge -- and among the space flight hardware of Kennedy Space Center, they'll launch a new generation of eagles.

Anna Heiney, NASA's John F. Kennedy Space Center

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.

Manatee Treasure Box

Educators, are you interested in teaching your elementary students about manatees? If so, you can borrow a free outreach program called the "Way of the Manatee" Treasure Box. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission developed this outreach tool to educate the public about the natural history and conservation of the West Indian Manatee.

This program is designed for use in the classroom (public, private and home-school). You can borrow the treasure box for two weeks with the possibility of an extension. Also, you can visit the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge with your students and see manatees in the wild. Please contact me at 321-861-0668 or by email at Nancy_Corona@fws.gov to request the "Treasure Box" and to arrange a guided school field trip to the Refuge.

Nancy Corona, Public Use Ranger, USFWS

New Species Discovered on Refuge!

On December 9, 2005, Trisha Crabill, a graduate student conducting research on her Master of Science degree in biology from Towson University, discovered a northern dwarf siren (*Pseudobranchius striatus*) on the Merritt Island NWR. The significance of this find is that it has never before been reported this far south in its range and the discovery extends the known distribution of the species south into Brevard County, Florida.

**Trisha Crabill, Graduate Student
with Marc Epstein, Refuge Biologist**



**Trisha Crabill Holding a Dwarf Siren.
Photo by Marc Epstein**

MIWA Bird Tours a Popular Event

Numerous MIWA Members attended our first series of Member's-only birding tours. Led by MIWA Board Members and bird enthusiasts, Jim Pedersen and Ned Steel, as well as by volunteer Jim Stahl, the tours were filled to capacity. Hundreds of bird species were sited, as well as a few active eagle nests. Thanks to Jim, Ned, and Jim for your devotion to nature, the Refuge and MIWA.

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



**Ned Steel and Jim Pedersen.
Photo by Audrey Preston**

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 6504, Titusville, FL 32782 or join online at www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org.

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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**.

Forever Florida

This year's Refuge spring volunteer appreciation trip and awards ceremony were held at Forever Florida in St. Cloud. We took a swamp buggy ride through the Crescent J Ranch and the Forever Florida conservation area. Sightings included: a caracara, swallow-tailed kites, sand hill cranes, a bald eagle, and many Florida cracker cattle and horses.

After the ride, we were treated to a delicious barbecue lunch that was followed by the awards ceremony. Volunteers were recognized with awards of merit for hours worked over the year. The volunteers worked a combined total of over 5500 hours last year, which is equivalent to 2.4 man-years of work. Without their hard work, the Refuge would not have the proper staff to provide many public use services. Congratulations to Cary Salter for receiving the first Volunteer of the Year award! Cary put in over 460 hours over the year covering the information desk, leading birding tours with his wife Betty, roving, special events, and assisting with many other projects.

Many thanks go to all of the Refuge volunteers for the hard work, Nancy Corona for organizing the event, the staff of Forever Florida for being so kind, and to MIWA for sponsoring this annual event.

Brad Sloan, Habi-Chat Editor



**Refuge Volunteers at Forever Florida.
Photo by Betty Salter**

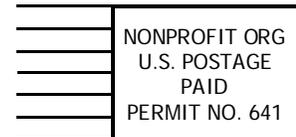


Forever Florida is an established area of pristine Florida wilderness set up by the Allen Broussard Conservancy. Eco-safaris, horseback rides, and hiking trails are available to experience the unspoiled ecosystems.

For more information, call 1-866-854-3837 or visit www.floridaeco-safaris.com/



Merritt Island Wildlife Association
P.O. Box 6504
Titusville, FL 32782
www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org



The Max Brewer
Bridge will
be closed
April 17-May 8th.

