



# Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 12, Number 2

Summer 2006



## What Declining Budgets Mean to the Refuge System and Merritt Island NWR

This is very unique time for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Budgets for the System have been declining steadily for the last few years and in May the Director requested each Region develop a plan to properly align refuge staff with budget projections. In other words – “begin down sizing”. Budget models indicate a flat or declining budget through 2011. On the surface a flat budget may not sound too bad, but each year annual cost of living increases and higher energy costs add an extra \$16 million to the annual cost of doing business on refuges nationwide. If this trend continues, the Refuge System will be operating “in the red” in five years.

In the Southeast, the problem is worse. Of the seven regions, the Southeast Region (Region 4) is home to 24% of the refuges (128 out of 545), the most employees (530), and 30% of the visitors, but only represents 19% of the national budget. This is far short of what we need to operate refuges in the Region. In Region 4, about 90% of the budget is tied up in salaries and benefits, leaving little to conduct wildlife surveys; maintain facilities; fix or replace equipment; control exotic species; buy supplies; pay the light bills; or conduct popular wildlife-dependent recreation programs such as wildlife viewing, fishing, or school programs. When budgets have declined in the past, rather than laying off employees, we just did less management. This is not a good model and it limits our ability to meet our “wildlife first” mission on refuges. So, starting in 2003, in order to maintain adequate operating budgets, Region 4 eliminated 69 positions. This allowed operating dollars to rebound temporarily, but with the flat budgets it means more job cuts are inevitable. Under the current forecast, this region must reduce additional positions over the next five years. This will result in about a 20% decline in our workforce!

Ron Hight and other refuge managers from the Region were on a team charged with developing a strategic plan to find cost savings and provide sufficient operating budgets of 20% for refuges. To do so they ranked each refuge based on a number of factors, including how important the refuge was to migratory birds and endangered species, as well as its size, geographic location, visitation, and other factors. Based on each refuge’s importance in fulfilling these priority purposes, the refuges were ranked. This ranking determined if the refuge would maintain current staff or lose positions. The team also identified if a refuge should stand on its own or be supported by a larger complex. The final report on staffing will be released later this summer, but preliminary indications are that Merritt Island NWR came out in the top category and most positions should be secure.

**Dorn Whitmore, Refuge Operations Specialist, USFWS**



### *Message from the President*

What can MIWA do to help? Most Friend’s groups around the nation are asking this same question. The answer is simple: more funding is needed to run the System. Rather than lobbying for a larger piece of the pie for Merritt Island Refuge, a better approach is to address the larger issue – the declining budget for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Refuge budgets are fixed and a plan has been developed to allocate budgets to the highest Region-wide wildlife priorities. If each Friend’s group seeks support for their particular refuge, funding will be shifted away from higher needs. Your support of the National Wildlife Refuge System is needed now more than ever. This important issue is a great topic for discussion at the upcoming Region 4 Friends Conference, to be held the week of October 23 at the Ding Darling NWR. For now you can help by networking with other Friend’s groups or national organizations, like the National Wildlife Refuge Association. For more information on the budget crisis or to find ways to help, you may contact the National Wildlife Refuge Association through its web page: <http://www.refugenet.org/> and follow the link to Refuge Issues.

**Dan LeBlanc, MIWA President**



**Great Egret in Flight.**  
Photo by Joel Reynolds



## 2006 Sea Turtle Programs

The Refuge's public use program led three sea turtle programs this season. The volunteer sea turtle program ran "like butter". Ranger Dorn Whitmore provided the group with an educational program with Refuge Bio Tech., Jim Lyons as turtle scout. Soon after arriving at the sea shore, we spotted a turtle. All viewed the egg laying process and happily watched the mother turtle return to the sea. The MIWA member tours were both led by Ranger Nancy Corona who provided an inspiring educational program to a packed auditorium. All waited patiently at the sea shore for the scout's call. Finally, at around 11:00 pm, turtles were spotted. By the time the third group reached the mother turtle, the eggs had all been laid. All enjoyed the nest covering process. While leaving the nest, the third group was surprised by the site of hatchlings heading for the ocean! Thank you to all who participated in these educational programs. And a big THANK YOU to Dorn Whitmore and Nancy Corona for leading the tours, and to our turtle scouts for finding mama turtles!

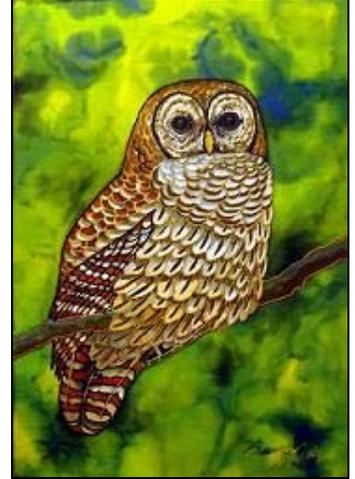
**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager  
and Brad Sloan, Habi-Chat Editor**

## "Our Florida" Art Exhibit on Display

Artwork by local area artists will be displayed in the MINWR Visitor Center auditorium from June 8 through September 5, 2006. This multimedia event contains pieces from a variety of artists featuring their favorite impressions of Florida.

Artwork is available for purchase from the artists. MIWA sponsored a reception that was held on July 22. It's a great way to spend a hot day, come by and enjoy the art!

Viewing hours are:  
Mon.-Fri. 8 am-4:30 pm  
Saturdays 9 am-5 pm  
(Viewing is closed during scheduled programs and orientation video showings)



**Barred Owl Painting.  
By Artist Beverly Osborne**



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

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Bill Thompson, Editor, *Bird Watchers Digest*

Jonathan Wood, The Raptor Project

Scott Weidensaul, Author

Debra Shearwater, Sea Bird Expert (Shearwater Journeys)

Ryan J. Wheeler, PhD, Chief, Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research

Ocean Sessions  
Birding Trips  
Wildlife Trips  
Botanical Trips  
Archaeology  
Photography  
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Boat Trips  
Workshops  
Art Competition  
Nature Trade Show  
Silent Auction  
Kids Activities

— Additional announcements about exciting events to follow throughout the year —



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### INFORMATION:

Brevard Nature Alliance

Neta Harris, Executive Director

321-268-5224 800-460-2664

neta@natureandspace.com

SCBWF website: [www.nbbd.com/fly](http://www.nbbd.com/fly)



Cocoa Beach Melbourne Palm Bay Titusville

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## Species in Focus: Vultures of Florida

One of the most commonly seen birds hopping clumsily around the edges of our Florida roads and soaring gracefully in the skies above us is the vulture. Unlike their European cousins, vultures have weak chicken-like feet, which are only suitable for running on the ground or holding their food in place while they feed. They cannot lift or carry food with their feet like raptors. In fact, they are more closely related to storks than to raptors.

The term “buzzard” is often used incorrectly to describe vultures. Buzzard is the correct term for a family of hawks in Europe and it is thought that the first English colonists, not recognizing the vulture species, used the term buzzard to describe all the soaring birds they saw above the New World and it stuck – especially in the south.

Two species, the turkey vulture and the black vulture, are common in Florida, but are different in size and temperament.

- The turkey vulture has a featherless red head and white beak, while the black vulture (and the immature turkey vulture) has a featherless grayish-black head and black beak. The featherless feature allows the vulture to stick its head into the carcass of carrion without trapping any rotting flesh in its feathers.
- The turkey vulture is bigger at about six pounds with a wing span of up to six feet as compared to the black vulture’s four pounds and up to five-foot wing span. The black vulture flaps its shorter and rounder wings more often and more rapidly than the turkey vulture and appears less graceful in flight. Its wing shape in flight is flatter compared to the turkey vulture’s dihedral form. The turkey vulture is predominantly brownish black, but the flight feathers are gray and can look silver from below as they catch the light. The black vulture is predominantly black with a white patch near each wingtip that is conspicuous in flight.
- The turkey vulture has a remarkable sense of smell, more so than the black vulture that relies mostly on its sight. In fact, black vultures will “hang out” with turkey vultures to let them find food and then, being the more aggressive, will run the turkey vultures off the carcass. It is said that a turkey vulture can smell a dead mouse under leaves from 200 ft in the air.
- The turkey vulture is unaggressive and non-confrontational and will not feed on live prey, an occasional habit of the black vulture.



**Black Vulture.**  
Photo by Joel Reynolds



**Turkey Vulture.**  
Photo by Joel Reynolds

Both types of vultures are nature’s garbage men. They can eat carrion and contaminated meat due to specialized digestive enzymes and bacteria in their systems. These enzymes destroy hog cholera, rabies, and other contagious diseases in their digestive systems. To extend the useful life of this unique germ-fighting enzyme, the birds will allow their urine to run straight down onto their legs and feet. This helps to prevent the bird from contracting diseases through cuts on its legs or feet while standing in a decaying carcass and also is believed to help cool its legs. It is less known that vultures will also eat overripe fruit and rotting vegetable matter.

Vultures are very communal and roost together in large groups. They usually build their nests on the ground with up to three eggs. The adults share incubation over 38-41 days and the young birds fledge in 70-80 days. Adults can live 16-21 years normally, although one bird on record lived 33 years!

The birds have limited vocalization – grunting when courting and hissing when threatened. Another unique feature when threatened is a vomit defense where it will throw up decaying food and shake its head to project the evil smelling matter up to six feet. This characteristic was personally observed (and unappreciated) by Jim Lyons, one of the MINWR Bio Techs, when he had to carry trapped birds from inside the roof of the VAB down in the elevator.

Despite their less than attractive appearance close-up and their unappealing diet, vultures are a valuable aid in cleaning up the animal detritus that would otherwise build up along our roads. They

gracefully soar around the VAB and in the skies above us, not necessarily looking for food, but just for the sheer pleasure of floating on the thermals. They are an attractive and welcome Florida trademark.

**John Tribe, MIWA Board Member**

## To Kill or Not to Kill, That is the Question

With thousands of KSC employees driving to work and with all of our daily public visitors, excessive road kill has always been an issue throughout the Refuge. Did you know that at least six bald eagles have been killed out here by our drivers and that in the last 10 years over 400 accidents with animals have been reported? Each reported accident averaged \$884 and together they totaled over \$350,000! And now, in May of 2006 alone, 103 dead animals were picked up off of our roads. It is suspected that an excessive vulture population has been created and sustained by our excessive road kill food supply. On July 26th, 2005, Space Shuttle Discovery hit a vulture during launch. Luckily, no significant damage was sustained, except to the dead vulture. Since that event, many people have come to realize that KSC mission success and Refuge mission success are very much intertwined. (Continued on Page 7)



## Roosting Northern Harriers (*Circus hudsonius*) at Merritt Island NWR

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2006, I left a cold and wet Northern Ireland for an eight day birding trip to several of Florida's prime wildlife refuges. This was my first visit to North America, and the purpose of my visit was to monitor the movements, behaviour and plumage details of wintering Northern Harriers. Harriers are my favourite species of raptor having studied them since 1986 and scientifically from 1991. There are 16 species and one subspecies recognised worldwide, so the Northern Harrier would be my 13<sup>th</sup> species to date, having already observed the aforementioned subspecies!

On 6<sup>th</sup> January, I arrived at Merritt Island for a 3 day visit and eagerly entered the Black Point Wildlife Drive. After only a short distance I soon discovered that Northern Harriers were abundant here with around 12-16 observed by lunch time. The diverse habitat was superb hunting territory for these birds, which were bold enough to ambush Blue-winged Teal in the salt and freshwater marshes. Other Harriers regularly patrolled over Mangrove bushes and grassy areas in pursuit of mammals and small birds which were seemingly in abundance.

A pre-arranged meeting that afternoon with Dorn Whitmore in public use and Marc Epstein, the biologist supervisor, soon lead me to acquire a 4 day permit for Harrier studies within the Refuge, with access also granted before sunrise and after sunset if roosting harriers were to be discovered. Northern Harriers had never been recorded roosting here by staff and the public alike, but I firmly believed the habitat was ideal for a roost site, due to the vast amounts of prey available and the adjacent salt marshes, which would provide good ground cover amongst the tall Sand Cordgrass (*Spartina bakeri*).

May I thank sincerely Josh Larsen of Delray Beach, for being my most able guide and driver during my visit and also Marc Epstein, Dorn Whitmore, Jim Lyon (the Refuge bio-tech) and Nancy Corona at Merritt Island NWR, for all their valuable help and assistance that was freely conveyed to me during my studies of the Northern Harrier! This is a superb and well managed Refuge, with many wonderful species of birds and mammals to savour. Hopefully I shall return again in the near future for a second, and just as an exciting, visit!

**Don Scott, Chairman of Biology and Microbiology, Dundonald, Northern Ireland**



### Hello to...

... **Jennifer Adams**, the new Forestry Tech Firefighter. She has a B.S. in Geography and an M.S. in Forestry. Relocated from

the Regional Office in Atlanta, she now lives in Titusville. Since arriving, Jennifer has assisted in multiple projects that include GIS mapping and assisting with the Refuge road kill prevention program.

... **Matt Brown**, a new Refuge Firefighter. Coming from Pocosin Lake Refuge in North Carolina, he now lives in Titusville. Matt has been quite busy since arriving in the middle of our active wildfire season. He has completed fabrication of the Refuge Type 4 engine, which is now operational.

... **Angelique DeLong**, a Refuge Biological Science Technician working with wildlife. Originally from West Palm Beach, she now lives in Longwood. Angelique has a B.S. in Biology from UCF, where she is currently an M.S. student doing a thesis on the southeastern beach mouse.

... **Roland Schlierf**, who is in the NASA Leadership Development Program on a three-month assignment with the Refuge. He is leading the educational awareness effort to inform the KSC workforce about the Refuge and road kill prevention. Roland normally tests space station research experiments at KSC just prior to launch to ensure that we get good science results out of NASA missions.

... **Jeff Smith**, our Restoration Ecologist. Originally from Michigan, Jeff has been living in Gainesville for 3 years and now lives in Port St. John. He has a B.S. in Horticulture/Landscape Design from Michigan State University and an M.S. in Soil and Water Science/Wetland Ecology from the University of Florida. Jeff will be here for at least 3 years. He would like to work on a Ph.D. and maybe develop and coordinate large-scale wetland restoration projects.

### Goodbye to...

... **Wayne Boykin**, Biological Science Technician, who was here working on exotic plant removal. Wayne is moving on to Congaree National Monument to work on killing exotic plants on a larger landscape scale for several National Park Service units. Congrats Wayne!

... **Jason Vehrs**, who was one of our law enforcement officers. Before becoming a LEO, Jason previously worked as a Refuge volunteer, YCC Coordinator, and a firefighter. He is going to Wheeler Refuge in Decatur, AL to continue his work in law enforcement. Congrats Jason!

... **Frank Watson**, equipment operator and maintenance worker for the Refuge. Frank is following in his Brother Miley's footsteps and retiring after 20 years of service. Congrats!



*Gifts in remembrance were donated by...*

... **George English** in memory of his two good friends,  
*Barry Olton and Larry Morgan.*

... **Rob and Linda Kellogg** in memory  
of their dear friend,  
*Robert Kimak.*

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



## MIWA Minute

MIWA would like to welcome our three new life members, *Robert R. Green* of Winter Park, FL; *Carl L. Jones II* of Titusville, FL; and *Jay Honeycutt* of Cocoa Beach, FL. Robert is a frequent visitor to the Refuge and has an interest in becoming an active volunteer. Carl is a local resident and good friend of Board Member Lorry Simpkins. And Jay is a good friend of Board Member George English. Welcome Robert, Carl, and Jay! As life members, they will enjoy benefits that include discounts on Bookery purchases and invitations to members-only programs. We would like to thank all of our Life Members for their loyal support.

<i>Halifax River Audubon Society</i>	<i>Dr. Bud Ferguson</i>	<i>Hugh &amp; Mary Nicolay</i>
<i>Space Coast Audubon Society</i>	<i>Emmett B. Ferguson, MD</i>	<i>Lewis Oliver</i>
<i>Tommie Barron</i>	<i>Kathy Gay</i>	<i>Gerry &amp; Arline Oppliger</i>
<i>Sam Beddingfield</i>	<i>Carolyn Haas</i>	<i>Charles Platt, 3<sup>rd</sup></i>
<i>John &amp; Linda Boucher</i>	<i>Barbara Hoelscher</i>	<i>Roy Roberts</i>
<i>Kathryn Brown</i>	<i>Carl &amp; Nancy Holtman</i>	<i>Dr. Bill Rylander</i>
<i>H.P. Bruckner</i>	<i>Darleen &amp; Jerry Hunt</i>	<i>Cary &amp; Betty Salter</i>
<i>Robby &amp; Sue Buckalew</i>	<i>Barbara Hutchinson</i>	<i>Charles Schneider</i>
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<i>Howard and Kiki Davidow</i>	<i>Marian Lunsford</i>	<i>Ned Steel</i>
<i>Judy &amp; Jim Dryja</i>	<i>Barry Maness</i>	<i>Rick &amp; Diane Stees</i>
<i>Cheri Ehrhardt</i>	<i>Captain Fredrick Mastin</i>	<i>Marcelite J. Harris, Maj. Gen. (Ret.)</i>
<i>Lori &amp; Steve Emly</i>	<i>General &amp; Mrs. Forrest McCartney (Ret.)</i>	<i>Malcom &amp; Amy Whitelaw</i>
<i>George English</i>	<i>Bob Merrilees</i>	<i>Nan Wilson</i>
<i>Jim Escoffier</i>	<i>Tom &amp; Virginia Mills</i>	

For the third year, Andy Bankert's team, the Nikon/Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival's Coastal Cuckoos, took the top spot in the youth division of the World Series of Birding. Identifying 212 species of birds, they also placed fifth in the adult section. Andy solicited pledges of over \$3,500 for the competition, raising \$1,000 for MIWA and \$2,500 for the Space Coast Audubon Society. It has been inspiring to watch Andy through the years at the refuge. His passion for birding and nature is unique for a teen and he truly is a champion! Thank you Andy for thinking of MIWA and the SCAS.

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**



### Fond Memories

Fond Memories of Refuge volunteer Bob Kreidler are embedded in my memory. Unfortunately, Bob passed away this past spring. Bob was a faithful and dedicated volunteer who loved the natural resources. He worked for the Boy Scouts of America for many years and during his retirement he chose to volunteer at the Refuge. Bob, usually accompanied by his father Karl or wife Luba, staffed the Refuge visitor center desk faithfully on Tuesday mornings. He loved to interact with the visitors and was always busy advocating for the Refuge even when he was not working. The Refuge staff selected Bob as the 2005 Volunteer of the Year for the Retired Senior Volunteer Service Program (RSVP).

Bob's family held a memorial service at the Sandler Education Outpost in June. Surrounded by the beauty of the Refuge that Bob loved so much, his family and friends shared and reflected on their precious moments they had with Bob. The words spoken during the service portrayed the life story of a man who was truly loved by his family and had a great conviction for the natural world. The Refuge staff and visitors were fortunate in having Bob as a volunteer.

**Nancy Corona, Public Use Ranger**



**Karl and Bob Kreidler.  
Photo by Nancy Corona**

*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](mailto:HabiChat@MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org)



**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.

**To Kill or Not to Kill, That is the Question**

(Continued from Page 4)

A NASA led bird abatement team is feverishly working to help minimize impacts to the shuttle due to this overpopulation of vultures on the Refuge/KSC. The team has added new go/no-go launch criteria with respect to flying birds at the launch pad. New radar systems can now track birds at the pad. New sound systems are being added to scare flying birds away just before launch. A potential new vulture trap and release program is being tested. USFWS is supporting this bird abatement team in many of these areas with the help of Marc Epstein (Refuge Biologist) and me, but everyone out here can help these two agencies be successful by supporting two key strategies.

1) Prevent Road Kill: Let's all drive extra cautiously out here. New wildlife crossing signs will appear. Watch out for animals crossing the road. Every animal we miss hitting out here is one more animal we can enjoy, even the snakes, and one less snack for the vultures.

2) Call in Road Kill: If you see any road kill out here, call 853-5211 for rapid collection. We won't be able to enjoy that animal anymore and we don't want any vultures to run the risk of being hit by a vehicle.

Why? Through attrition, we hope to bring the vulture population back down to more normal levels as our vultures look for their food and homes elsewhere. This will make NASA shuttle missions safer and potentially save an astronaut's life. We will also save some animal lives and reduce damage to some of our cars to boot as some vultures go their merry way.

**Roland Schlierf, NASA Leadership Development Program on assignment at MINWR**



**Bookery Buys**



*The Life Cycle of a Sea Turtle*

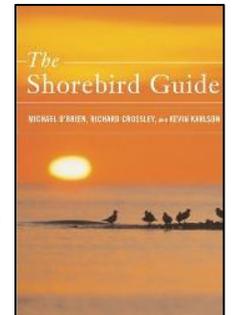
by Bobbie Kalman.....\$6.95  
Describes the life cycle of sea turtles, how they migrate long distances, and the dangers they face, and suggests ways children can help.

*Awesome Osprey, Fishing Birds of the World*

by Donna Love.....\$12.00  
This scientific yet light hearted book acquaints readers with ospreys from courtship and nesting to raising their young.

*The Shorebird Guide*

by Michael O'Brian.....\$24.95  
Join the experts in this quick and simple style of bird identification. The technique, *Birding by Impression*, is an all new holistic approach to identifying shorebirds. This guide includes 870 stunning color photos.



**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](http://www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org).

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Address \_\_\_\_\_

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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**.

# Upcoming Members-Only Events



## Beginning Bird Tour

Tour with MIWA Board Members Jim Pedersen & Ned Steel to identify the many native species of birds on the Refuge. Transportation is provided for the first nine members, all others follow safari style via personal vehicles. Voluntary carpooling is suggested.

**Date:** Thursday, July 20, 2006

**Time:** 9:00 am (tour typically lasts 2-3 hours)

## Plant Tour & Lagoon Seining

Meet Jim & Ned for an informational guided walk through a hammock, followed by a seining program at Dummitt Cove. This hands-on program is a great way to view the native plants and lagoon creatures on the Refuge. Suggested items to bring are: sun screen, bug repellent, water, snack, hat, and comfortable shoes (that can be worn in the lagoon).

**Dates:** Saturday, July 29 & Thursday, August 24, 2006

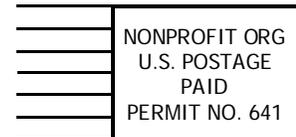
**Time:** 9:00 am to approx. Noon



**Space is limited! Please RSVP to the MIWA office @ 321-861-2377.  
All tours meet at the Refuge VIC.**



Merritt Island Wildlife Association  
P.O. Box 6504  
Titusville, FL 32782  
[www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org](http://www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org)



Planning a Refuge trip? Visit  
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for space shuttle closure  
updates.

