



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 18 Number 1

Spring 2012

Improvements to Waterfowl Habitats

Merritt Island NWR began 2011 in a severe drought with poor habitat conditions. Most of the impoundments were open to the lagoon due to hyper saline conditions. At the beginning of the wet season in May, water control structures were closed and impoundments were allowed to fill with rainwater. The summer wet season produced sufficient rainfall to fill the impoundments, but not to flush out residual salt from previous years of drought. By September, most impoundments had salinity levels of 25 parts per thousand (ppt), which is marginal for submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) production. October brought heavy rains and the additional water allowed for flushing of the impoundments which reduced the salinity to target levels of 8-15 ppt. While target conditions were reached late in the season, the SAV present under the marginal conditions responded well and the mild winter extended the growing season. The refuge's impoundments were thus in excellent condition by the time the majority of migratory waterfowl traditionally arrive.

The numbers of waterfowl using the refuge impoundments improved over last year with the peak number of ducks, excluding scaup, doubling from 3,021 to 6,269 and peak coot numbers tripling from 5,555 to 16,890. However, the number of scaup using the refuge and adjacent lagoon were low, which gave a general impression of fewer waterfowl. December 30th, 2011 was the only survey day where large numbers of scaup were detected on the refuge. On that survey, 7,212 scaup were counted adjacent to the NASA Causeway in the Banana River, bringing the peak count of waterfowl using the refuge to 10,128.

Hunter check stations were operated 27 of the 29 duck hunt days during the 2011-2012 regular season. Hunter success on the refuge increased over last year. Hunters averaged 1.7 ducks per hunter, up from 1.5 last year and a low of 0.7 in the 2008-2009 season. Hunter party success was also higher, with 82% of parties harvesting at least one bird.

The impoundments within the no-hunt sanctuary adjacent to the wildlife drive held most of the waterfowl (excluding scaup on the Banana River) with an average of 61% of waterfowl counted on the five surveys conducted. Surprisingly, traditional core sanctuary areas within the NASA security area had relatively little use, with Moore Creek averaging 5% and Jack Davis averaging 1% of waterfowl located on surveys. The Shiloh

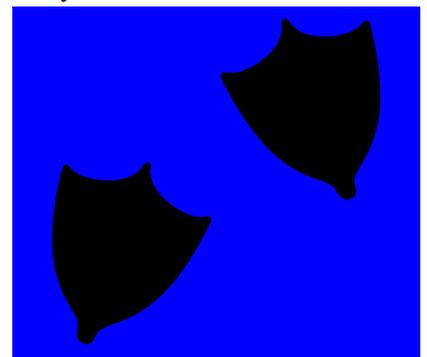
impoundments began the hunt season with 33% of waterfowl located on the first survey, but by the last survey were holding 1% of surveyed waterfowl.

Most hunt impoundments have retained the abundant rainwater received last fall despite the current lack of rainfall. Impoundments will continue to be managed for low salinity levels; and as long as water quality within impoundments remains high, priority impoundments will remain closed. Provided summer rains return, the coming year should continue to see improvements to waterfowl habitat.

Stan Howarter, Wildlife Biologist, Merritt Island NWR, USFWS



Northern Pintail & Blue Winged Teal on Black Point Drive
Photo by Photographer, Joel Reynolds



Sharing Our Natural Wealth

MIWA Co-Sponsors “Balancing Nature and Commerce” Workshop

“Awakening the Possibilities: Balancing Nature and Commerce on Florida’s Space Coast” took center stage at the historic Titusville Playhouse on March 14 and 15 in front of a packed house audience. Experts in land use planning, transportation, marketing, and economics, along with The Conservation Fund and local community leaders, challenged our thinking on how we best promote North Brevard’s great natural resources.

Did you know that the St. Johns River-to-Sea Bike Loop is under construction and will offer 300 miles of bike trails for recreational and outdoor enthusiasts right in our own backyard? Or how about the reintroduction of passenger rail service from Jacksonville to Miami with stops in Titusville bringing new visitors to the County. Experts provided updates on these projects and also shared success stories from around the country on marketing all a community has to offer.

The BNC workshop was a remarkable event that inspired and truly did awaken the possibilities of promoting our natural wealth. Greater Titusville Renaissance which staged the event will hold its annual meeting on April 19. Help shape our future by getting involved.

Craig George has recently been appointed Vice President to the MIWA Board of Directors. Congratulations!
Craig George, MIWA Vice-President



Newly Elected MIWA Vice President, Craig George
File Photo



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 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

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New Refuge in the Merritt Island NWR Complex

It finally happened! The long awaited 556th refuge in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area in south-central Florida. This addition is of national importance helping conserve declining grassland and longleaf pine savanna habitat and protecting the watershed of the Florida Everglades. A land donation of 10 acres from the Nature Conservancy was all it took to get the refuge established. Pelican Island NWR Project Leader, Charlie Pelizza, has worked tirelessly, meeting with interested partners and coordinating public meetings to listen to concerns. Staff from other Florida Refuges including Merritt Island NWR have been involved with the planning process and assisting with public meetings. An important part of the process involved informing the public that ranching land in central Florida is under pressure of development if it is not protected under conservation easements.



Keenan Adams, Secretary Salazar, and Charlie Pelizza install the 1st Everglades Headwaters NWR boundary sign! USFWS file photo.

The land donation garnered national attention with Department of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar speaking at the donation ceremony on January 18, in Haines City, FL. Other featured speakers included USFWS Director Dan Ashe and Florida Senator Bill Nelson. Senator Nelson mentioned his family homestead on Merritt Island, which is now part of Merritt Island NWR. It was an eventful day including a swamp buggy tour of the donated land where Secretary Salazar posted the first boundary sign! Other attendees enjoying the tour were USFWS Southeast Regional Director Cynthia Dohner, Deputy Regional Director Mark Musaus, Florida Refuges Staff, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Nature Conservancy and several other conservation partners including the National Wildlife Refuge Association and the National Audubon Society.

The USFWS plans to purchase 50,000 acres in fee title and 100,000 acres in conservation easements through willing sellers. The conservation easements will allow landowners to continue farming and ranching the land, but will protect the land from development. The new refuge will protect habitat and provide corridors for several threatened or endangered species including the Florida Panther (E), the Audubon's Crested Caracara (T), the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (E), the Florida Black Bear (state threatened), the Florida Scrub Jay (T), the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow (E), and the Everglades Snail Kite (E). Waterfowl and several other wetland species will also benefit from the protection of wetlands and open water. After numerous planning documents, public hearings, and meetings, Charlie can now focus on land acquisition and partnerships. Hats off to all the staff members that made this happen. This is a historical event in the history of the Merritt Island NWR Complex!

For more information, please visit the USFWS Everglades Headwaters NWR website at <http://www.fws.gov/evergladesheadwaters/>.

Candice Stevenson, MINWR Acting Supervisory Ranger



Megan and Lauren make a new friend!
Photo by Refuge Intern Patrick Barnes



Hello and Goodbye to...

.....*Megan Oberkircher* from Laurens, NY has been working as an intern for the Biology Dept. spraying invasive plants and will be with us until April 2nd. Megan has a

B.S. degree in Wildlife & Fisheries Science from Penn State and would like to pursue a career as a wildlife biologist with the USFWS. Good luck with your future goal. We will miss you.

.....*Lauren Smith* from Sharon Center, Ohio graduated with a degree in Zoology and English from Ohio Wesleyan University. During her internship, she helped with education programs, the Visitor's Center and other various duties. Lauren would like to pursue a career that would enable her to travel and work with animals. Thank you and good luck. We will miss you.

MIWA Minute



It has been a wonderful birding season at the Refuge! Large flocks of waterfowl and wading birds overwintered here to the delight of bird watchers. It was great talking “birds” to visitors from throughout the USA and Europe. But, all good things come to an end. By the time this edition is delivered, the flocks will be flying north. No worries, there is still plenty to see at the Refuge. Manatees will be seen at the observation deck and Bair’s Cove boat ramp, Florida Scrub-jays will be heard throughout the scrubs areas, and large groups of butterflies will drink from the native wildflowers. Please come out and enjoy our native wildlife!

I am happy to report receiving donations from two generous supporters. Our friends at **Jon’s Fine Jewelry** in Cocoa Village took in donations during the month of November for watch and jewelry repair resulting in funds of \$479.18! Thank you for supporting MIWA! Please visit Jon’s for your gifts and jewelry repairs; they support a different non-profit monthly. Refuge volunteers and nature lovers, **Rosemary & Andrew Georganna**, have generously donated \$500. Rosemary is our

Wednesday VIC Desk Volunteer and, along with hubby Andy, has a passion for wildlife and artwork. Thank you two for supporting the Refuge and MIWA!

Also, we have a few new Life Members to announce! Welcome to **Ruth Anderson** of Lancaster, MA; **Diana Barnhardt** of Titusville, FL; **Martina & John Martin** of Media, PA; **Houston Stebbins & Dean Steele** of Tuxedo Park, NY; **James M. Trammell** of Melbourne, FL; **Charlie & Barbara Venuto** of Merritt Island, FL; and **Dorn Whitmore** of Titusville, FL. All our newbie’s are wildlife enthusiasts and have a passion for nature. Welcome!

And, being human, we made an error in our last edition. We left out a few silent auction donators and beg for forgiveness! We could not raise funds without the generosity of all who participate in this annual fundraiser. Below is a reprint of the many kind participators.

See you at the Refuge!

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager

SILENT AUCTION DONATORS

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Loss of a Refuge Friend

It saddens me to announce the unexpected passing of my good friend – former Treasurer, MIWA President & current MIWA Vice President, Jim Pedersen on January 15, 2012. Jim was quite a character – always smiling, cracking jokes and ready to volunteer wherever needed. He never met a stranger -only new friends. Jim made you feel good being with him.

As Director of the Youth Conservation Corps in the early 70's, Jim and area students cleared trails (Oak & Palm Hammock), improved habitat for the endangered Dusky Seaside Sparrow, and taught marine science environmental education programs in Refuge habitats. Jim volunteered at the Canaveral National Seashore for the Sea Turtle Nesting Protection Program from the early 70's until his death. He loved nature. He was a Biology Educator at Astronaut High for over 30 years and was a favorite among students. His most recent hobby was flying model airplanes and he was a member of the Moonport Modeler's Radio Control Club or, as he called it, "the Fly Boy's Club".

Jim was a great husband, parent, grandfather, family man, friend and an excellent neighbor, always there to repair a lawnmower, outboard engine, or leaf blower for a friend or neighbor. Jim was an active MIWA Board Member & Officer. He was the co-compiler for our annual Christmas Bird Count, volunteered for countless environmental education programs, preformed manual labor for the Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project, (nailing his thumb in the process), and was a popular guide for our seasonal bird tours with his best friend, Ned Steel.

This is truly a loss for MIWA, the Refuge, the community, and his many friends and family. We miss you, Jim.
Ned Steel, MIWA Board Member



Ned Steel with his best friend, Jim Pedersen.
Photo by Tom Dunkerton, Photographer

Species in Focus: Painted Bunting

The Painted Bunting has served as our Visitor's Center star attraction for several years now, drawing visitors from across the state *just* to see this colorful bird. The bird feeders mounted near the Center attracts the little Bunting, allowing visitors a good view of the skittish bird – provided the Red-wing Blackbirds aren't making a fuss. The Painted Bunting shows up numerous times during the calm between the Red-wing feeding frenzies, but disappears quickly into the Coffee bush. Although while fleeting, the glimpses are a rare treat for visitors and prove that even Mother Nature can use Photoshop.

A common reaction from a visitor's first view of the male Painted Bunting is the shock at how small and colorful the bird is. Like with many species, the male is the decorative one of the pair. The female is certainly beautiful in her own right with bright lime green color and a yellow underside. However, the *male* is the one that everyone wants to see. Sporting a deep blue head, a lime green back, and a red rump and underside, the male Painted Bunting looks like something out of a child's coloring book. It's no wonder that people come from so far away to see him - he must be seen to be believed!



Male Painted Bunting at MINWR VIC
Photo by Tom Weidemeyer, Photographer

The Painted Buntings that visit our Visitor Center, both male and female are seasonal visitors themselves. They are active during the winter months and leave just before summer hits Florida, heading to north Florida, Georgia, and parts of South Carolina as well as west to Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. While there is always hope that our little stars will take up permanent residence at the Refuge, since we *are* at the southern tip of their breeding range, the Painted Buntings have shown no interest so far!

Sheri Girard, MIWA Bookery Staff



Visitor's viewing the Painted Buntings
Photo by Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager.



Biologist's Corner- Habitat Restoration

Habitat restoration for wildlife comes in many forms, and the Refuge staff uses many tools to restore wildlife habitat. Two current projects highlight very different techniques for wildlife habitat restoration.

Careful Refuge observers may have recently noticed some activity in the cleared area just south of Haulover Canal. Refuge staff, in coordination with researchers at the University of Central Florida and Innovative Health Applications, began a scrub restoration project on the former grapefruit grove. We have fenced off a one acre parcel to test four different scrub restoration techniques: direct seeding, direct transplants of individual container scrub plants, and two separate techniques for inoculating the former grove soil with native scrub soil. If one or more of these techniques is successful in getting the native scrub established, we will then scale up to the entire 30 acre field. This research into scrub

restoration is important to the Refuge, restoring the hundreds of acres of former scrub land would benefit Florida Scrub Jays, and several more trust scrub species: gopher tortoise, Florida mouse, and eastern indigo snake.

Exotic plant control is another tool for wildlife habitat restoration. Old World Climbing Fern (*Lygodium microphyllum*) is a nasty exotic vine that has the ability to completely alter vegetation communities by covering and killing the vegetation at a site. Left uncontrolled, this plant is capable of destroying thousands of acres. A drive down I-95 anywhere south of Martin County is will confirm this sad fact. In March, Refuge staff, our SCA interns, and volunteers went on a 4 day climbing fern killing spree, killing hundreds of individual plants growing in the marsh near Peacocks Pocket. Fortunately, we are in early detection and response mode with climbing fern, and the native vegetation is still intact. Removing the offending exotic species will “restore” the habitat, as the natives fill back in the openings left from the climbing fern control.

Mike Legare, Wildlife Biologist, Merritt Island NWR, USFWS



Local Youth Fledges as New Eagle Scout

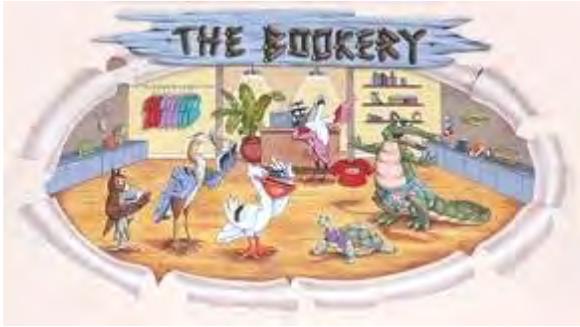
Hello, my name is Scott Richardson; I am a member of the Boy Scouts of America Crew 370. I am working toward the rank of Eagle Scout. One of the requirements to achieve Eagle Scout status is to plan and carry out a service project where I show my leadership skills. Under my leadership, my crew of 13 scouts recreated the ceremonial fire area at Dummitt Cove. We replaced the broken brick fire rectangle with a granite fire ring and the weathered benches with brand new wood. All together my crew and I served in a total of 215 hours on this project. I am very proud of the work my crew did; the feeling of accomplishment I have is overwhelming.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to help Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge and to achieve the highest rank in scouting, EAGLE.

Scott Richardson, Eagle Scout



Scott Richardson and crew celebrate completion of the fire ring!
File photo



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...

... many friends and loving family members

In memory of Jim Pedersen

... Diane & Rick Stees

In memory of Susan Bird

Donations in remembrance of loved ones and friends can be sent to:

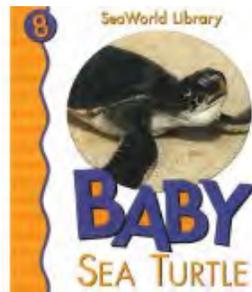
MIWA, P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781

New Items in

Sea World Library Baby Sea Turtle

Written by Patricia A. Pingry
Illustrations by Drew Rose
.....\$6.95

SeaWorld Library gives youngsters the opportunity to learn about these animals in the ocean. Collect them all for your child with an encyclopedia of the sea.



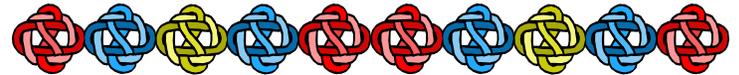
Sea World Library Baby Sea Manatee

Written by Patricia A. Pingry
Illustrations by Drew Rose
.....\$6.95

SeaWorld Library gives youngsters the opportunity to learn about these animals in the ocean. Collect them all for your child with an encyclopedia of the sea.



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



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

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www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org

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Type of Membership:

Seniors and Students – \$10

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Senior Couples – \$15

Family Membership – \$20

Supporting Membership – \$50

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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.

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.

**MIWA Member's Only Tour
Free MINWR Wildlife Tour with
Guide Ned Steel
Friday, April 13th, 2012, 9 a.m. till noon
Group limit: 12**



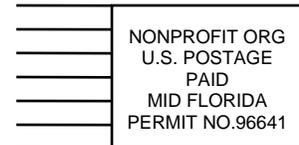
Join fellow nature lovers and MIWA Board Member/Refuge Volunteer-
Ned Steel for a guided tour of the Refuge via the new tour bus.
Ned, an excellent birder and retired biology educator
will give an instructional tour of the varied species of wildlife & plants
in our refuge habitats. Seating is limited.
Please RSVP to the MIWA office at 321-861-2377.



*Need current Refuge Program info?
Look for Merritt Island Wildlife Association on
Facebook or visit our website at
www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org !*



Merritt Island Wildlife Association
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