



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 18 Number 2

Summer 2012

New Construction Project at the Manatee Deck

The Manatee Deck is sure to be a hotspot for Refuge visitors after the completion of a second construction project in the past 2 years. The Manatee Deck is currently closed and crews are working to pave the road and parking area. The new parking area will have 16 parking spots including 2 handicap accessible spaces and an additional space for buses and RV's. There is also a nice sidewalk leading from the parking lot to the observation deck. The project has until September to be completed; however, I spoke to the supervisor and most likely it will be completed within a few weeks!



Sidewalk improvements at the observation deck.
Photo by Candice Stevenson



Busy at work paving new road!
Photo by Candice Stevenson

Visitors looking for manatees are encouraged to go to Bairs Cove Boat Ramp and park in the gravel lot to the left at the entrance to the boat ramp area – no fee required. We have new signs to show the way- to manatee viewing. The new signs feature a manatee mom and calf, very cute! The signs are located under the entrance signs to Bairs Cove boat Ramp and will be moved to the Manatee Deck road entrance after the construction. I hope all of you visit the new improved Manatee Deck when it opens again!

Candice Stevenson, Acting Supervisory Refuge Ranger



New Visitor Center Summer Hours

We are still unable to fill the Supervisory Refuge Ranger position left vacant by Dorn Whitmore when he retired December 2011. Because we remain short-staffed going into the summer months, we are shortening the Refuge Visitor Center hours.

Beginning the first week of June, the visitor center will be **closed on Sundays and Mondays** and will open 2 hours later at **10 AM – 4:30 PM Tuesday - Saturday**. The new hours should accommodate most of our visitors, as peak visitation is from 10AM-2PM.

Candice Stevenson has been acting since January and is returning to her office in the Refuge Headquarters building. Refuge Ranger Nancy Corona will be assuming the role of Supervisory Refuge Ranger from June – September and she will continue with her normal duties as well.

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. The deadline for donations is October 10th.

Contact the MIWA office at 321-861-2377 for info.



Adopt an Area Hot Dog Roast



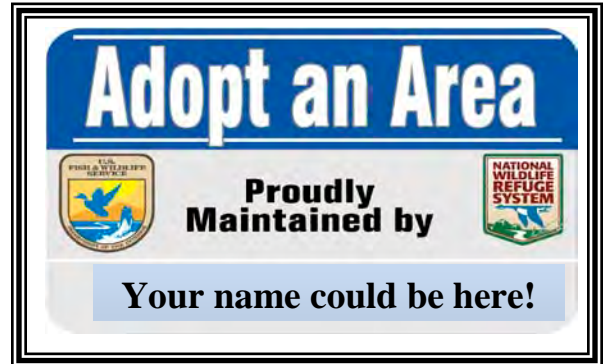
Adopt an Area volunteer Kathy Eichinger
Photo by Bill Nunn

Forty five Adopt an Area volunteers enjoyed a special recognition event at Sandler Educational Outpost on May 5. Courtesy of MIWA, and thanks to the efforts of Sandee Larsen and grill master Ed Larsen, volunteers were treated to a hot dog roast, door prizes, an educational presentation, and four special guests. Refuge Biologist Stan Howarter gave volunteers an overview of water management on the Refuge. Attendees had the opportunity to get up close and personal to an Eastern barn owl, a kestrel, a swallow tailed kite, and a red shouldered hawk from the Avian Reconditioning Center in Apopka. Attendees kept the birds busy posing for photos.

Thanks go to Refuge Ranger Nancy Corona and Biologist Stan Howarter, and volunteers Bill Nunn and Kathy Eichinger for their assistance in making the hot dog roast a success.

Dedicated participants in the Refuge's Adopt an Area litter control program have removed over 1,250 bags of litter and provided over 1,700 hours of service since the program started in April of 2009. The Refuge is still in need of volunteers who are interested in joining Adopt an Area and working to provide a litter-free environment for Refuge wildlife. Contact Nancy Corona at nancy_corona@fws.gov or 321-861-0668 for information.

Kathy Eichinger, MINWR Volunteer



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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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**.

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Biologist's Corner—Armadillo Research at Refuge

Jim Loughry, a Professor of Biology at Valdosta State University in Valdosta, GA is conducting a survey of possible leprosy infection in the armadillos found on the refuge. Humans and nine-banded armadillos are the only two vertebrates known to exhibit naturally-occurring infections of *Mycobacterium leprae*, the bacterium that causes leprosy. In both species, the disease creates damage in peripheral nerves. However, because the bacterium only propagates at cooler temperatures, in humans most nerve damage is confined to the extremities. In contrast, armadillos have a very low metabolic rate, and, thus, a low core body temperature. As a consequence, leprosy spreads throughout the entire body, compromising the functioning of internal organs to the point where the animal eventually dies.

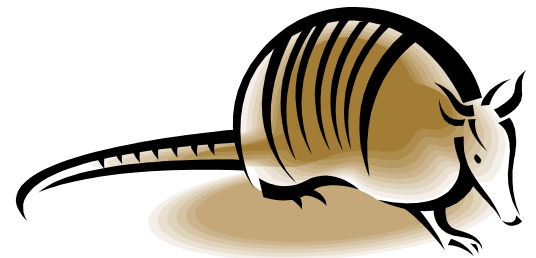
The geographic distribution of leprosy infection in armadillos is complex, and may be changing rapidly. A single genetic strain of *M. leprae* has been found in infected populations ranging from Tallahassee, FL all the way to the southern Gulf coast of Texas (and, possibly, into Mexico as well). A second strain has

appeared recently in southern Florida; the range of this strain extends from at least Naples, FL to Merritt Island. A quick survey of 12 animals collected on the refuge in January 2012 provided evidence of infection with this second strain in 6 individuals. Such high infection prevalence (50%) is unusual: most populations infected with the first strain exhibit infection prevalence ranging from about 5-25%. However, it may be that the high prevalence at Merritt Island was just a fluke due to the small number of animals sampled. Loughry's current project is designed to sample additional animals in order to more accurately determine the level of infection that is present. Also, tissue samples (spleen and lymph node) are being collected to further identify which strain of *M. leprae* is present. While most sampling is being conducted on the refuge, any armadillos from the general area are desirable. Thus, anyone wishing to help out can do so by collecting road kills or dispatching problem animals found in various neighborhoods. Once collected, animals need to be put into a trash bag and delivered to Refuge Biologist Mike Legare for storage.

Mention of leprosy in armadillos can lead to concerns for human public health. Indeed, there is evidence of some disease transmission from armadillos to humans. However, the risk of contracting leprosy from an armadillo is actually quite low and can be minimized by taking some simple precautions. Because leprosy acts internally in armadillos (there are no external symptoms; one cannot tell if an armadillo is infected just by looking at it), routine handling of an animal presents little risk of infection. However, more intimate contact, such as immersing hands in the body fluids of an animal, may generate a higher risk. Thus, the simplest way to avoid contracting leprosy from an armadillo is to just not touch it but, if handling is unavoidable, to wear gloves while doing so. It is worth mentioning that even exposure is no guarantee of contracting leprosy because many people (especially of northern European descent) are naturally immune to the disease, and that, assuming one is unlucky enough to become infected, the disease is now curable with a treatment of antibiotics.

Ultimately, sampling conducted at Merritt Island, coupled with similar surveys at other sites in north-central Florida, will be crucial in providing a clearer picture of patterns of leprosy infection in armadillos. Such information may, in turn, have important ramifications for human public health.

Jim Loughry, Professor of Biology at Valdosta State University



Goodbye to...

.....**Gregg Bailey** – our Seasonal Refuge Park Ranger will be traveling home at the end of April to New Hampshire. He will be returning to the National Park Service (NPS) at Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site (1st successful USA iron works). Have a safe trip home and thanks for your hard work. See you next winter!

.....**Sam Heindel** – Refuge Public Use Intern will be a NPS Park Ranger at the Rocky Mountain Park In Estes Park, CO. He hopes to acquire a permanent Interpretation/Environmental Education Ranger position with NPS of USFWS in the future. Thank you for your service at MINWR and good luck with your future endeavors!

MIWA Minute

The dog days of summer have returned and, unfortunately, the visitors have left. The VIC is quiet and the weather uncomfortably muggy. But, thanks to the comfort of AC, this is a great time for locals to come out and enjoy the Refuge. Please stop by- taking in consideration of our new summer visitor center hours (see page 1).

I am happy to announce receiving grant funds of \$1,000 via the **Walmart Foundation**. The Titusville Walmart has been supporter of environmental education programs at the Refuge - donating monies ear-marked for these programs for numerous years. Without their support, MIWA would not be able to fund the numerous Refuge EE programs attended by local students. Thank you Walmart! Your generosity is appreciated by MIWA and all the Brevard students that benefit from these programs. I would also like to thank MIWA Member **Eric Gardze** for enrolling our group in the **United Technologies** (UTC) Charitable Contributions Program. We have received \$85 via the program and will put it to good use. Thank you UTC! If your company has a charitable program please consider enrolling MIWA. All proceeds go directly into refuge programs.

I also would like to announce our new Sr. Couple Life Members and Life Members: **Lester & Bonnie Fullen** of Orlando, **Peg Strahman** of New Smyrna Beach, and **Mary Jane De Lauder** of Indialantic. Lester & Boonie are long time members, Peg joined last year and we welcome Mary Jane as a newbie. All are nature enthusiast and love the Refuge.

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

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager



Coral Vine
Photo by Kathy Benson

La Florida, "Land of Flowers," Florida Wildflower Foundation Community Grant

In spring 2011, MINWR received one of three micro grants awarded in Brevard County from The Florida Wildflower Foundation to purchase native wildflower plants or seeds. Projects for the grant include demonstration gardens, community beautification and roadside plantings. The grants are available in counties that have passed a Wildflower Resolution. On Sept. 7, 2010, our Brevard County Commission voted unanimously to adopt the Wildflower Resolution.

<http://www.flawildflowers.org/grants.php>

A wide variety of native plants were purchased from our local native nurseries. Many of these augmented the efforts of others over the years to establish the beautiful grounds of the visitor's center. The goal is to elevate awareness of Florida's natural landscape and benefits for wildlife. This is extended to water conservation and beautification for humans as well.

One unanticipated issue was with the wild hogs. They so enjoyed our efforts, perhaps attracted to the smell of the newly ground mulch. We would come back in the morning after the long hot August days of installing mulch to find that they had happily rooted through the tidy flower beds. Working like mad gardeners, mulch was thrown throughout the grounds and onto the roads and trails.

The hog issue has subsided and most of our plantings survived our last few months of drought. The next step is to design and order the identification signs that are part of the in-kind contribution of Merritt Island Wildlife Association.

We have a group of volunteers with green thumbs and a dedication to replanting the earth with native plants. We meet each Friday morning with the Friday Trail Crew (Kathy Eichinger as contact person) throughout the year to work with the grounds. We are so pleased to have the opportunity to work at the refuge as well as the new plantings from the La Florida Grant. Pictured are several of the many who have worked on the gardens, Ron Henderson, Kathie Benson, Barbara Peterson and Sara Morrison.

To volunteer, contact Nancy Corona, Ranger, (321) 861-0668 (Nancy_Corona@fws.gov). Volunteers are welcome to join us weekly at the MINWR Visitor Center on Friday mornings 8 AM – 11:30 AM. For more information regarding the garden and the wildflower grant, you may also contact Barbara Peterson at 321-799-2621 or vueuxb@aol.com

Barbara Peterson, MINWR Volunteer-Garden Coordinator



Wildflower gardeners enjoy their hard work.
Photo by Sandee Larsen

A Celebration on the St. John's River



Candice Stevenson & Betty Salter
Photo by Sandy Walters

On a beautiful sunny day in late March at Blue Springs State park, seventy refuge volunteers and staff celebrated and recognized MINWR's volunteers. First on the agenda, was a two hour narrated boat tour along the St. John's River. An American Bald Eagle heralded a welcome from atop a pine tree as the volunteers boarded. During the trip, volunteers enjoyed the scenery, views of wading birds and glimpses of limpkin chicks; a BBQ lunch and award ceremony followed. Longtime refuge volunteer, Betty Salter received the Volunteer of the Year Award for her instrumental work in interpreting the refuge's natural resources for visitors and environmental education school groups. Betty's keen sense of nature, contagious enthusiasm, and her natural ability to engage visitors and children helped create and advance the refuge's education programs. Not one, not two, but three volunteers received the Presidential Call to Service Award for their dedicated federal service of 4,000 volunteer hours or more. The recipients Betty Salter with 4,500 hours, Bill Nunn with 4,000 hours, and Cary Salter with 4,750 hours received a medal and letter of recognition from the President of the United States.

A GREAT BIG THANK YOU to our outstanding volunteers for their dedication and hard work and to MIWA for sponsoring the day's events. We couldn't do it without you!

Nancy Corona, Refuge Public Use Ranger



Species in Focus: Sea Turtles

As both friends and fowl flee north to escape the Florida summers, it comes time for another type of wildlife to visit the Refuge – *sea turtles*! Many species of sea turtles, such as the endangered Loggerhead and Green sea turtles and the critically endangered Leatherback sea turtles come to lay their eggs along the protected beaches of the Canaveral National Seashore. Sea turtle eggs have *many* predators, ranging from insects, crabs, and gulls to larger creatures such as opossums, pigs, cats, raccoons, and even *humans*. It's for this reason that Rangers and volunteers comb the beach both day and night during the summer, looking for sea turtles coming to lay their eggs. They mark the nests and record their locations, before doing what they can to protect the nests. Eggs that belong to the more critically endangered species of sea turtles are marked for retrieval, so that they can be tended to safely in a controlled environment. The nests that are allowed to hatch naturally are meshed over so that predators can't easily dig after the precious treasures underneath the surface; they are then monitored over the next several months. Of course, this is all assuming that the eggs actually get laid safely in the first place!

When a mother sea turtle begins laying her eggs, she enters a trance-like state. This allows predators of all shapes and sizes a chance to snag the eggs, even while the mother is still in the process of laying them! There have even been reports of a raccoon sitting on the backside of the sea turtle and simply snagging the eggs as they are laid, the furry hooligan using the sea turtle as a giant egg dispenser with the mother none the wiser.

With so much piled on the baby sea turtles before they're even born, one would like to think at least they'd catch a break once they're out of the shell. That couldn't be further from the truth! After hatching, the very first trial before a hatchling is digging itself out of the very nest that had been protecting it. It can take several days for the hatchlings to dig themselves out of their would-be tomb, before they're immediately confronted by their next trial – a mad dash for the ocean. They must race for the water, as the helpless hatchlings are a smorgasbord for opportunistic predators. This marathon for survival continues even when the hatchlings reach the safety of the water, where they must contend with oceanic predators such as sharks and fish that would love a little turtle snack. It's no wonder that the survival rate for sea turtle hatchlings is 1 in 1,000!

Sheri Girard, MIWA Bookery Staff



A sea turtle comes ashore to nest.
USFWS file photo

MIWA Costa Rica Birding Trip



Red-legged Honey Creeper
Photo by Dorn Whitmore

My first view of Costa Rica was from the window of our plane as we landed in San Jose located in the central valley at an elevation of 3,500. Surrounding the capital city I could see lush green mountains, coffee plantations, and small farms. I have always heard Costa Rica had a remarkable climate, but traveling to Central America in late April, I was not sure what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised to find midday temperatures in the low 80's and low humidity. Not bad for a country located just 10 degrees north of the equator. I later discovered the climate here is perfect year round and ranges from 78-83 degrees at this elevation.

Edwin, our Latin guide, met our group at the airport and he turned out to be our second pleasant surprise. Edwin was a warm, friendly, patient, college educated man who spoke perfect English. He is one of five Holbrook Travel Master Guides and, as one in our group exclaimed, "He was like traveling with Google". He was very familiar with the country, had a superb knowledge of the natural history, and was one of the best birders I have ever seen.

The trip centered around birds, which was a good fit for our small group of 11 MIWA members. Our first stop was Hotel Bougainvillea where we got our first glimpse of the remarkable diversity of bird life Costa Rica had to offer. On the 10 acre grounds of the hotel we picked up over 40 species; species like Blue-grey Tanagers, Great Kiskadee, Squirrel Cuckoo, Ferruginous Pigmy Owls, and Blue-Crowned Motmot to name a few. Almost every bird we saw was a life bird. The next day we bordered our bus for Selva Verde, located in the Caribbean lowlands about 2 hours northeast of San Jose. Traveling there we passed over the continental divide and through one of many National Parks found in Costa Rica. On the trip we picked up the Fiery-Throated Hummingbird, Gray Hawk, Bat Falcon, and Brown Jay.

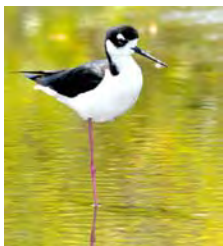
Selva Verde was home base for our group for the next four days and the birding here was absolutely incredible. Over several days we observed 73 species on the property including the Montezuma Oropendola, Agami Heron, King Vulture, Olive Parakeet, White-Crowned Parrot, Keel-billed and Black Mandibled Toucans, Sun Bittern, Great Green Macaw, and Black-Throated Trogon. From Selva Verde we made excursions to La Seva Biological station, a boat trip on the Puerto Viejo River, and an adventurous trip to Bosque de Paz, a private preserve on the edge of a cloud forest. Each trip was an adventure, allowed us to see much of this beautiful country, and of course add additional species to our growing list of birds. On the fifth day we traveled back to San Jose for our return to the States. Over the course of the six days we observed 213 species with most of them life birds. The accommodations were wonderful, the group leader superb, and the scenery and birding outstanding. If you are considering enriching your life by taking an ecotour, the trips offered by MIWA are safe; fair priced, and offer first class accommodations. Best of all, you are traveling with other MIWA members and a portion of the proceeds benefits MIWA.

Dorn Whitmore, MINWR Staff Retiree

Lucky 13th on the Refuge

What do non-superstitious nature lovers do on an unlucky day? On Friday, April 13th twelve "lucky" MIWA Members attended a wildlife tour guided by MIWA Board Member and bird extraordinaire, Ned Steel.

Ned, a Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge lover since 1966, led the group via the new tour bus from the Refuge entrance (looking for shorebirds), to the Black Point Wildlife Drive (for waterfowl and wading birds) to the Bairs Cove boat ramp (for manatees and dolphins).



Black-necked Stilt
Photo by Lek Wallace

The weather was perfect and wildlife was abundant. A total of 31 bird species were spotted. Wildlife species of interest sited include: River Otter, Manatee, American White Pelican, Least Bittern, nesting Green Herons, Sora Rail, American Avocet, Western Sandpiper, Willet, and Bonaparte's Gull.

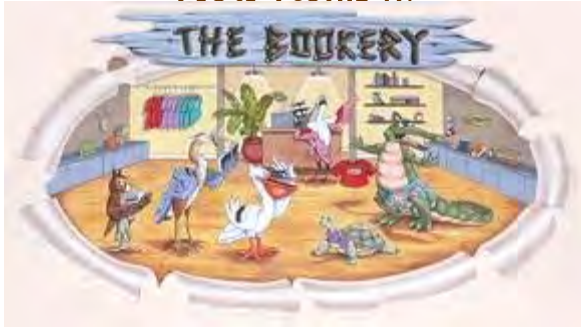
Thank you to Ned for a great tour. And, thanks to driver Ed Larsen and to attending MIWA Members for a fun, lucky day! See you next Friday the 13th!

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager

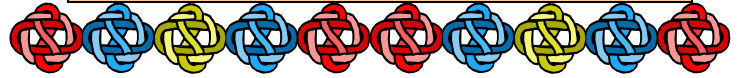


MIWA Tour Group at Bairs Cove
Photo by Sandee Larsen

New Items in



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



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.....many friends and family members
In memory of Jim Pedersen

.....Heather Bates

In memory of Thomas Bastable

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



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Illustrated by Marc Boutavant
.....\$9.99
Lift the flaps and find out which baby animals turn into which grown-ups! Educational and fun for young children.



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Lift the flaps and find out which animals are alike! Educational and fun for young children.



Baby Alligator

By Ginjer L. Clarke
Illustrated by Neecey Twinem
.....\$3.99
By a lake in Florida a baby Alligator hatches from her egg. What dangers and adventures lie ahead?



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

Visitor Information Center Hours

**VIC Summer hours-10-4:30 Tuesday-Saturday,
closed Sunday and Monday from June thru Sept.**

Regular Hours- Monday through Friday
8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Saturday and Sunday *

*VIC is closed Sundays from April -October
The Refuge is open daily from sunrise – sunset.

Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Supporting the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge

Joining is simple. Just fill out this form and mail it to the Merritt Island Wildlife Association at P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781 or join online at www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org

Name _____

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Type of Membership:

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Individual – \$15

Senior Couples – \$15

Family Membership – \$20

Supporting Membership – \$50

Senior Couple Supporting – \$75

Life Membership – \$250

Patron – \$1000

Optional – Donation \$ _____

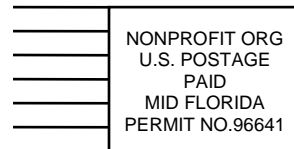
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Please check the expiration date on the address label and, if expired, renew your membership via page 7 today!



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MIWA Members-Only Sea Turtle Walks
Saturdays: June 30th and July 14th
7:30 pm till Midnight?

Meet Refuge Ranger Nancy Corona at the MINWR Visitor Center for a short information program followed by a trip to Canaveral National Seashore in search of a nesting sea turtle. A long sleeve shirt, bug spray, and comfortable walking shoes are recommended. No cameras or flashlights allowed. RSVP as limited space is available. Call 321-861-2377 to reserve your space now.

