



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 11, Number 3

Fall 2005

The 9th Annual Spacecoast Birding and Wildlife Festival



Don't forget to mark your calendars now for the Ninth Annual Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival: Wednesday, November 16 through Sunday, November 20, 2005! Presented by Nikon Sport Optics and the Brevard Nature Alliance, this year's exciting event will be bigger and better than ever!

As always the festival days are packed with field trips, seminars and workshops, as well as the ongoing nature-based trade show. Speakers from all over the world will discuss topics varying from underwater photography to raptor rehabilitation. Photography presentations, field workshops and sessions on Photoshop, macro-photography, bird photography and digital cameras will be led by award winning photographers. There will even be a class for kids. Photography's latest rage, digiscoping, will be the focus of speakers from Nikon, Swarovski Optik, and Eagle Optics.

A variety of field trips offer participants the opportunity to explore one of the country's most diverse areas by car and bus; on foot; and in boats, airboats and kayaks. Activities for youngsters include presentations; owl pellet dissection; owl house and bird feeder construction; live bats, birds, snakes and reptiles; bird banding and a photography class. An Art Competition, sponsored by Dynamac International Corporation, is open to artists who work in several media as well as a poster contest for school-aged kids. Prize monies for this festival event will total over \$1,300.

Seminars will cover a range of topics including Florida scrub jays, gopher tortoises, black rails, tropical birding tips, butterflies, wildflowers, the Florida Trail, Panama's best birding spots, the Galapagos and Ecuadorian Andes, birding in Brazil and Alaska, the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, Florida growth issues, and much more. Many distinguished authors will also be available for book signings. Workshop subjects include: raptors, seabirds, sparrows, beginning beach birds, seven steps to better birding, birding by ear, and the always popular advanced shorebirds.

An enlarged archaeological component this year will include field trips of historical sites at Canaveral National Seashore and the ongoing excavation of a 2000 year old prehistoric Native American village at the Pine Island Conservation Area, as well as presentations highlighting past civilizations and the archaeological treasures left behind.

On Sunday afternoon we will adjourn to the beautiful Ace of Hearts Ranch in Port St. John for great food, while Florida musical group Patchwork and Safari Todd will provide the entertainment. Take a hayride or a leisurely stroll to visit the animals that call the Ace of Hearts Ranch home.

Pre-registration is required for all field trips. Specific times and fees for events, seminars and exhibits; Directions; registration forms and special accommodation rates are found on the Festival website, www.nbbd.com/fly or by contacting Neta Harris at 321-268-5224 or (800) 460-2664.

Laurilee Thompson, MIWA Board Member



Indian River Lagoon Sharks

University of Florida graduate student Tobey Curtis, through the Florida Program for Shark Research and Florida Museum of Natural History, has been getting to know some of our local sharks, primarily the bull shark. Bull sharks, an increasingly important part of shark fisheries, use the Lagoon as a nursery. Tobey and his assistants sample the shark population using longlines, gill nets and rod and reel to capture the young sharks. Once captured the sharks are measured, sexed, weighed and tagged. Researchers hope to learn more about the movements, population size, growth rates and residency patterns of the sharks.

Some sharks will be tracked for 24 hours using acoustic transmitters to study small-scale habitat use, home range and swimming behaviors. **Beth Homa, HabiChat Editor**



Tobey and Tabitha with one of the young bull sharks. Photo courtesy of Tobey Curtis, Florida Program for Shark Research.



MIWA Minute Fall 2005

I hope you all had the opportunity to visit the *Bookery* with visiting family members this summer. You may have noticed the new retail displays and a small refrigerator for cold drinks. Thank you to vendors, **Crowley Distributors** and **Impact Photography**, for the displays and to our handy volunteer **Susan Waldron** for the mini fridge. Susan customized it with a plexi-glass front for easy access and visitors are thrilled to have a cool drink to re-hydrate after enduring the heat.

I'm happy to announce the donation of \$1,034 by local birders, the **Nikon/Space Coast Coastal Cuckoos**, led by teen birder extraordinaire **Andy Bankert** (seen at right). This is the second year the team has supported the Refuge and MIWA. Proceeds will go to the Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project. Thank you Andy and team for your continued support and for being such great role models for area youth.

As you have read elsewhere in the Habi-Chat, MIWA is nearing the end of our 2005 Membership drive. I am happy to report we have acquired many new Life Members and Corporate Sponsors. We welcome our newest Life Members: **Tom Barron, Carl & Nancy Holtman, Barbara Hutcheson** and **Malcolm & Amy Whitelaw**.

I would also like to announce our newest Corporate Sponsors: **Allen Engineering; Black's Spray Service; Ear Care, P.A.; Fun Day Tours; Iveys' Construction; L & D Consulting; Norman Ray; Rodney S. Ketcham, Inc;** and **TLC Engineering**.

As Life Members and Corporate Sponsors they will receive benefits, including discounts on field trips and educational programs and purchases at the Bookery Gift Shop. We encourage all members to become actively involved in our programs and we ask you all to promote membership to your friends and families.

For information on volunteering at the Refuge, contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0667. Feel free to call MIWA's direct line, 321-861-2377, if you need membership or retail information, or if you would like to contribute to our expansion fund or donate a bookshelf. I'll see you at the Refuge!

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



Photo by Cheri Ehrhardt, MINWR.



The purpose of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association is to promote conservation, awareness, and appreciation of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and to provide assistance to Refuge programs.

President	Dan LeBlanc
Vice President	Lee Solid
Treasurer	Jim Pedersen
Secretary	Robert Hutchison
President Emeritus	George English

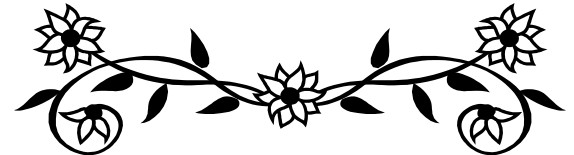
Board Members

Sam Beddingfield, Jim Butts, Warren Camp Judy Dryja, Chris Fairey, Bud Ferguson, Darleen Hunt, Forrest McCartney, Joel Reynolds, Lorenz Simpkins, Ned Steel, Laurilee Thompson, Ron Thorstad, John Tribe

Refuge Manager Ron Hight **USFWS Liaison** Dorn Whitmore
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 Beth Homa **Technical Consultant** Sandee Larsen
Habi-Chat Committee Beth Homa, Sandee Larsen, Dorn Whitmore



**Thank you to our
Corporate Sponsors**

Allen Engineering
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Nikon and The Brevard Nature Alliance present the 9th Annual **Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival**

November 16-20, 2005

Brevard Community College • Titusville Campus 1311 N. US 1 • Titusville, FL 32796

Fabulous Field Trips • Special Seminars

Wondrous Workshops • Exceptional Evening Keynote Presentations

Sociable Afternoon Gatherings • Art Competition • Paddling Adventures

Breathtaking Airboat Trips • Birding Hotspots

Offshore Pelagic Birding Trip • Butterflies & Wildflowers • Children's Activities

Nature-based Exhibit Area • Silent Auction to Benefit the Festival

"Queenie"



Barn Owl

photo courtesy of Audubon Center Birds of Prey

FEATURING:

Naturalist/Birding Marketing Specialist - Nikon Sport Optics

Victor Emanuel - Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

Denver Holt - President, Owl Research Institute

Kevin T. Karlson - Author, Photographer, Shorebird Expert

Neil Fifer - Internationally Recognized Bird Photographer (Sponsored by Swarovski Optik)

Captain Peggy Goldberg - Nature/Wildlife and Underwater Photography

Jonathan Wood - The Raptor Project (Sponsored by Nikon Sport Optics)

Steven Ingraham - Birding & Wildlife Observation Specialist with Carl Zeiss Optics

Jeff Bouton - Product Specialist for Leica Sports Optics Birding/Naturalist Markets and Raptor Expert

Mike Legare - Black Rail Expert

Jim Danzenbaker - Naturalist Sales Manager, Brunton (Sponsor of the Pelagic Boat Trip)

Ben Lizardas - Eagle Optics Representative

Sponsors for 2005

AAA Adventures - Bird Watcher's Digest - Boeing - Brevard Community College - Brunton - Canaveral Port Authority
City of Titusville - Dixie Crossroads Seafood Restaurant - Dynamac Corp. - Eagle Optics - FLORIDA TODAY
Florida Power & Light Company - Hubbs-Seaworld Research Institute - Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex
Nikon Sport Optics - Pentax Corporation - Pepsi/Aquafina - Reliant Energy - Ron Jon Surf Shop
Florida's Space Coast Office of Tourism - Swarovski Optik - Visit Florida - Waste Management, Inc.

For more information contact:

Neta Harris

(321) 268-5224 or 800-460-2664

neta@natureandspace.com

Festival Website: www.nbbd.com/fly



"In cooperation with the Brevard County Tourism Development Council"



SCBWF©2005



This project received financial assistance from VISIT FLORIDA



Brevard Watercolor Society's 3rd Annual Watercolor Exhibit

The Brevard Watercolor Society (BWS) will present the Third Annual Watercolors of the Refuge exhibition at the Refuge Visitor Center beginning in November.

A group of 20 artists from the BWS were given a special tour by Dorn Whitmore in preparation of their annual art exhibition at the Refuge. BWS members have been encouraged to create art depicting landscapes, animals, birds and flowers seen around the MINWR. The paintings will be juried and then displayed in the Visitor Center auditorium from November 5, 2005 through January 30, 2006. An opening reception to meet the artists will be held on Saturday, November 5, from 5:00 - 7:00 p.m. MIWA members are cordially invited to attend.

The paintings will be offered for sale with a portion of the proceeds to be donated to MIWA. Smaller prints of the paintings will also be available for sale.

Darleen Hunt, MIWA Board Member



Raccoons in the Moonlight by Therese Ferguson, winner of the Merit Award at the 2004 MINWR exhibit.



Bookery Buys

Collectible Florida Shells...\$9.95

An affordable sea shell guide for kids from 3 to 93.

Sea-Beans from the Tropics.....\$29.50

A locally published, colorful and user-friendly publication of sea bean species.

Priceless Florida, Natural Ecosystems and Native Species..... \$21.95

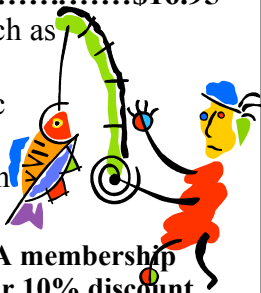
A comprehensive guide of Florida's natural history full of scientific and educational lessons. A must have for those with a love of nature.

The Redfish Book.....\$11.95

A complete angler's guide by author Frank Sargeant. Full of info on where to find redfish, trophy techniques, rigging a redfish boat, and redfish biology habitat and conservation.

Sport Fish of Florida.....\$16.95

Answers questions such as game quantities and common and scientific names. Also contains 231 fish illustrations in full color.



Show your MIWA membership card to receive your 10% discount on all purchases!

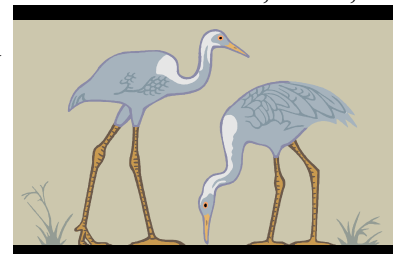
Florida Friends Meet at Loxahatchee NWR

The May 14th meeting of the Florida Friends' Conference was hosted by the Friends of Loxahatchee NWR. More than 60 dedicated friends of refuges traveled to Boynton Beach to attend. MIWA Board Member Warren Camp; MIWA staff Betty Camp and Sandee Larsen; and Refuge Manager Ron Hight represented the Merritt Island Wildlife Association.

The two-day event included a Membership Session by Evan Hirshe (National Wildlife Refuge Association NWRA President) and Max Schenck (NWRA Constituent Outreach). Evan and Max offered all friends group members' complementary one-year memberships to the National Wildlife Refuge Association. Benefits include a year subscription to the new *Wildlife Refuge Magazine*. As affiliate members, our members can join 48 other Friends organizations nationwide in supporting the NWRA's mission of advocacy for Friends, refuges, and the Refuge System. A Diversity Session was led by Audrey Peterman (co-founder of Earth Wise Productions) and Nadine Patrice (Founder of Operation Green Leaves). Audrey and Nadine spoke of the need to increase diverse visitation to our nations' refuges by contacting ethnic groups in our areas and inviting them to programs. Ann Smith and Bob Eisenstadt (Friends of Black Bayou NWR) led the Motivating Board Members and Volunteers session. Motivational ideas included; having board members meeting every week, requesting support from local businesses, requesting donations from larger corporations, and inviting local groups to use your facilities.

Attendees enjoyed a delicious lunch and door prizes were awarded. Afterward, all visited the Arthur R Marshall NWR via airboat, canoe, and walking tours. Thank you to meeting organizers, Ruth Levow, Nancy Marshall, and Jean Poleshuck, for a job well done. And a big thanks to Refuge Manager, Mark Musaus, for hosting the conference.

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



The Ups and Downs of a MIWA Turtle Walk

The Upside. The June 25th MIWA Members' Only Turtle Walk was a huge success due to excellent member turn-out and an energetic turtle. Thirty members munched on refreshments and enjoyed the great informational program given by Refuge Ranger, Nancy Corona. Volunteer Ed Larsen assisted Nancy with crowd control, while volunteer Jim Pilgrim worked behind the scenes, roving along the shoreline on an ATV searching for a nesting loggerhead. As we headed for the beach, Jim radioed that a turtle had been sighted. The night was dark, as there was no moonlight, and we shuffled together onto the beach.

After walking a short distance, Nancy radioed Jim and he guided us back to the tracks. It seemed we passed them up on the way out! We followed the tracks to a false nest started by the turtle and just a few steps away came upon her busily nesting for real. She was so dug in and covered with sand that we almost stepped on her! Members alternately got a front row view and soon she covered her nest, tossing sand on the onlookers. Younger members eagerly assisted in covering the nest with a protective grate and named the turtle, Sandee. Thank you to Nancy, Jim and Ed for a great experience. And thanks to Sandee the loggerhead sea turtle for an exciting wildlife experience.



The Downside. Unfortunately, the July 9th turtle program was cancelled due to a NASA shuttle closure. Please be aware that our permit is issued only for the night of the program, and if cancelled, cannot be rescheduled. All members confirmed for the July program will be automatically registered for next season's turtle walk.

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager

Silent Auction Donations

Donations are needed for the silent auction to be held at the MIWA Annual Meeting, Tuesday October 11th. Proceeds from the auction will go to environmental education programs at the Refuge. Your company name or your name will be displayed with the item. All donations are tax deductible and help a great program! Contact Sandee Larsen at 321-861-2377 for more information.

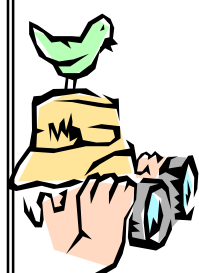


Refuge Celebrates First Junior Ranger Program

I am happy to report that, with the help of MIWA's generous donation of refreshments, supplies, and awards and with the leadership of Refuge Volunteer Nancy Pilgrim, we made it through our first season of the Junior Ranger Program here at the Refuge! The program consisted of several nature-related workshops, such as All about Manatees, Sea Turtles, and Birding, an independent project, as well as a trash clean-up.

Despite the cancellation of one of the workshops due to the shuttle launch, the program was a success. Twenty students received their Junior Ranger certificates and badges. The independent projects, including a diorama on the Indian River Lagoon and a drawing of a Leatherback sea turtle, are proudly on display in the Visitor Center auditorium. Hopefully, with earlier advertisement next season, we will have even better enrollment. If anyone is interested in more information about the Junior Ranger program for next summer just contact Nancy Corona at 321- 861-0668.

Ariel Hartney, Public Use Intern



The 2005 Christmas Bird Count at MINWR will be held on Monday, December 19, 2005. Anyone interested in participating should contact Count Coordinators Ned Steele at 321-452-1140 and Jim Pedersen at 321-267-4981 for more information.

Thank You Titusville Wal-Mart!



Junior Ranger participants fill birdfeeders with seed donated by the Wal-Mart in Titusville. Over 400 lbs of bird seed have been donated and used for Refuge feeders, volunteer feeders and youth programs.

THANK YOU Wal-Mart from the Refuge, local students and hungry area birds.

Photo by Ariel Hartney

Eastern Indigo Snakes

The eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*) is the longest snake native to North America, typically ranging from 5 to 7 feet long, but can reach lengths greater than 8 feet. They are robust and shiny black, with smooth scales. The lower chin and face may be black, light grey, or red, and the coloration can extend down the body past the throat. Indigo snakes are non-venomous and generally docile; rarely aggressive, even when threatened. They are long-lived, with reports of captive individuals surviving for 25 years, but life spans in the wild are likely much shorter.

Eastern indigo snakes were federally protected as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1978, but populations have continued to decline throughout the range. They were once common from the southern tip of South Carolina west to southeastern Mississippi and throughout Florida, including the Keys. Their current range is restricted to southern Georgia and peninsular Florida, with a few isolated populations in the Florida panhandle and north Key Largo. KSC/MINWR is considered to be a population center for indigo snakes because of its large expanse of suitable, relatively undisturbed habitat.

In the early 1990s, a program was started on MINWR to collect data on eastern indigo snakes. Six snakes were captured and surgically implanted with year-long transmitters that could be tracked using a radiofrequency receiver. We found that indigos used a wide variety of habitats and that their home ranges were between 50 and 800 acres.

In 1997, a grant from a private wildlife foundation allowed us to radiotrack indigos throughout Brevard County, including MINWR. A total of 81 individuals were followed, some for more than three consecutive years. Our previous home range size estimates were confirmed and we found that, on average, males had larger ranges than females. A surprising result was finding indigos in suburban areas, using ditches and power-line corridors to travel between yards and vacant lots. A small amount of reproductive data was collected, but a nest site was never discovered. The highest cause of death was road mortality, while several snakes were intentionally killed by people. During the study, many indigos that were located outside of publicly owned conservation lands lost parts of their home ranges to development.

In 2001, a gathering of indigo experts was held to review the snake's status and determine a course of action. It was agreed that the greatest hindrance to conservation was the lack of a survey method. A graduate student from the University of Central Florida worked at MINWR for two years to test the effectiveness of different capture methods: road running (i.e., cruising a specific set of roads at specific times of day and hand capturing snakes seen crossing); using a gopher tortoise burrow camera to survey for indigos in burrows; and placing large trap arrays in appropriate habitats to capture snakes. The first two methods were not successful, but the trap arrays were. However, only three individuals were caught during a year of effort, so the trapping method is only practical for multi-year projects, not fast-track habitat-loss scenarios.

Current research efforts involve development of a bait to lure indigos into a trap or in front of a camera in order to prove presence at a site. A favorite food of indigo snakes is other snakes, so a solution made of corn snake sheds has been tested in the laboratory to see if it attracts indigo snakes. In 24 of 27 trials, indigos chose to follow trails within a maze that were scented with bait solution, as opposed to trails that were not. During the next several months, six snakes are to be tested here at MINWR to see if the lab results can be reproduced in the field. One female indigo has been captured and radiotagged, and bait testing will commence this fall. If these tests are successful, the next step will be to synthesize an artificial bait solution. The ability to reliably survey for indigos will greatly enhance the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's ability to protect these snakes and to require mitigation from developers for loss of individuals, populations, and habitat.

You can help protect and conserve eastern indigo snake populations in a number of ways. First, educate yourself and others about indigos and the vital role that all snakes play in the environment. Most snakes, including the indigo, are completely harmless. There are many people who would not bother snakes if they realized what important and interesting creatures they are. Irrational fear and prejudice can often be cured by one pleasant experience. Also, be an informed voter. Support officials at all levels of government who recognize the value of our natural resources. The most important factor in saving the eastern indigo snake from extinction is the conservations and proper management of large tracts of habitat. It will not matter how many individual snakes we save if there is no habitat for healthy, reproducing populations to thrive. Strong laws to protect wildlife and habitats (and enforcement of those laws) are not necessarily incompatible with responsible development and a robust economy. It is possible, and preferable, to have both.

Rebecca Bolt, Wildlife Ecologist, Dynamac Corporation



Young indigo snake. Photo courtesy of Dynamac Corporation.



Photo courtesy of Dynamac Corporation.

MIWA 2005 Membership Drive

Membership information has been sent to 20,000 homes and corporation addresses, and we have started to see a very nice response of people who are interested in the Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge. With over 100 members joining the association in July, we are well on our way to making our goal of 1,500 members by the end of the year. We would like to thank everyone who has helped with the development of the brochures, web site and membership mailing. All of their hard work will benefit the Refuge and MIWA. We would also like to thank WDBO, which interviewed MIWA about their relationship with the Refuge and the membership drive.

The membership drive will continue to raise awareness of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Our goal is to expand community involvement in Refuge programs, such as the National Wildlife Refuge Week, the annual songbird festival, environmental education programs at the Sandler Education Outpost, habitat restoration projects and projects to enhance wildlife viewing opportunities on the Black Point Wildlife Drive.

Chris Fairey, MIWA Board Member

Hello to...

...**Debbie Wagner**, the new Administrative Officer. Debbie comes to us from an Ecological Services field office in Carlsbad, CA. She moved from across the country with her daughter, Bandit (the dog), and Smokey (the cat). Debbie will be handling the Refuge's budget and purchases. Stop by the office and give a big welcome to Debbie!

Goodbye to...

...**Ariel Hartney**. Ariel was the Public Use Intern, where she helped out in lots of ways, like working with the volunteers, staffing the VIC desk, and participating in environmental education programs. She also organized our Junior Ranger Program! Ariel returns to the University of Florida to finish her undergraduate degree in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. Thanks Ariel and Good Luck!

...**Rena Bryan**. Rena was an 8-week Biological Science Technician in the Planning Program through the Service's Student Temporary Experience Program (STEP). She helped support several refuge planning efforts through geographic information system (GIS) databases and maps. What a help she's been. Rena also returns to the University of Florida to finish her undergraduate degree in Environmental Science. After that she plans to study Conservation Biology in graduate school. Thanks Rena and Good Luck!

...**John Ross & Beth Homa**. John has been a law enforcement officer at MINWR for four years and will be transferring to the Great Dismal Swamp Refuge in North Carolina. Beth was a Refuge Ranger, a MIWA employee, Refuge volunteer, editor of the Habi-Chat, our resident Blue Goose and an Environmental Analyst for Dynamac. A busy four years! John has been a great asset to our Law Enforcement Program and has even helped out on a few owl stories in previous Habi-Chats! (How will we convince someone else to help out like they have?) We will miss them both greatly. Thanks John and Beth and Good Luck!!!

Cheri Ehrhardt, Refuge Planner



Visitor Information Center Hours

Monday through Friday (8-4:30 pm)

Saturday and Sunday* (9-5:00 pm)

*VIC is closed Sundays from April-October.

The Refuge is open daily from Sunrise-Sunset, except during Shuttle operations.

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.MerrittIslandWildlife.org or www.nbbd.com/npr/MIWA

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone Number _____

Email _____

Type of Membership (Circle):

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**.

You are cordially invited to attend

MIWA's 12th Annual Meeting

Tuesday, October 11, 2005

7:00 pm

Dixie Crossroads Restaurant

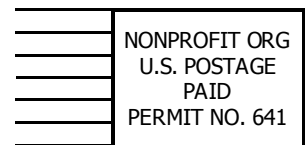
(1475 Garden Street, Titusville. From US 1 in Titusville, turn west onto Garden Street/SR 406.
The restaurant is less than a mile down the road on the left.)

Agenda topics include the annual financial report, Board Member elections and Refuge update. Appetizers will be provided by MIWA, but please feel free to purchase dinner on your own before or during the meeting. This year there will be a silent auction in addition to door prizes. The Annual Meeting is a great way to meet fellow members and become more involved in the Association. We encourage all members to attend and we look forward to seeing you there!

Regarding MIWA elections, the Nominating Committee will present a slate of officers and returning board members. Nominations may also be taken from the floor the night of the Annual Meeting. Please call George English at 321-783-1108 for more information.



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



*MINWR Birding Tours
will return in November.
Visit our website
www.fws.gov/merrittisland
or call 321-861-0668
for more information.*

