



Volume 11, Number 2

# Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Summer 2005

## Scrub Jay Survey

The annual Florida Scrub jay survey was conducted at MINWR during March of this year. Marc Epstein, Supervisory Refuge Biologist, led the survey effort, assisted by Jim Lyons, Refuge Biological Technician. The survey was conducted along 22 routes on the refuge, totaling approximately 28 miles. MINWR volunteers staked the routes at 150-meter intervals prior to the survey.

Three surveys were conducted over a period of two weeks. Six of the routes were surveyed on March 25<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>. These were sample data collecting surveys to gather information for statistical analysis. The full survey, all 22 routes, was conducted on March 31<sup>st</sup>.

The 45 surveyors were a diverse group of people from the National Wildlife Refuge System; the National Park Service; the Kennedy Space Center; and, of course, our trusty Refuge volunteers. Volunteers from as far away as the Okefenokee NWR, GA participated.

Teams of 2 to 3 people, equipped with a loop recording of Florida scrub jay calls, binoculars and bug spray began the survey. The tape was played at each station (each stake on the route) and the responding jays were counted. Only jays visually observed were counted this year. At each station the condition of the habitat was recorded as well as the weather condition. Raptors sighted along the route were also noted. A number of the jays have been banded through a KSC Environmental Project carried out by the Dynamac Corporation. Surveyors were asked to record band identifications, which, at times, was very difficult. Some jays would not venture close enough to distinguish the band colors (there are 11 different colors), even using binoculars. Survey results are listed.

Sample Survey–March 25: 159 jays and 44 families (89 stations)

Sample Survey–March 29: 149 jays and 46 families (89 stations)

Complete Survey–March 31: 388 jays and 137 families (316 stations)

This year's survey technique and data gathering approach will undergo an analysis and review by Marc Epstein and others in the Service and USGS, before next year's survey in an attempt to improve the population data gathered.

**Warren Camp, MIWA Board Member**



Banded jay. Photo by Betty Camp.



Jim Lyons and John Tribe with some very cooperative jays. Photo by Melinda Tribe.



## Nikon/Space Coast Coastal Cuckoos take on the World Series of Birding

Local birders, the Nikon/Space Coast Coastal Cuckoos, led by Andy Bankert recently competed in the World Series of Birding, held in New Jersey on May 14<sup>th</sup>. With a total of 212 birds the Cuckoos won the youth division by nine birds, tied for third place overall, and took second place for the out of state division. Some of the birds sighted during the day-long competition included a winter wren, red-headed woodpecker, bobwhite, great horned owl and common nighthawk. The Cuckoos raised \$8,000, which will be donated to local conservation organizations.

**Left to right: Tom Johnson, Zach Baer, Ross Gallardy and Andy Bankert. Photo courtesy of the Nikon/Space Coast Coastal Cuckoos.**

## Message from the President

The first week of this June, nearly 20,000 Merritt Island Wildlife Association membership brochures and applications were mailed to households within 50 miles of the Refuge. Our goal is to increase memberships to 1,500 from the current 900 members. The membership drive was funded through a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, with additional financial support from Delaware North Parks and Resorts, operators of the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. By building up our membership base, we will not only be better positioned to increase our financial support to the Refuge, but also increase participation in Refuge and MIWA programs. A Brevard County corporate membership solicitation will follow later this month.

A second exciting project soon to be completed is a new MIWA web site. The site, **MerrittIslandWildlife.org**, will go live in the next few weeks. In addition to the latest on MIWA events and activities, it will feature online shopping and online membership sales and renewals.

*MIWA President, Dan LeBlanc*



*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.*

<b>President</b>	Dan LeBlanc
<b>Vice President</b>	Lee Solid
<b>Treasurer</b>	Jim Pedersen
<b>Secretary</b>	Robert Hutchison
<b>President Emeritus</b>	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

<b>Refuge Manager</b>	Ron Hight	<b>USFWS Liaison</b>	Dorn Whitmore
<b>NASA Liaison</b>	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**.

<b>Newsletter Editor</b>	Beth Homa	<b>Technical Consultant</b>	Sandee Larsen
<b>Habi-Chat Committee</b>	Beth Homa, Sandee Larsen, Dorn Whitmore		

## Merritt Island Refuge CCP Status

For those of you interested in the future management direction for Merritt Island NWR, stay tuned! We anticipate that a draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Refuge will be available for public review and comment towards the end of this year. In the meantime, expect to see a planning update between now and then. If you are not on the CCP mailing list and would like to be, fill out and send in a request form found at: <http://merrittisland.fws.gov/ccp/MailListReq-MI.pdf> or the Visitor Center, or contact Cheri at 321.861.2368.

### More CCPs: St. Johns & Lake Wales Ridge

Also, for those of you interested in the future management directions for St. Johns and Lake Wales Ridge NWRs, we are beginning CCP preplanning activities with Wildlife and Habitat Management reviews in May and August. And, we could begin public scoping later this year! If you would like to stay informed about these plans, get on the CCP mailing list for either/both of these refuges - fill out and send in a request form found at: h

<http://merrittisland.fws.gov/ccp/MailListReq-StJ.pdf> (St. Johns), <http://merrittisland.fws.gov/ccp/MailListReq-StJ.pdf> (Lake Wales Ridge), or Visitor Center, or contact Cheri at 321.861.2368.

**Cheri Ehrhardt, Natural Resource Planner**



**Little green heron by Joel Reynolds.**





## Miwa Minute Summer 2005

Well the birds and snow birds have left the area, leaving the truly tough behind to sweat out another summer. The heat is always bad news, but the good news is MIWA has received a \$1,500 donation earmarked for the Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project. This donation was made in memory of **Debbie Thomas** by a group of her good friends. As per their request a bench will be placed on the new Wild Birds Trail with a plaque containing the following verse by Emily Dickinson's *Hope is a Thing with Feathers*:

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all.



The group, **Debbie Thomas "Fly Away Friends"** will also be listed on the major donors sign at the Drive's entrance. Thank you for thinking of the Refuge. Debbie would be proud.

More good news: **The Halifax River Audubon Society** has donated \$250 to MIWA. This group has been an annual supporter of MIWA and we cannot thank them enough. Their donation allows them to be corporate supporters with benefits that include: 10 individual memberships, a 10% discount on purchases at the Bookery or online store, and a plaque of support on display at the VIC. Again, we thank you!

Even more good news: MIWA is now hosting a new website, **www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org**. With much technical help from **Brian Wright** of Delaware North Parks and Service staff and photo expertise from Refuge volunteer, **Ray Scory** (seen in photo at right), the new site is up and running. Visit the site for updates on Refuge and MIWA "Members Only" events and for our online store. Thanks Brian and Ray, you have brought us into the 2000's!

If you would like to make an in-kind or monetary donation, please contact the MIWA office at 321-861-2377.

See you at the Refuge!

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**



**Ray Scory, Volunteer. Photo by Sandee Larsen.**

### Bookery Buys

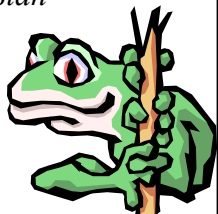
*The Identiflyer*.....\$32.99

Handheld song player with 2 song cards and guide. A great way to learn to bird by ear. For beginners and experts of all ages.

*Identiflyer Songcards* .....\$9.99 Create a library of birdsongs by adding additional cards to your collection. Collection includes: Bird Calling Card, Birds of the Night, Birds of the South and Birds of the Seashore.

*Jabebo Earrings*.....\$9.99. Constructed of recycled cardboard with a Polycrylic finish. Images are reproductions of original artwork. Available in assorted species that include: rail, alligator, monarch butterfly and orb weaver.

*Birds of Florida Field Guide by Stan Tekiela*.....\$14.95. This popular pock size 2<sup>nd</sup> edition publication contains info on 140 species. Color tabs allow easy access for identification.



The new Public Use intern for MINWR is **Ariel Hartney**, from Kissimmee, FL. She is majoring in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation at University of Florida in Gainesville, and will be a senior when she returns to school in the fall. Ariel will be v until the second week of August. Luckily, she has family in the area and so does not have to take advantage of the prestigious accommodations at BioLab. In the future, Ariel hopes to work for the USFWS in public use, or in a more biological role.



**Ariel Hartney, Public Use Intern. Photo by Sandee Larsen.**

**Daniel De Sousa**, a science teacher at Astronaut High School in Titusville, has been hired for the summer in support of the Refuge's environmental education program. Daniel will be writing standard-based environmental education programs correlated to the Sunshine State and FCAT standards. He was hired through the Summer Industrial Fellowships for Teachers (SIFT) program and will be here for a 7-week period.



## Whoooo's New at the VIC?

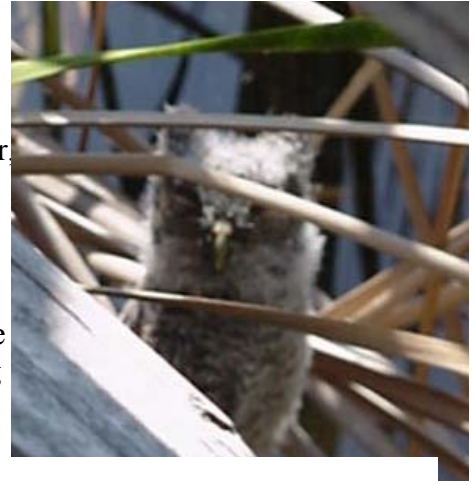
While cleaning the construction mess on the MINWR VIC deck in preparation for the Welcome Back Songbird Festival in April, a red-phased screech owl was discovered in the rafters. She was often observed mid-day perched at the opening, posing for photos to the delight of countless visitors. The male was spotted soon afterwards. It became a daily event to check on the two. When it came time to install the windows it was decided to check and see if an active nest could be

ind. Jim Lyons, Refuge Biological Technician, climbed a ladder and, armed with an extension mirror

soon spotted a pair of owlets. The window installation was halted and we eagerly waited for the babies to fledge. Weeks later, a visitor reported a baby owl in the reeds next to the boardwalk. Apparently the youngster left too early and had crash landed on the edge of the pond! Rangers felt the parents would be nearby and decided to let the little one be. Visitors took photos and youngsters delighted at the site of the baby owl. At the end of the day, I checked one last time before heading home and, to my dismay, saw that the owl was slowly sinking! The reed had apparently softened and could no longer support the owl's weight. Emergency! I headed into the VIC and, luckily for the baby, found LE Officer John Ross.

Armed with a handheld net, John scooped up the wet, angry owl and placed it in the fire bush where the daddy owl was perched. The next morning the baby was seen perched in the building's overhang and by the end of the day, had fledged. What a wonderful event. Thank you John, you are a hero to me and "Little Whoooty".

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**



## Songbird Festival

Once again the dedication and talent of the Refuge volunteers made the event a success. A big Thank You to the volunteers and MIWA members for their support! For the line up, Jim Angy presented a Nature Photography Workshop and Don Stap, University of Florida Professor, presented a program on Bird Song, based on his newly published book. Richard Poole and Christine Brown did a terrific job educating the visitors about their research by conducting bird banding and mist netting demonstrations.

Brevard Zoo brought some special guests to show off, including a beautiful Florida King Snake. Volunteers conducted several birding tours and an optics program. The Avian and Reconditioning Center drew attention with their live raptor presentation. Space Coast Audubon and the Friends of the Enchanted Forest were also on hand.

A Day Away Outfitters provided kayak tours of the Indian River Lagoon and naturalist, Rob Greene, entertained and educated folks with a live alligator. Terrific upbeat music by the Free Range Pickers mingled with the festival activities and the Children's Tent was a big hit. Volunteers worked diligently helping kids make bird feeders and stuffed manatees. Backyard Wildlife

Garden volunteers worked hard preparing the garden for the event and their efforts showed; the demonstration garden looks fabulous. MIWA Board Members were busy selling refreshments. Once again, thank you volunteers and MIWA for your tremendous support! We couldn't do it without you.

**Nancy Corona, Refuge Ranger**



**Jordan Green and Warren Camp hard at work making buttons. Photo by Sandee Larsen.**





## Small, but Mighty

The eastern screech-owl (*Megascops asio*) is one of our more common owls, but is rarely seen due to its small size and nocturnal habits. Standing 8–10 inches tall, this owl's call, a thin, wispy, descending trill, is often the only clue to its presence. If you are lucky enough to spot one, it can be identified by size, prominent ear tufts, and heavily streaked breast. Eastern screech-owls exhibit the widest variation in colors of any of our local owls and can range from a dark grey to almost red, with reddish-brown being the most common color. All phases of these colors can be present in the same family of owls.

Eastern screech-owls occur from east of the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Coast, and from Canada into Mexico. They are difficult to distinguish from western screech-owls and the two were once considered to be the same species. However, different bill colors and calls were the basis for splitting them into two species.

Habitats used by these owls are diverse, ranging from deciduous woodlands to lakesides to fields, and even suburban landscapes and towns. The one habitat feature absolutely required is large trees with available cavities for nesting and roosting sites. Screech-owls compete with several other species of birds and mammals for these sites, including squirrels, woodpeckers, and starlings.

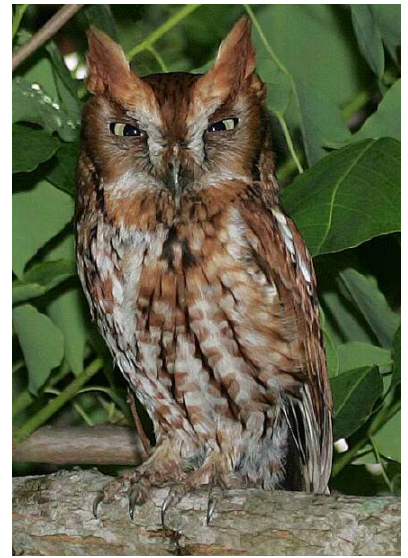
The screech-owl's diet is the most varied of any North American owl and is dependent on the region where they live and the habitat occupied. They will eat most types of invertebrates, including insects, crayfish, and earthworms. No small vertebrates are safe in a screech-owl territory; fish, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals such as mice, young rabbits, shrews, and bats, and even song birds are fair game. Screech-owls sit on a perch and sweep down on the unsuspecting prey item. Any food that is not eaten immediately is stashed in a cavity within the territory and may be used by the male as enticement for the female during courtship.

The reproductive ecology of the eastern screech-owl is very interesting and somewhat unusual. The pair bond is life-long, although a new mate will be taken if one of the pair dies or disappears. The pair does not migrate, but maintains a stable territory throughout the year. The individuals spend most of their time alone except during the breeding season. Male courtship is very elaborate with much body language, sweet talk, and offerings of food. Once the female accepts, a former roost cavity within the territory is converted into a nest cavity. No true nest is built, but a depression is made in the old food and other debris at the bottom of the cavity. Three or four eggs are laid, and the female stays on the nest throughout incubation. The male also stays close, except when hunting. He feeds the female and roosts within or very near the nest cavity during the day. An unusual habit that has been documented is screech-owls bringing live blind snakes (family Typhlopidae) into the nest cavity. It is believed that the snakes eat leftover food debris, excrement, and parasites, helping to improve nestling health and nest success. Incubation takes about 26 days and the young fledge four weeks after hatching. They cannot fly, but are proficient climbers and hoppers. By ten weeks after fledging, the young can fly and hunt, at which time the adults kick them out of the territory to fend for themselves.

Although they are considered to be fairly common, the position of the eastern screech-owl near the top of the food chain leaves it in a precarious situation. The loss, fragmentation, and degradation of natural habitats are serious threats to their continued survival. As with most of our top-level predators, screech-owls need large chunks of land to hunt, and being nocturnal makes them particularly vulnerable to road mortality. Rampant use of pesticides directly and indirectly reduces the abundance of many prey items. Other human-caused problems include the preponderance of owl predators such as raccoons and free-ranging cats, and the disruption of hunting by light pollution. Some positive things that you can do to help screech-owls thrive in our increasingly crowded area are limit or eliminate your use of pesticides, reduce or eliminate the use of unnecessary lighting, keep your pets indoors, drive responsibly and with care for wild creatures that must share our roadways, and build a screech-owl nest box for your yard (plans are

available on-line). Most importantly, become an educated, informed voter so we elect officials that appreciate and protect the value of all of our natural resources.

**Becky Smith, Wildlife Ecologist, Dynamac Corporation**





## Wildlife Garden Resurrected After Hurricanes

In the Spring and Summer of 2004, volunteers Peter Bartman, John Boucher, Bob Sleczkowski and Dan Witmer rebuilt the Visitor Information Center garden to the point that Lisa Graham was able to successfully apply for and receive the National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Wildlife Habitat certification and the University of Florida's Backyard Landscape for Wildlife certification. The garden is a demonstration garden to show what can be done in a backyard to support wildlife.

Unfortunately, a couple weeks later, three uninvited volunteers – Charlie, Francis and Jeanne – transformed the garden into a hydric hammock. This spring the original volunteer team was joined by Margaret Towe and Susan Waldron. They removed root-rotted plants and raised the center garden with over twenty cubic yards of soil and two truckloads of mulch. The garden has been replanted strictly with native species, including tropical sage, blanket flower, yellowtop, Tampa verbena, golden canna, tickseed, blue porterweed, cardinal flower and butterfly milkweed. Some plants were purchased through a donation from MIWA and others were donated by members and friends, including Betty Eichhorn, Judy Dryja, Sandy Juba and the Great Outdoors Nature Center, Sandee Larsen, Betty McKeown, Edd Ronco, Dan Witmer, Pat Knollenberg and members of the Volusia Master Gardeners. The demonstration garden was back in place for the Welcome Back Song Bird Festival.

If you would like to donate time, native plants or funds for this on-going project, contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668.

**John Boucher, Refuge Volunteer**



## Aboard The Beresford Lady

What is the Beresford Lady? It is a hand-made 90foot authentic side wheel paddle boat, weighing in at a whopping 129 tons. This year, The Lady, was the site for the annual MINWR Volunteer Recognition.

On a sunny, but windy day in late March, 75 people, volunteers and guests, and Refuge staff boarded the paddle boat expecting a leisurely three-hour ride along the St. Johns River. However, mother nature was feeling disgruntled that day: 30 mph winds pinned the boat against the dock. Fortunately, the beautiful scenic back ground of Lake Beresford, the upbeat staff, and the always supportive volunteers made the best of the dockside situation.



Volunteer hours totaled more than 5,500 hours for the year! Annually, volunteers reaching "milestone" hours are given additional Recognition. This year's "milestone" volunteers are: 250 hours (**Chuck Blakey, John Boucher, Dan Witmer, Jim Stahl, Bob Sleczkowski, Ed Larsen, Bob Kreidler and Tom Dunkerton**); 500 hours (**Mary Ann Theis and Sandy Walters**); 750 hours (**George Baker and Karl Eichhorn**); 1,250 hours (**Betty Salter**);

1,500 hours (**Bev Campbell**); 1,750 hours (**Joanne Napieralski**); and 2,000 hours (**Cary Salter**).

The Refuge staff sends out a tremendous thank you to all our volunteers for giving so much to the Refuge visitors, staff, and the natural resources. We couldn't do it without you!! Thank you to MIWA and its members for sponsoring this event. *All who attended the docked Spring Volunteer Awards Program will receive notice from Nancy Corona of the rescheduled program date (sometime in Fall 2005). There will be a \$12 per person fee to cover meal costs.*

**Nancy Corona, Refuge Ranger**

## Volunteers Bash the Trash

Local members of the community, including Cub Scout Pack 712 from Mims, came out April 16th to be a part of Trash Bash 2005 at MINWR. Participants chose from many locations coordinated by Keep Brevard Beautiful, our local chapter of Keep America Beautiful. Those who came to the Refuge had the opportunity to view wildlife, such as manatees and birds. The volunteers did an excellent job of cleaning up along the Haulover Canal and Bair's Cove Boat Ramp. MIWA provided pizza for the adventurous youngsters and adults, for their hard work and community service. The group picked up over thirty bags of trash, including everything from car batteries to baby diapers! Everyone involved had a great time while doing a wonderful service for the Refuge.

**Jordan Green, Refuge Intern**





## Volunteer and MIWA Member Art Exhibit

We know you love nature, now we want to see your artistic side. Please join us this summer for a Refuge volunteer and MIWA member art exhibition. All types of art media will be accepted, however, the content should be related to the Refuge or Florida's natural resources. There will be a public opening to celebrate the art work and to give visitors a chance to meet the artists. The exhibit will be on display in the Visitor Center's auditorium from the end of August through October. Please contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668 or email at: [Nancy\\_Corona@fws.gov](mailto:Nancy_Corona@fws.gov) for additional information. Join us and show off your artistic side!

**Nancy Corona, Refuge Ranger**



## Thank you to our Corporate Sponsors

**Delaware North Parks and Resorts  
Dixie Crossroads Restaurant  
Halifax River Audubon Society  
Merritt Island Wal-Mart Store  
Space Coast Audubon Society  
United Space Alliance**

### 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](http://www.MerrittIslandWildlife.org) or [www.nbbd.com/npr/MIWA](http://www.nbbd.com/npr/MIWA)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

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**.



### Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge Junior Ranger Program



Kids ages 6-12 accompanied by an adult are invited to participate in the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge's Junior Ranger Program. There will be five wildlife related programs presented through July. Kids that attend three of the five programs and create a wildlife project will be invited to an award ceremony and receive a Junior Ranger badge and certificate. Their projects will be displayed at the refuge Visitor Center in July. *All About Manatees* is scheduled for Tuesday, June 28 at 9:45 am.

Please contact Refuge Ranger Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668 or by email at:

[Nancy\\_Corona@fws.gov](mailto:Nancy_Corona@fws.gov) for further information and registration. Please meet at the refuge visitor center for each of the programs. The Visitor Center is located on SR 402, 5 miles east of U.S. 1 in Titusville.  
**Nancy Corona, Refuge Ranger**



### 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.

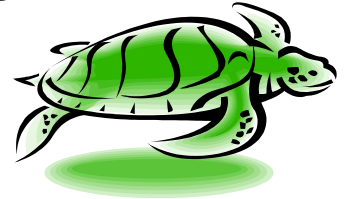
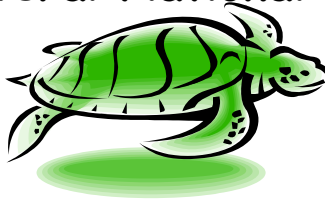
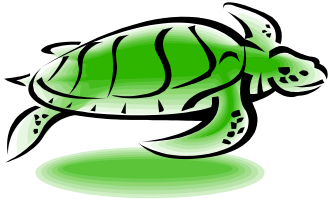
The Refuge is open daily from Sunrise-Sunset, except during Shuttle launch and landing operations.

# MIWA Members-Only Sea Turtle Walk

Saturdays: June 25<sup>th</sup> and July 9<sup>th</sup>

8:00 pm

MINWR Visitor Center &  
Canaveral National Seashore



Meet a Refuge Ranger at the MINWR Visitor Center for a short informational program followed by a trip to Canaveral National Seashore in search of a nesting sea turtle. Program typically lasts three to four hours. Long sleeve shirt, bug spray and comfortable walking shoes are recommended.

Cameras and flashlights are not permitted.

RSVP, as limited space is available.

Please call 321-861-2377 to reserve your space now.

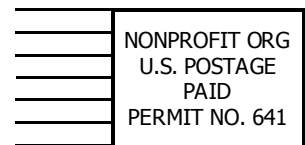


Merritt Island Wildlife Association

P.O. Box 6504

Titusville, FL 32782

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



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