



Volume 12, Number 1

# Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Spring 2006

## Refuge Update

If it seems the Refuge is busier than usual, you are right. Over 7,500 more visitors have come through the Visitor Center this year as compared to last year. In March alone we've had more than 14,000 visitors in the VIC, an increase of 15% over last year! More visitors mean higher sales and MIWA's sales grew \$12,000 thus far compared to sales over the last year.

Because of the increased visitation, the Refuge will keep the Visitor Center open for the first two Sundays in April. This may help off set the anticipated impact of the Max Brewer Bridge closure from April 17 - May 8. The County is replacing several spans of the bridge during this three week period. This means visitors will have to make a 40-mile journey to get to the Refuge. We expect visitation to drop sharply due to the bridge closure.

Visitors entering from the north will be able to enjoy the newly rehabbed Shiloh Marsh Road. The road snakes along the edge of the Indian River Lagoon for a distance of 12 miles and affords one of the most scenic drives on the Refuge. While one road opens another closes. Repair work is ongoing on the Bio Lab and Catfish Creek roads. Both suffered erosion from last year's storms and, with repair work wrapping up, the roads should reopen in April.

Another major construction project is taking place on the Hammock trails. The Refuge found funding to fix the trails damaged by the storms. The boardwalk on Oak Hammock Trail is being replaced and Palm Hammock Trail will be rerouted to bypass one section of boardwalk which could not be replaced. Palm Hammock has reopened and repairs on Oak Hammock will be complete by June.

Before the sultry temperatures of summer arrive, take the time to walk a trail or enjoy the views along Shiloh Marsh Road.

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



Crews from Brevard Workforce replace boardwalks damaged by the 2005 storms.

Photo by Dorn Whitmore

## Historical Tour – A Bushwhacker's Delight!



MIWA members make their way past a fallen tree.  
Photo by Joel Reynolds

Thirty MIWA members were hailed as "survivors" of the annual Refuge Historical Tour on Saturday, January 14<sup>th</sup>. The exciting event was led by Refuge Operations Specialist Dorn Whitmore. It proved to be quite a workout! Dorn led us to our first stop, the Dummitt homestead to discuss the origin of Indian River fruit and how homesteaders lived on Merritt Island. Then it was off to the Old Haulover Canal site to get a glimpse of the colorful past of boat haulers and merchants. Afterwards, we bushwhacked to the Sugar Mill ruins for a talk on sugarcane processing.

The road to Ross Hammock Indian Mounds proved to be slightly scary as we ventured over a bridge with a large gap, only to find that the road was blocked by downed trees. All voted to hike out to the site, which was at least a mile away. We hiked through muck and climbed over numerous tree trunks. It was well worth the effort to view the mound and surrounding area.

Thank you to Dorn for an adventurous day and to the members for sticking it out!! We are the champions of hiking tours!

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**

## MIWA Minute

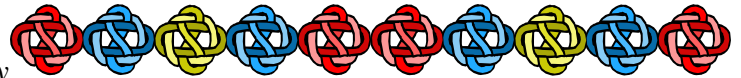
Things have been busy at the MIWA office and Bookery Nature Store. Sales have been fantastic and VIC visitation is up from last year!

MIWA has formed a scholarship program to provide funds for Refuge interns. We have earmarked over \$3,000 to supply weekly stipends for interns working in the Refuge's Public Use Program. Six internships have been completed since forming this popular program. If you or any college student is interested in participating, please contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668.

We are proud to announce awarding Refuge Planner *Cheri Ehrhardt* an Honorary Life Membership for volunteer computer support for the MIWA office computer. Cheri's expertise kept our system up several times during the season and was greatly appreciated! MIWA welcomes our newest Life Members, *Nan Wilson and Gary Stevens* of Titusville, FL. As Life Members, Cheri, Nan, and Gary will receive benefits including: discounts on field trips, educational programs and purchases at the Bookery Nature Store.

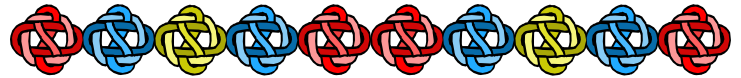
And a big THANK YOU to *Warren Camp, Clay Hutchison, Jim Pedersen, and Ed Larsen* for installing carpet, shelves, paneling and lights in MIWA's new Gadwall storage shed. The new storage area is conveniently located next to the VIC and has been a much needed addition for our Bookery stock. Thanks guys!

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**



A donation in memory of  
*Chuck Mason* was donated by  
**George English**

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



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

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## Update: Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project

We now have all the funding necessary to accomplish the Project. Dorn Whitmore obtained the services of a local engineering firm to provide the documentation necessary to get the required permits from the St. Johns River Water Management District. NASA Kennedy Space Center, through MIWA Board Member Jim Butts and our NASA Liaison, Mike Sumner, has agreed to provide the necessary poles we need for the project. The Space Center is replacing its wooden power poles with concrete ones and has a surplus of wooden poles, which are exactly what we need for our handicapped access tower, walkways, and observation blinds. Once we receive the permits, we will begin moving dirt at the Cruickshank Trail parking area, where the permanent restrooms will be located. We are also in discussions with Florida Power and Light Company about the possibility of support in erecting the poles. We are planning an unveiling of a temporary sign at the entrance of Black Point Wildlife Drive sometime in April. We will invite representatives from the contributors to the project and, of course, MIWA members.

**Warren L. Camp, BPWDEP Project Leader**



Snowy Egret Takes Flight on Black Point Wildlife Drive.  
Photo by Joel Reynolds

## Black Point Wildlife Drive Receives Grant

MIWA is a recipient of a Keep Brevard Beautiful Xeriscape/Beautification grant. This project is being led by Refuge volunteer John Boucher. John designed the plan, submitted the proposal and is supervising the project, leading a great group of volunteers informally known as the "Thursday crew". As an extension to the Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project, the grant is funding native plant vegetation along the Black Point Wildlife Drive. The plants are providing an attractive landscape both for visitors and for wildlife, particularly perching birds, and hopefully inspiring visitors to plant similar landscapes in their yards. The plantings are also providing screening for waterfowl and other marsh creatures.

**John Boucher, Refuge Volunteer**



Beverly and Dave Ousley of "Fly Away Friends".  
Photo by Bob Armbruster

## "Fly Away Friends" Visit

Beverly and Dave Ousley of the Debbie Thomas "Fly Away Friends" stopped in at the VIC on December 19, 2005. Afterward, they drove Black Point Wildlife Drive to look for birds and scope out the area of the new Wild Birds Trail. The "Fly Away Friends" are providing some funding for the Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project. Thanks for coming by the Refuge!

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**



## CCP Update!!!

Many of you are patiently awaiting the arrival of the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Merritt Island NWR. And the rest of you are saying, "CCP what???"

Well, very soon now the US Fish and Wildlife Service will be releasing the Draft CCP and EA for public review and comment. The Management Direction Chapter of the CCP implements the preferred alternative and provides guidance for future management activities, outlining goals for wildlife and habitat management, resource protection, visitor services, and refuge administration.

If you are interested in submitting comments on the Draft CCP and EA, you can request to receive a CD or paper copy of the plan. If you have not already done so and if you would like to receive a copy of the plan, please email [MerrittIslandCCP@fws.gov](mailto:MerrittIslandCCP@fws.gov) or call 321-861-0667 with your name, mailing address, and preference of a CD or paper copy. Otherwise, you can visit one of our local libraries, the internet, or the Visitor Center to view a copy. Comments should be sent in writing with your name and address to Merritt Island CCP, PO Box 6504, Titusville, FL 32782-6504; or [MerrittIslandCCP@fws.gov](mailto:MerrittIslandCCP@fws.gov); or 321-861-1276 (fax).

Feel free to contact us with any questions or for more information.

**Cheri M. Ehrhardt, AICP, Natural Resource Planner, USFWS**

## Lake Wales Ridge Overnight Trip a Success

What do you do on the coldest, most windy weekend in February? You take an overnight trip with MIWA! On Saturday, February 11<sup>th</sup>, twenty lucky members participated in a two-day tour led by Refuge Operations Specialist, Dorn Whitmore. After an annoying van rental complication, we were all escorted to Tiger Creek Preserve, enjoying wildlife along the way. Species viewed included: wild turkeys, numerous sand hill cranes, an eagle, a deer, and a lone caracara. At Tiger Creek we were greeted by Tricia Martin of the Nature Conservancy. After viewing an informational video, we took a guided walk to see endangered plants of the Lake Wales Ridge. Then it was off to feast on lunch and to check in at Archbold Biological Station (ABS). There we were met by Hillary Swain, Director of the ABS, and were treated to a guided hike where we viewed numerous scrub jays and learned of the endangered plants and history of the Station. After a short break, we had a meal in the Station's dining hall. We departed Sunday morning, stopping in Lake Placid to view the historical murals throughout the downtown area.



MIWA Group at the Archbold Biological Station.  
Photo by Betty Camp

Our next destination was Bok Tower, where we adventured through the gardens and were treated to numerous species of birds that included: quail, pilated woodpecker, and wood ducks. We also enjoyed the sight of a red shouldered hawk flushing birds from their perches in the sanctuary. The tired, but happy group was loaded into the vehicles and all returned to the Refuge.

Thank you to Dorn, Hillary, Tricia, volunteer drivers Warren Camp & Ed Larsen, and all the members for a wonderful adventure. Let's do it again next year!

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**

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## Lake Woodruff NWR Field Trip is Finger Licking Good!



Making Breakfast at the Table!  
Photo by Joel Reynolds

Thirty hungry MIWA members attended the Lake Woodruff NWR/ DeLeon Springs State Park field trip led by Refuge Operations Specialist Dorn Whitmore on Saturday, March 18<sup>th</sup>. We were greeted at the meeting point by three sand hill cranes flying over the parking lot. Then, the group caravanned to DeLeon Springs and started the day off with a pancake breakfast at the Ole Grist Mill (you cook your own pancakes right there at your table on the grill!).



The Ole Grist Mill at DeLeon Springs State Park.  
Photo by Joel Reynolds



MIWA Group at Lake Woodruff NWR.  
Photo by Joel Reynolds

Afterwards, all were treated to a Pontoon Boat Tour down Spring Run. Birding was light with several species sighted that included: various herons, egrets, coots, limpkins, a red shouldered hawk, and a barred owl perched in a tree on the hiking trail. After a brown bag lunch, it was off to the Lake Woodruff NWR for a three-mile hike. Here we viewed coots, little green herons, snowy egrets, and a small flock of sand hill cranes flying overhead. Thank you, Dorn, for a beautiful day at the Spring and Lake Woodruff Wildlife Refuge.

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**



## The Eagles Have Landed



**Bald Eagles in Nest with VAB in the Background.**  
Photo Courtesy NASA/KSC

Wildlife Refuge, established in 1962 and operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuge provides a protected habitat for migratory birds and endangered and threatened species.

"Even though it is a very unusual marriage between technology and nature, the marriage has lasted more than 40 years," explains longtime ranger Dorn Whitmore. "And one of the species that really benefits is the bald eagle."

Merritt Island is a stronghold for eagle nests, Whitmore continues. About a dozen pairs of the majestic birds make the refuge their home; some stay year-round, but most migrate north for the summer. Around September, they begin arriving one by one. They can be seen sitting atop high towers, trees or utility poles, keeping a wary eye out for their mates. Eagles maintain bonds with the same mate for life, only taking up with a new mate if the previous one dies or fails to arrive at the breeding ground.

When a couple reunites, they must reclaim their territorial nest, occasionally booting out birds that moved in during their seasonal absence. This can be a battle, and the eagles don't always win.

Once the nest is reclaimed or rebuilt in a nearby tree, the birds prepare to expand the family. They add to their nest and line it softly with blades of grass. In late November or early December, the female lays an egg, sometimes two. The downy eaglets hatch around Christmas.

Like any newborn, a newly hatched eagle is dependent and needy. The youngsters stay in the nest, spending most of their time with their mother, while their father hunts for food -- although mom occasionally takes off to hunt on her own for awhile. It takes about three months for a young bird's "flight feathers" to grow in.

"They'll just jump up on a day with a strong breeze, and hover above the nest in the wind, flapping their wings," Whitmore says. "Then, pretty soon they'll take that first flight, and leap out and take off."



**Young Eagle Waiting for Food.**  
Photo Courtesy NASA/KSC

On a crisp morning on the east coast of Florida, an American icon prepares for its maiden voyage. A thin layer of fog stretches lazily between the palmettos, slowly burning away in the morning sun. The tension mounts until the moment approaches. Then, with a sudden burst of movement, the great bird leaps from its launch pad, rising above the treetops and gliding away on the breeze.

This scene plays out every spring at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida, but it's not a sleek space vehicle that's taking off this morning: It's a fledgling American bald eagle.

Kennedy is best known as a gateway to space. Its landscape is dotted with towering launch pads and support facilities filled with high-tech hardware. But the launch complex has a wild side. The space center shares a boundary with the Merritt Island National



**Mother Bald Eagle Feeding Her Eaglet.**  
Photo Courtesy NASA/KSC

Around April, the family's time together comes to an end. After caring for each other and their young for several months, the adult eagles leave separately for the journey north. All of the youngsters, still immature and lacking the signature white head and tail feathers of an adult, usually accompany one parent. Whitmore suspects they stay with their mother, learning the best places to live and eat so they'll be prepared to establish their own nests and families when they reach maturity around their third or fourth year.

It will be months before the parents see each other again. But every year in early fall, they'll reunite at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge -- and among the space flight hardware of Kennedy Space Center, they'll launch a new generation of eagles.

**Anna Heiney, NASA's John F. Kennedy Space Center**



## Hello to...

...Sandy Edmondson who will be temporarily helping us out in the Bookery. Sandy formerly worked at MINWR as a Ranger.

## Goodbye to...

...Jesse Wagner our seasonal Bookery sales associate who has moved to Florida's west coast so she can continue her studies and seek employment in the fashion design field. Thanks Jesse for all the hard work!

...Audrey Preston, our spring intern. She is leaving us to return to her summer job as an Assistant Group Director in Acworth, Georgia. As for her plans come August? She still is not sure what she will be doing... Maybe graduate school or back in the area looking for employment in environmental education.



Audrey Preston with a Captured Alligator.  
Photo by Sandee Larsen

## Cuckoos at It Again

On May 13<sup>th</sup>, along with three other young birders from around the country, I will participate in the World Series of Birding in New Jersey. This is an event where teams of birders try to spot as many species of birds as possible in one day. Last year my team, the Nikon/Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival Coastal Cuckoos, became the first youth team to see 200 birds in one day. Our final total was 212, which was good enough to win the youth division and place third in the overall competition. Over the past two years the team has raised in excess of \$15,000 for conservation, and last year we raised \$3,500, which I donated to the Space Coast Audubon Society and the Merritt Island Wildlife Association. The money raised for conservation comes from pledges. If you wish to pledge please contact me at either ravenboy@cfl.rr.com or (321) 258-2353 and leave your name, a way to be contacted, how much you would like to pledge, and whether you would like your money to go to the Space Coast Audubon Society or the Merritt Island Wildlife Association. After the competition I will contact you and tell you where to send the pledge, as well as how the team did on our competition. Thank you for your help!

Andy Bankert, Youth Birder Extraordinaire

## Bookery Buys

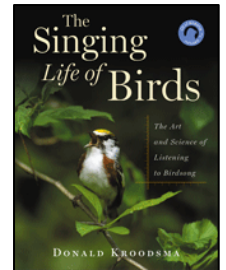


### Scenic Driving: Florida

By Jan Annino Godown.....\$15.95  
Inside this regional travel guide, you will find individual itineraries, maps and in-depth descriptions of attractions throughout Florida.

### The Singing Life of Birds

By Donald Kroodsma.....\$28.00  
This advanced birdsong book teaches the reader to identify, and identify with, singing birds, while connecting with nature's musicians in a whole new way. An included CD allows you to hear what you see on the pages.



## MIWA Donates to Katrina Relief

With a huge storm surge and winds over 150 miles per hour, Hurricane Katrina swept into coastal Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana causing major damage. The Friends of J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge started a fund to assist Refuge colleagues whose families were displaced or who had major damage to their homes. MIWA gladly contributed \$500 to the FWS Hurricane Katrina Fund and encourages all members to contact the Ding Darling Friends group at: 1 Wildlife Drive, Sanibel, FL 33957 or call 239-472-1100 to donate or get additional information.

We can be proud of the incredible efforts that Service employees and Refuge Friends have provided to wildlife, local residents, and communities in the areas hardest hit by Katrina.

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager

## Laurilee Thompson Receives Laureate Award

Congratulations to MIWA Board Member Laurilee Thompson for being inducted into the Junior Achievement of East Central Florida Hall of Fame. Best known as the owner of Titusville restaurant Dixie Crossroads and founder of the annual Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival, Laurilee is an active member in the North Brevard community. She is well deserving of this honor. Again, congrats Laurilee!

Brad Sloan, Habi-Chat Editor

Habi-Chat has email! If you would like to be on our mailing list to receive MIWA announcements, please add us to your safe senders list and send a request to [HabiChat@MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org](mailto:HabiChat@MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org)



### Visitor Information Center Hours

Monday through Friday

8:00 am – 4:30 pm

Saturday and Sunday\*

9:00 am – 5:00 pm

\*VIC is closed Sundays from April-October

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

### Manatee Treasure Box

Educators, are you interested in teaching your elementary students about manatees? If so, you can borrow a free outreach program called the "Way of the Manatee" Treasure Box. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission developed this outreach tool to educate the public about the natural history and conservation of the West Indian Manatee.

This program is designed for use in the classroom (public, private and home-school). You can borrow the treasure box for two weeks with the possibility of an extension. Also, you can visit the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge with your students and see manatees in the wild. Please contact me at 321-861-0668 or by email at Nancy\_Corona@fws.gov to request the "Treasure Box" and to arrange a guided school field trip to the Refuge.

**Nancy Corona, Public Use Ranger, USFWS**

### New Species Discovered on Refuge!

On December 9, 2005, Trisha Crabill, a graduate student conducting research on her Master of Science degree in biology from Towson University, discovered a northern dwarf siren (*Pseudobranchius striatus*) on the Merritt Island NWR. The significance of this find is that it has never before been reported this far south in its range and the discovery extends the known distribution of the species south into Brevard County, Florida.

**Trisha Crabill, Graduate Student  
with Marc Epstein, Refuge Biologist**



Trisha Crabill Holding a Dwarf Siren.  
Photo by Marc Epstein

### MIWA Bird Tours a Popular Event

Numerous MIWA Members attended our first series of Member's-only birding tours. Led by MIWA Board Members and bird enthusiasts, Jim Pedersen and Ned Steel, as well as by volunteer Jim Stahl, the tours were filled to capacity. Hundreds of bird species were sighted, as well as a few active eagle nests. Thanks to Jim, Ned, and Jim for your devotion to nature, the Refuge and MIWA.

**Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager**



Ned Steel and Jim Pedersen.  
Photo by Audrey Preston

### Merritt Island Wildlife Association

*Supporting the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge*  
Joining is simple. Just fill out this form and mail it to the Merritt Island Wildlife Association at P.O. Box 6504, Titusville, FL 32782 or join online at [www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org](http://www.MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org).

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**.

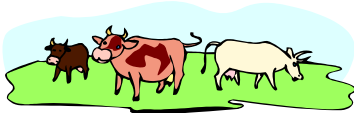
## Forever Florida

This year's Refuge spring volunteer appreciation trip and awards ceremony were held at Forever Florida in St. Cloud. We took a swamp buggy ride through the Crescent J Ranch and the Forever Florida conservation area. Sightings included: a caracara, swallow-tailed kites, sand hill cranes, a bald eagle, and many Florida cracker cattle and horses.

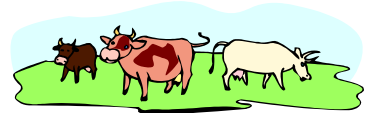
After the ride, we were treated to a delicious barbecue lunch that was followed by the awards ceremony. Volunteers were recognized with awards of merit for hours worked over the year. The volunteers worked a combined total of over 5500 hours last year, which is equivalent to 2.4 man-years of work. Without their hard work, the Refuge would not have the proper staff to provide many public use services. Congratulations to Cary Salter for receiving the first Volunteer of the Year award! Cary put in over 460 hours over the year covering the information desk, leading birding tours with his wife Betty, roving, special events, and assisting with many other projects.

Many thanks go to all of the Refuge volunteers for the hard work, Nancy Corona for organizing the event, the staff of Forever Florida for being so kind, and to MIWA for sponsoring this annual event.

**Brad Sloan, *Habi-Chat* Editor**



Refuge Volunteers at Forever Florida.  
Photo by Betty Salter

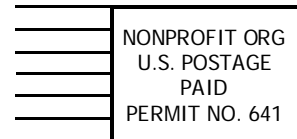


Forever Florida is an established area of pristine Florida wilderness set up by the Allen Broussard Conservancy. Eco-safaris, horseback rides, and hiking trails are available to experience the unspoiled ecosystems.

For more information, call 1-866-854-3837 or visit [www.floridaeco-safaris.com/](http://www.floridaeco-safaris.com/)



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



The Max Brewer  
Bridge will  
be closed  
April 17-May 8<sup>th</sup>.

