



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 12, Number 4

Winter 2006



Florida Cracker Cows at Forever Florida.
Photo by Joel Reynolds

2007 Winter Field Trips

January 20 **Forever Florida** – We will depart the Visitor Center at 8 A.M. and drive about 1 hour to the privately owned 4,700-acre working cattle ranch west of Melbourne. The highlight of the day will be a swamp buggy ride which takes us through the cattle ranch before entering the “wilderness” area. Forever Florida has the largest herd of Cracker cattle and horses in Florida, as well as a lot of wildlife. After the tour we will have a barbecue lunch at their restaurant. After lunch we will travel a short distance to the Three Lakes Management Area for a rare look at whooping cranes. We will return to the Refuge by 5 P.M. The Refuge will provide transportation for the first 20 who register. Group size is limited to 30 people. Cost is \$36 per person. Leader: Dorn Whitmore

February 17 **Archie Carr & Pelican Island** – The tour begins at 1:30 P.M. at Coconut Point County Park, located on A1A in south Melbourne Beach. We will make several beach side stops to learn about the Archie Carr NWR, and visit the Pelican Island NWR Centennial Boardwalk and tower to view our first National Wildlife Refuge. We will later board the River Queen for a sunset cruise to witness the nightly ritual of the birds returning to roost at Pelican Island. An optional dinner is available at Captain Hiram’s Restaurant. Return is on your own. For those in the Titusville area interested in riding or car pooling, the FWS van will depart the Visitor Center at noon and holds 10. (The first 10 who are interested can ride free.) Group size is limited to 30 people. Cost is \$16 for the boat tour; the optional dinner is not included. Leader: Dorn Whitmore

March 10 **History of Merritt Island** – Merritt Island has an interesting and colorful past. Historic sites abound, from the remains of a Seminole War fort, to a home site of the first pioneer citrus grower, to the old Haulover Canal, to a sugar mill ruins, to Indian mounds. All sites are found well off the beaten path and bush whacking through undergrowth is the only way to get to these sites. This is not for anyone who has trouble walking or is in poor physical condition. This all-day tour begins at the Visitor Center at 9:00 A.M. and is limited to 20. Transportation is provided. Bring a brown bag lunch. Fee: none. Leader: Dorn Whitmore



The remains of the Dummitt House.
Photo by Joel Reynolds

Space is limited for all four tours! Please RSVP to the MIWA office @ 321-861-2377.

MIWA Minute

MIWA has been busy this past season and sales are brisk, even with the shuttle launch & landing closures. The biggest change visitors notice is the MIWA corporate sponsor sign designed and installed by MIWA Board Member, **John Tribe**. All corporate sponsors are now listed on this colorful sign, on our website, and in every *Habi-Chat* published. Thanks John for a job well done! Want to see your company displayed? Contact the MIWA office for corporate support levels.

MIWA welcomes our newest Corporate Sponsor, **Advanced Electrical Installations, Inc.**, and our newest Life Members, **Kerry Palermo** and **Darlene Koenig**, both from Merritt Island. As Corporate Sponsors and Life Members they will receive benefits, including discounts on field trips; educational programs; and purchases at the MIWA Gift Shop, the *Bookery*. We encourage all members to become actively involved in our programs and we ask you all to promote membership to your friends and families.

A big **Thank You** goes to **United Space Alliance** for its annual donation of \$1,000. USA has been a loyal partner to MIWA through the years and has always supported our conservation and educational programs. Without its support many programs at the Refuge would not exist. Thanks for your generous gift!

MIWA would also like to thank the **Titusville Wal-Mart** for its generous donation of damaged bird seed bags. We have received over 100 lbs of seed in just 4 months. Thank you Wal-Mart!

For information on volunteering at the Refuge, contact Nancy Corona at 321-861-0668. Feel free to call MIWA's direct line, 321-861-2377 if you need membership or retail information, or if you would like to make a donation.

See you at the Refuge!

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager



Board Member John Tribe with the new MIWA Corporate Sponsors' VIC Sign.
Photo by Sandee Larsen



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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Treasurer	Jim Pedersen
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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** Cheri Ehrhardt
Habi-Chat **Committee** Brad Sloan, Sandee Larsen,
Dorn Whitmore, Cheri Ehrhardt
Official Photographer Joel Reynolds

Thank You to Our Corporate Sponsors

Advanced Electrical Installations, Inc.
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Manatee Release

The keynote speaker for the MIWA annual meeting on October 11 was Mike Walsh, the Director of Veterinary Medicine from Sea World of Orlando, Florida. He discussed the capture, treatment, rehabilitation, and eventual release back to the wild of injured manatees. By a fortuitous coincidence the next morning, when our Thursday group of volunteers showed up for work, the Refuge received a phone call from Sea World stating that a truck and crew were on their way to the boat ramp at the Max Brewer Causeway and asked if we would be able to assist in the release of a manatee. Of course we said yes and headed down to the boat ramp.

The animal that they had was a 1,700-lb. female and the personnel from Sea World were too few in members to get the manatee off the truck and into the water. In the end it took 14 of us from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, MIWA volunteers, and Sea World to release it back into the water. After the release she circled back around the boat ramp where we were all still standing as if to say, "thank you for the assistance." She then headed to the deeper waters of the Indian River Lagoon where it is hoped that she will produce future generations of manatees for us to observe and enjoy.

Dan Witmer, Refuge Volunteer



Refuge personnel and volunteers assist in a manatee release.

Photo by John Boucher



Southeast Regional National Wildlife Refuge System Friends Workshop

The S.E. Regional Friends Workshop was held at the J.N. Ding Darling NWR, October 27-29, 2006. MIWA was represented by Board Member Warren Camp and Bookery Manager Sandee Larsen. The Refuge was represented by Refuge Deputy Manager, Ralph Lloyd and Refuge Operations Specialist, Dorn Whitmore.

Attendees were welcomed by Rob Jess, Project Leader of Ding Darling Refuge and Jim Sprankle, President of the Ding Darling Wildlife Society. Afterwards, we were treated to discussions and programs by Sam Hamilton, Regional Director for the Southeast Region and Evan Hirshe, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

MIWA truly shined as Warren played a key role in the Education Program, and MIWA was recognized as ***the top friends group in the region!***

The three day workshop sessions included the listed programs:

- NWRS Strategic Plan: How it Impacts Your Refuge and How Friends Can Help – Rick Schultz, Washington Office Division Chief, Conservation Planning and Policy
- ABCs of Establishing Relationships with Congress – Desiree Sorenson-Groves, National Wildlife Refuge Association
- Reaching out to Non-Traditional Audiences – Toni Westland, J.N. Ding Darling NWR
- Change as Inspiration: Fear, Frustration, and Flying – Ann Smith, Friends of Black Bayou NWR; Ralph Gilges, Friends of Bon Secour NWR; and Rob Jess, J.N. Ding Darling NWR
- Friends Making a Difference with education – Julie Binz SEWEE Association; Charman Cupit, St Catherine Creek NWR; and ***our own MIWA Board Member, Warren Camp***

All were treated to a beautiful social and a fabulous dinner at The Sanctuary on Saturday night with keynote speaker, Jim Kurth, Deputy Director of the National Wildlife Refuge System, providing an inspirational speech. We wrapped up the workshop Sunday with a National Friends Update by Trevor Needham, National Friends Coordinator, and Garry Tucker, Regional Visitor Services Chief. Thank you to the Ding Darling Wildlife Society and Refuge for their hard work coordinating the conference.

Sandee Larsen, MIWA Bookery Manager



Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project Update and Ribbon Cutting

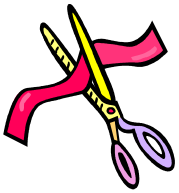


The new handicapped accessible viewing platform on Black Point Wildlife Drive.
Photo by Warren Camp



Board Members Jim Pedersen and Robert "Hutch" Hutchison try out the new Black Point restrooms.
Photo by Warren Camp

We have completed two features of our project: the handicapped accessible platform with a handicapped accessible spotting scope and the permanent restrooms. We are also about 40 - 50% complete on the two observation decks on the "Wild Birds Walking Trail". After completion of the two decks, hopefully in late January, we will begin work on the two small observation blinds on Cruickshank Trail. We will begin landscaping around the handicapped platform and the restrooms and improving the walking trail along the dike road leading to the two decks, right after the holidays. Signage is now being designed and will soon be ordered.

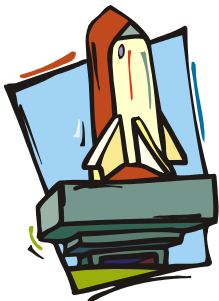


There will be a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony and all MIWA members are invited. The event will take place in late March on Black Point Wildlife Drive at the entrance to the Wild Birds Walking Trail, which is about 2 miles into the Drive.

Watch our website and your email for event announcements.
Warren L. Camp, Project Leader, Black Point Wildlife Drive Enhancement Project

Volunteer Social at KSC a Blast!

This year's Refuge Volunteer Fall Social took place at the Kennedy Space Center Visitors' Complex. We were generously treated to lunch with an astronaut, featuring Col. John Fabian, of the shuttle missions STS-7 and STS-5-G. While we enjoyed the excellent meal, Col. Fabian spoke to us about his experiences in space and gave his insights on the future of the space program. Following that, we were given some time for Q&A and then photographs with him.



Then, we were given full admission to enjoy all the sights the KSC Visitors' Complex has to offer, including the bus tour and IMAX films.

Thanks go out to Dan LeBlanc at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, Col. John Fabian, and Refuge Volunteer Coordinator Nancy Corona for setting up such a wonderful event. And many thanks to all of our volunteers for their continued hard work!

Brad Sloan, *Habi-Chat* Editor



Astronaut John Fabian (Back Row, Center) poses with the Refuge volunteers.
Photo by Betty Camp

***Species in Focus:* Wild Hogs - Uninvited Guests at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge**

In the 1500s when Spanish explorers were making their way throughout Florida, they unknowingly left behind a legacy that will forever change the nature of Florida: the introduction of feral hogs.

Early settlers arriving in what is now known as Florida brought with them a host of animals, including sheep, goats, horses, cattle, and hogs. Today, the descendants of some of those mostly free-ranging, feral (wild) hogs roam throughout the lands of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Tell-tale signs of their rooting behavior can be seen along many roads throughout the 140,000-acre Refuge.

Behind Texas, the State of Florida has the second largest feral hog population in the United States. This non-native species has become a serious nuisance animal throughout much of the southern United States, including Florida. Now found in all 67 Florida counties, an estimate of the statewide population is at one million animals. In many rural areas of Florida, as many as 15-20 hogs per square mile is not uncommon.

The average adult wild hog weighs about 100 pounds, though they can weigh up to 400+ pounds. They have thick, coarse hair which is usually black, brown, red, or tan. A highly developed sense of smell and hearing is useful as these omnivores roam the woods feeding on a variety of both plant and animal matter.

Hogs are extremely adaptable creatures and reproduce up to three times per year with an average litter size of four to six piglets. In a few short years, one pair of hogs and their offspring can become hundreds. They need only three things to survive: food, shade, and water. Hogs use a variety of habitat types in Florida, from flatwoods, upland pine, and bottomland hardwood forests to coastal areas, marshes, swamps, and more open agricultural lands. However, hogs prefer large forested areas with abundant food, particularly acorns, interspersed with marshes, hammocks, ponds, and drainages. They also seek cover in the form of dense brush and areas with limited human disturbance. Dense cover is used as bedding areas and provides protection from predators and hunters. Because most of Merritt Island Refuge fits their preferences, hogs can be found in all habitat types in search of acorns, roots, seeds, grubs, worms, and insects. Their foraging behavior leaves behind disturbed soils and uproots native vegetation. Other negative impacts include destroying nests and eggs of ground nesting birds, sea turtles, and reptiles; competing for food with native wildlife, such as deer and turkeys; and carrying diseases, including brucellosis that can spread to livestock.

In most parts of Florida, including the Refuge, feral hogs are considered domestic livestock and are the property of the landowner. In attempts to reduce impacts, feral hog removal contracts are in place throughout the Refuge to help control the population size through trapping. Once established, control of feral hog populations is usually difficult and eradication is virtually impossible. It is highly unlikely that hogs will ever be eliminated from Refuge lands, so the goal is to minimize their impacts as much as possible.

Kathy Whaley, Deputy Refuge Manager, MINWR Complex



Wild hog in the brush.

Photo by Joel Reynolds

Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival

The 10th Annual SC Birding and Wildlife Festival will be held January 24 - 28, 2007, celebrating a decade of the promotion of nature-based tourism and outdoor adventure opportunities on the Space Coast. Programs include key note speaker presentations, seminars, workshops, and field trips.

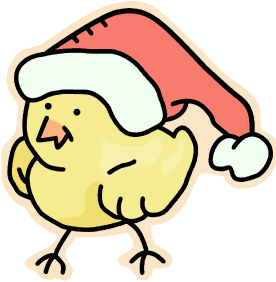
MIWA will be hosting a booth in the exhibit center, promoting our association and the Refuge and selling nature-based retail items. Please stop by to visit!

For festival information, contact the festival office by phone: 1-800-460-2664 or 321-268-5224, or by e-mail: neta@natureandspace.com.

See you at the festival!

Sandee Larsen, Bookery Manager





Great Refuge Christmas Bird Count!

This year's Christmas Bird Count was a super success. Many of the best birders in Florida were with us, as well as several out-of-state experts. This is the 106th-year for the count nation-wide. Your Refuge has been participating for almost 40 years.

Very early (5 A.M.!) on the morning of December 18th, about 60 sleepy, but eager folks gathered at the Refuge's Visitor Information Center for coffee and breakfast. After some last minute shuffling of teams, we were off to what was to be an extraordinary day of birding. The weather was perfect – unlike last year's cold, wet, windy, and downright yucky conditions. Teams dispersed throughout the count circle before dawn and the chase was on. When we all gathered back at the Visitor Center 13 hours later, there was a noticeable buzz in the air. Rumors of "never-before-seen birds on the count" were quietly moving through the reassembling birders.

The tally began... tired, hungry, muddy, and sun-reddened people sat quietly ticking off each bird as its species was called. Were we to have a total higher than last year's 161 species? Were there really some rare birds seen?

At the end of the long, long day, your Refuge count was 168 species! (Later to be increased by one... a Barn Owl was observed just inside the south edge of the count circle by Dave Freeland on his way home).

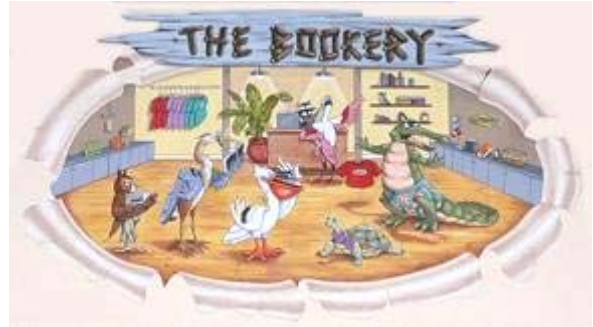
Birds seen that are really uncommon on our count: saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrow, all three scoters, golden-crowned kinglet, gull-billed tern, several hummingbirds, black-throated green, and parula warblers.

Birds seen for the first time on our count: common merganser, brown creeper, Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow, and a dovekie.

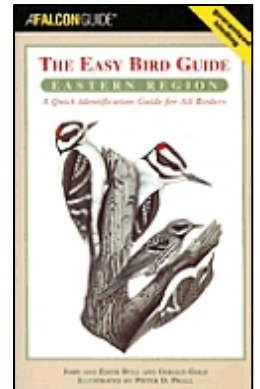
Jim Pedersen and I thank all of the folks who helped us make this super count: our birders from all over, Dorn Whitmore and the Refuge staff, and your MIWA volunteers and employees. We had a great day and are already looking forward to next year's Christmas Bird Count.

Ned Steel, MIWA Board Member and CBC Coordinator

New Items in



The Easy Bird Guide: Eastern Region
By Falcon Guide.....\$14.95
The perfect identification guide for beginner and casual bird-watchers of all ages. Clearly written and easy to use, this well-organized book introduces readers to the hobby of birding and contains all the information needed to quickly identify 253 of the most common birds in the eastern United States.

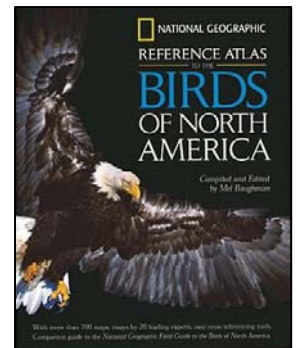


Stuffed Plush Manatees

By Wishpets.....\$6.99 or \$12.99
These adorable stuffed manatees are available in three variations: large, small, and puppet.

Reference Atlas to the Birds of North America

By National Geographic.....\$35.00
Whether you're curious about the birds in your backyard or wondering where to find that elusive species to add to your life list, this is the book for you – a comprehensive, definitive atlas of all of the more than 800 species of North American birds.



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



Hello to...

... **Beverly Osborne**, our new Environmental Educator. Beverly is from Titusville and was a Biology professor at Valencia Community College. She is also a freelance wildlife artist. Beverly will be working on the Refuge's education programs and leading MIWA Refuge tours.

Do you have an idea for the *Habi-Chat*? You can submit articles and pictures for consideration to:
HabiChat@MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org

Blazing Paddles

Jesse Ingram's first priority for establishing his new kayaking business was creating a positive and giving relationship with the Refuge. And he did just that. In December, Jesse offered a free kayaking trip to Refuge volunteers, providing all the equipment, instructions, and expertise. More than 20 Merritt Island NWR volunteers paddled for a two-hour eco-tour around Haulover Canal and Mullet Head Island (a rookery island). Close encounters with dolphins and manatees were just some of the highlights. Mullet Head Island was colored white with roosting white ibis and egrets and speckled brown and black from loafing brown pelicans and cormorants. The returning volunteers were exuberant and thrilled. A big Thank You to Jesse for his generosity!

For additional information on eco-tours for all ages, please contact Jesse at 321-890-9992 or visit www.FloridaBlazingPaddles.com
Nancy Corona, Public Use Ranger



Refuge volunteers enjoy the kayak trip.
 Photo courtesy of Blazing Paddles



Gifts in remembrance were donated by...

*...George English in memory of his friend
 Robert L. Fairman*

*...Chris Mackiewicz in loving
 memory of Andy Bennett*

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



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.



Refuge volunteers and the staff of Blazing Paddles.
 Photo courtesy of Blazing Paddles

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

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**.

MIWA Members-Only Refuge Tours

Birding and Wildlife Tour

Wednesday, February 7th 9:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.

Tour with MIWA board members, Jim Pedersen & Ned Steel, to identify the many native species of birds and wildlife on Black Point Wildlife Drive and other areas of interest. Transportation is provided for the first nine members, all others follow safari style via personal vehicles. Voluntary carpooling is suggested.

Please RSVP to the MIWA office @ 321-861-2377

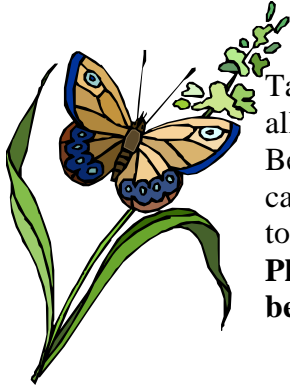


Bio-Lab Wildlife Tour

Saturday, February 10th 2:00 P.M. – 4:30 P.M.

Take a ride on one of the Refuge's most popular driving trails and encounter all of the plant and wildlife that it has to offer. Environmental Educator Beverly Osborne will lead the tour to show you all of the diverse biology you can find on the drive. Tour via the Refuge passenger van, so space is limited to only nine attendees only!

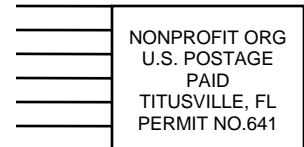
Please RSVP by email to tour leader Beverly Osborne at beverly_osborne@hotmail.com



Tours begin at the Refuge Visitors Information Center



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



The CCP is available for
public review and
comment!
Call 321-861-0667

