



FRIENDS MATTER



Staying Up-To-Date With the Refuges and Friends

From Barb Howard

Friends activities are on hold while the Covid-19 pandemic is still active, but the birds and sea turtles continue on with their lives. A few FWS mission critical activities are being done.

- Bird stewards and bird surveys are essential and are continuing with limited volunteer participation.
- Family groups have been going to the Pinellas Refuges to do counts. If you have a kayak, canoe, or shallow draft boat with trolling motor you are welcome to head out to the Pinellas Refuge islands to count birds -but please do not disturb them. Email your counts, date, and time to Friends@TampaBayRefuges.org, and let us know if you see anything that seems out of order.
- USFWS, State Park, and Audubon staff have been doing the census and monitoring the wildlife for Egmont and Passage Keys.

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- The guardhouse education center at Egmont is still closed until further notice. We will keep you posted and let all the docents know when activities can resume. The Hubbards Egmont Key ferry from Fort de Soto to the island is up and running.

We miss seeing all of you and can't wait for the pandemic to end. Before you know it this will be in our rearview mirror and we can resume field trips for adults and school children, great Ales & Wild Tails presentations, bird counts, island cleanups, docents at the Guardhouse, and festivals.

Meanwhile, if you want to learn more about nature? Various organizations have wonderful virtual presentations that you can join:

Friends of the Tampa Bay NWR is working to bring you a zoom program on the Tampa Bay Refuges. Watch your email for the date!

Center for Biological Diversity (on demand) – Go to www.SaveLifeOnEarth.org and scroll down to Speaker Series to view the on demand talks. If you sign up at the *Join Now* link (top right home screen) you will get advance notice of new live zoom presentations. The Center is our partner for Ales & Wild Tails.

Sensing Nature (weekly) – wildlife and habitat – Go to www.sensingnature.com to sign up. You must register for the event to have the zoom link sent to you. They have presentations by Jeanne Murphy and Brian Lane, the FL Master Naturalist instructors in Pinellas County.

Weedon Island Preserve – Go to www.WeedonIslandPreserve.org and scroll down to Special Programs, Classes, Events. Below the title you will find current talks. You must register to get the zoom link.

St Pete Audubon (monthly) – Go to www.StPeteAudubon.org and look for the coral color banner for Online Speaker Series. The zoom link and password are provided or a phone number if you just wish to listen to the talk.

Florida Native Plant Society has a nice menu of presentations for the plant-minded. Go to www.fnps.org

Not familiar with Zoom? The St Pete Audubon site has great links to help you download zoom and get connected. Zoom will work for all the online presentations, each one has a code and password. You will definitely find something to interest you, be it advocacy, wildlife, and/or habitat.

Nesting Season on Egmont

Nesting on Egmont was a challenge this year for many of the species. As always they stuck with it and in the end did pretty well. Here are some of the nesting highlights.

Egmont remains a very important sanctuary for beach nesting birds. We'll start with the Black Skimmers. In early June tropical storm Cristobal washed out the first Black Skimmer nesting colony. Being troopers, the 189 pairs (more than last year) nested again and were able to fledge a good crop of chicks. Florida Park Service staff kept the beach colony safe from accidental disturbances by visitors.

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American Oystercatchers were three families strong this summer. One pair raised three chicks – an outstanding feat! The second pair raised one chick. Unfortunately the third nest was lost.

Oystercatchers are a state-listed threatened species so we are always happy to see nesting success.

As always the Laughing Gulls were our largest and loudest group of nesting birds – the gulls were 20,000 pairs strong this summer, raising many, many chicks.

Terns also fared pretty well this summer - there were 5190 pairs of Royal Terns and 120 pairs of Sandwich Terns.

The Brown Pelican colony had 187 pairs of birds raising chicks.

The White Ibis decided to abandon Egmont mid-way through the season, but happily re-nested just to the south on Passage Key NWR. On the June peak nesting survey there were approximately 150 pairs of Ibis with 50 chicks. Joining them on Passage were approximately 400 pairs of Laughing Gulls nesting and resting. Numerous other birds rest on Passage Key throughout the year as the island is slowly growing back.

Sadly, Loggerhead Sea Turtle nesting was really impacted this season. 96 nests were laid, which is down from last year's 152 nests and 2018's 165 nests. We had 46 nests hatch of the 96 laid which is actually remarkable considering the weather and tides. In the past 2 years, 6-15% of the nests didn't hatch. This year a whopping 52% of the nests were lost due to storms and tides.

Success is dependent on how deep the mama turtle puts those eggs. You can tell the younger mom's nests from the older mom's nests based on depth, with age comes wisdom and experience for these sea turtles. An amazing observation was that many nests hatched successfully on the eve just prior to Hurricane Sally. Surely they did not know Sally was going to impact Egmont Key.

Bottom line, we had 3365 hatchlings successfully make it to the Gulf to begin their new lives this year. Thank you to State Park staff who faithfully monitored and counted the turtle nests this year.



Photo by Tom Bell



A Great Conservation Win

We received some good news this summer from our partners at the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

“On August 4th, 2020, the President signed the **Great American Outdoors Act** into law, ushering in a major funding boost for the National Wildlife Refuge System and fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The National Wildlife Refuge Association is thrilled that after decades of deterioration of infrastructure, congress has set aside \$1.9 billion each year for the next five years to tackle the maintenance backlog of our nation’s public lands. The National Wildlife Refuge System will receive 5% of this funding each year, or \$95 million. The National Wildlife Refuge Association looks forward to working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to full implement these programs and improving wildlife refuge habitat for wildlife and visitors alike.”

You can read more about this Act at <http://bit.ly/NWRAGAOA> or visit RefugeAssociation.org.

This is great news as our refuges have been scraping along for many years!

Birds of the Refuge: Belted Kingfisher *

(Megaceryle alcyon)

Refuge Locations – always a joy to spot, Belted Kingfishers can commonly be found fishing from a mangrove perch on most of the Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge islands, from late summer through late spring.

Stocky and large-headed with a shaggy crest these solitary birds fish along edges of streams, lakes, bays, and estuaries. Their rattling call usually gives them away as they fish by plunging headfirst into the water. The Belted Kingfisher is one of the few bird species in which the female is more brightly colored than the male. The rusty belt distinguishes the female from the males. Kingfishers nest in steep or vertical dirt banks, digging a long horizontal tunnel with a nest cavity at the end. These nesting tunnels are generally 3-6 feet long! Pleistocene fossils of Belted Kingfishers (to 600,000 years old) have been unearthed in Florida, Virginia, Tennessee, and Texas. The oldest known fossil in the kingfisher genus is 2 million years old, found in Alachua County, Florida.



Photo by Tom Bell

*information courtesy of Cornell Lab of Ornithology, All About Birds; and K. Kauffman; Lives of North American Birds

Pinellas NWR Nesting Update

The Pinellas NWR mangrove islands had another solid year. At Little Bird Key the new oyster reef balls protecting the island from erosion have been successful and, after less than a year, are covered with tiny oysters. That is what we want to see! The stars of Little Bird this year were a pair of Reddish Egrets that successfully fledged three chicks. We also had Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons and Double Crested Cormorants nesting on the island.

Jackass Key also had a successful nesting year for Great Blue Herons and Double Crested Cormorants, and continues to be a nightly roosting site for our Magnificent Frigatebirds. One count this summer yielded over 1,000 frigates resting on the island. That is quite a spectacle! Frigates roost on Jackass Key in the summer and travel south to places like the Dry Tortugas to nest in the winter.

Indian and Tarpon keys, our largest islands, continue to host feeding resting birds in great numbers but have not hosted any colonial nesters in several years. Tarpon Key was one of the largest Brown Pelican nesting islands in Florida as recently at 1990 when over 300 pairs of Brown Pelicans used the island. USFWS staff continues to work diligently each year to keep the island pest free. We hope that the colonial nesters will return soon, in the meantime we do look forward to our nesting Prairie Warblers every summer on these islands.



Photo by Tom Bell

A Busy Day at Egmont Key



Photo by Patrick Mundus

Egmont Key Refuge Report

It was a very busy and challenging summer on Egmont Key. The island saw record numbers for boaters visiting the island from early spring through the end of summer. There were numbers on a typical weekend that in years past we would only see on the 4th of July. USFWS and Florida Park Service staff worked very hard to keep visitors and wildlife safe. Friends bird stewards were on the island for 14 weekend days this summer assisting staff with visitor and wildlife monitoring.

Then came the storms. We had a remarkable year for storms and all five (!) have left some sort of impact on the island. Tropical storms Cristobal and Hannah came first, washing over our beaches and nesting areas, causing intense flooding. Hurricanes Marco and Laura were very close together and again heavy rains with beach wash over and more flooding. Then came the wrath of Hurricane Sally which along with king high tides flooded the interior and the beaches. All five of these storms produced a lot of erosion and loss of beach on Egmont's Gulf side.

The wall of the gun battery can be seen in two places facing the Gulf around Battery McIntosh. The power plant again has sea water on the west side (this is the area that received sand nourishment in June of 2019). The southwest casemate has such a skinny beach that it can only be accessed on foot along much of the beach. Many downed trees are scattered along the beach. The south tip of the island lost a significant amount of beach and the entire area where the majority of the Royal and Sandwich Terns nested this season is now gone. Overall it has been a very hot, very windy, very wet,

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and very active storm season! As you see in the nesting report, king high tides and tropical storms plagued our nesting birds and loggerhead sea turtles all summer.

The positives were that no direct tropical storm or hurricane hit Egmont Key, many turtles have hatched, the shore birds were resilient in moving around to avoid high tides, the triplet Oyster Catchers have proud parents, and the Black Skimmers said we will do this all over again with great success.

The visitors who came to the island this year, have been awesome. They are sharing the shore and protecting the wildlife. Our wildlife is important and our beaches are special. We want to add a great big thank you to USFWS and Florida Park Service staff and volunteers for managing the island under unprecedented difficult conditions all summer. THANK YOU!

Now that fall is here it is time to work on winter projects to prepare for nesting season 2021.

(Special thanks to Nancy Whitford whose reporting helped to keep us informed throughout the summer.)