



# FRIENDS MATTER

## 2020 - It's a Wrap

In spite of the majority of 2020 being put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March, Friends volunteers had many accomplishments. The Friends as well as the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) put all volunteer activities on hold as it became apparent that COVID-19 would be a significant problem. We hoped it would be short lived but no such luck.



*Osprey on Egmont Key; photo T. Bell*

The NWR system decided shortly after closing down all Friends activities to let “Mission Critical” volunteering proceed. Mission critical includes protecting the wildlife and habitat on the refuges. USFWS requires standard COVID protocols, masking, social distancing, etc. With these guidelines we were able to proceed with bird stewards on Egmont, bird surveys on Pinellas, and refuge maintenance support.

The first group up were the bird stewards. Egmont Key was, literally, busier than ever this spring and summer. We quickly saw record numbers of private boaters coming out to the key for some sunshine and recreation, weekend after weekend. Joyce Galiardo, our bird steward coordinator, assembled a team of veteran stewards, each willing to go out multiple weekends in the summer, to assist with the task of watching the colony and educating visitors. The stewards talked to the visitors about the value of undisturbed sanctuaries like the south end of Egmont Key. Stewards are the eyes and ears for our USFWS law enforcement team and they did a fantastic job!

As the summer progressed we began to better figure out how to work with COVID protocols. With these precautions in effect, Friends volunteers continued some basic chores, repairing boats, installing signs, and other maintenance tasks on Egmont. The summer and fall tropical storms hit Egmont Key very hard (see article in this newsletter), not only impacting our seabird nesting numbers but damaging equipment, docks, and infrastructure on the island. The fall of 2020 was focused on getting equipment back up and running and cleaning up the refuges.

The bird survey coordinators, assembled teams to go out to count the monthly Pinellas Refuge islands safely. Dave Howard planned counts for the boat and Pat Mundus scheduled kayakers. January and February were normal counts using the Fish & Wildlife boat but starting in March all counts were done by people who normally quarantine together using boats and kayaks. All together 7458 birds were counted!

In addition to volunteer support, Friends provided \$21,536 in direct support of the Tampa Bay NWRs. Friends contributed to the upkeep of the Egmont cabin, paying for new windows and siding for this critical piece of infrastructure. This cabin is used by our refuge managers and officers when they are working on the island allowing them to spend the night and save hours of commuting and boat time. We are also looking at improvements for the Egmont Guardhouse, hoping to upgrade some of the displays and cabinets. We are anticipating the return of the 500 year old dugout canoe that was found washed up on Egmont in 2019. The state of Florida is preserving this artifact which will be displayed at the Guardhouse in a new exhibit.

Outreach was limited in 2020, but we were able to participate in Raptor Fest at Boyd Hill Nature Park in St. Petersburg before the pandemic really took hold. We gave presentations about the Tampa Bay Refuges to Eagle Audubon in Sun City Center as well as a zoom presentation to Sarasota Audubon. We were able to host two in person Ales & Wild Tails before shutting them down in March.

In the education department, we paid for school buses to send 47 fourth graders and 13 special needs children on field trips to learn about nature in January. We hope that the fall of 2021 brings a safer environment so we can again offer funds to pay for the buses for Title 1 school children grades 1-5 this fall.

Adult field trips were on hold for 2020, but early in the year some of our volunteers participated in a bird rescue training at Seaside Seabird Sanctuary in Indian Rocks Beach in January. This was part of our ongoing effort to help reduce the impacts to and deaths of Brown Pelicans coming off of the Egmont Key nesting colony. The Friends group is closely following and supporting the pier steward volunteer programs at Skyway Fishing Pier State Park (Friends of the Pelicans) and Fort de Soto Gulf Pier (St. Pete Audubon). Egmont Key had 187 nesting pairs of Brown Pelicans in 2020.

We are hoping for many more activities in 2021. We miss getting together for field trips and are tentatively planning one for this fall. We have agreed to participate in an outdoor festival March 6 in Apollo Beach and are tentatively on the schedule for Shark Con at the Tampa Fairgrounds, indoor event, July 10 & 11.

Be safe, get vaccinated, see you soon!

Barb Howard, President



*Staff and volunteers resigning Pinellas NWR; photo P. Mundus*

## Birds of the Refuges

Spotlight on  
Black-crowned Night Heron  
(*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

**Refuge Locations** - Black Crowns are found on most of the Pinellas NWR mangrove islands but most commonly on Little Bird Key, where they nested in 2020. We recently noticed over 50 Black Crowns resting on Little Bird Key.



*Black-crowned Night Heron; photo T. Bell*

These chunky looking herons are noted for their hunched over look. As their name implies they do most of their work at dusk and at night, resting during the day. Some studies suggest that they feed at night because they are dominated by other herons and egrets by day. A cosmopolitan species, they nest on every continent except Australia and Antarctica making them the most wide spread bird of the heron family.

Black crowns nest in colonies usually mixed with other species. These could be herons, egrets, ibises, cormorants, and/or brown pelicans. The male chooses nest site and displays there to attract mate. The nest (built mostly by female with materials supplied by male) is a simple platform of sticks. 3-4 eggs is a typical number for a nest, and these eggs are incubated by both the male and female. The young fledglings leave the nest after about 4 weeks, at 6 weeks they can fly.

Black crowns can live for up to 20 years. Their numbers, while greatly reduced in the last 100 years from habitat loss, are considered stable at this point. Let's keep it that way!

*\*information courtesy of Audubon.org field guide*



*Sample gift shop ornaments*

## Online Gift Shop Coming in 2021

We'll be creating an online gift shop this year so you can buy your favorite ornaments, pin cards, and miscellaneous goodies. It will be on our website [www.tampabayrefuges.org](http://www.tampabayrefuges.org).



*Overwash sand from Tropical Storm Eta at Battery Mellon; photo N. Whitford*

## **Notes from Egmont Key – Recovering from Eta**

Tropical Storm Eta roared through the Gulf in November 2020. The Tampa Bay Refuges didn't have a direct hit but as the storm passed by from south to north, along with super high tides, it caused water to surge across Egmont Key. There was tremendous flooding. The trails coming off the beach looked like beach with all the debris of plastics, trash, sea grass, sticks, dock boards, and sand. The winds were so strong that it pushed the mix all the way into the main roads, and into Battery Mellon and MacIntosh. Sand pushed onto the mail trail, Battery Avenue, in front of Battery Howard. The trail was only accessible by tractor until FL Park Service was able to remove the sand and debris. The biggest issues were the intersection between the mine wharf, clearing the sand by Battery Howard, clearing trees that fell, removing dock boards and wood from the beach with all the nails and screws, and clearing palm fronds from all the interior trails so visitors could walk the island. Park Service staff then started working on the other main roads and trails in detail. Ranger Tom Watson has removed at least 100 tractor buckets of sand and there is still more to do. So far, the north part of Palmetto Street, Division Street, and Battery Avenue have been completed. Other paths and roads are in the process. Remember, this is being done by a few Park staff since volunteers are on hold. So much work from one storm.

Eta took out many of the NWR signs along the beach. Some of these signs are lost and some are buried. Staff has been locating them, digging them out and reinstalling them. It is important to have these in place during nesting season, as they are critical to law enforcement. Passage Key NWR was completely overwashed and also lost most of the signage. Some of the buried signs were dug out and reset in early January, but there is of course more to do.

## Notes from Egmont Key – Recovering from Eta (cont.)

One of the most critical items damaged in Eta was the dock in the pilots compound. Unfortunately the portion of the dock that the USFWS boat uses was severely damaged and is unusable at this time. We are currently docking at a different spot without a boat lift. USFWS is working with the pilots association to determine the best course of action at this time to repair or replace this. The USFWS cabin in the pilots compound weathered the storm well.

Eta also took a huge amount of sand off the beach. The sand dunes that were in front of the batteries on the west side are now gone and you can see the structure itself. This is not good. If water undercuts them they will be lost like the ones on the southwest end of the island.

On another note, the birds are happy on Egmont! Royal Terns and Turkey Vultures are populating the island along with many of the usual winter shorebirds. The Osprey from the fire tower who lost her mate last year has a new mate who built her a castle on the fire tower! It is huge and very exciting. The American Oystercatcher pair who had triplets last year are now feeding together. Looking forward to their next batch of chicks!

A big thank you to Tom, Gage, Nancy and Stan for all your hard work on the refuge! Thank you to Nancy Whitford for all of the reporting and information in this article.



*Battery MacIntosh exposed by TS Eta; photo D. Howard*

## History of Conservation in Tampa Bay Audubon's Coastal Islands Sanctuaries

Audubon's Coastal Island Sanctuaries are an important part of Tampa Bay's wildlife habitat. Located on the east side of Tampa Bay between Apollo Beach and Tampa these sanctuary mangrove islands of important wildlife habitat were established in 1934. That year Dr. Herbert Mills in cooperation with the Florida and National Audubon societies hired Fred W. Schultz as the full-time warden to protect the island of Green Key in Hillsborough Bay. Schultz soon expanded his patrol to include the newly created Alafia Banks islands that were created from the deepening and widening of the Alafia River channel. Fred managed the sanctuary until 1962 with the help of his wife Idah. The Fred and Idah Schultz Nature Preserve near Whiskey Stump Key in Hillsborough County is named after them. In 1994 Audubon staff officially named the islands they manage in Tampa Bay and further south, the Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries.

Audubon staff assists USFWS each year with with peak nesting counts on the Pinellas Refuge islands each year. In turn, USFWS staff and volunteers keep an eye on several Audubon managed islands in Boca Ciega Bay, including the Miller Family Island Refuge near the Don Cesar Hotel. Working together helps keep our these important Tampa Bay mangrove island habitats safe and productive.



Warden Fred Schultz (left)

## Friends Volunteers - CBC 2020

Friends volunteers participated in two Audubon Christmas Bird counts this year. Pat Mundus, Edie Stone, Alex Panos and Joe Porter counted Indian Key for the St. Petersburg count, They found 621 birds of 25 species. Highlights of the day were a large flock of Red-breasted Mergansers (200+) and a lone Bald Eagle.

Barb and Dave Howard counted several of the Pinellas Refuge islands for the Fort de Soto area count. They found 1227 birds of 27 species, including a large flock of Redheads (250+) out feeding in Boca Ciega bay.