



FRIENDS MATTER



Staying Up-To-Date With the Refuges and Friends

From Barb Howard

It has been a tough nesting season on Egmont and Passage Keys. Tropical Storms Elsa and Fred impacted the Refuges in early July, at the peak of nesting season for birds and sea turtles. Beaches on both islands experienced high storm surging and tides, but the birds and turtles persevered. The birds with chicks walked them up the beach to higher ground. State Park personnel had also made sure that the beach escarpments were broken down, allowing the birds to move up to safe ground. Thank you!

After Topical Storm Elsa, some sea turtle nest wash-outs actually hatched though several turned out to be false crawls. Good news, two of the crawls thought to be false ended up hatching. One just never knows. Despite high tides and tropical weather, there was strong

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success. Turtle nesting has now slowed down with only two new nests on Egmont in August.

Fortunately, Tropical Storm Grace tracked further to the west and brought some wet weather to the refuges, but no surges. When a tropical storm or worse is threatening, both Federal and State personnel prepare for the worst and evacuate. Their equipment is driven up a ramp to the Guardhouse porch to provide a few extra feet of protection. Without question, there is plenty to do in active storm seasons like what we experienced this year.

The nesting on the Pinellas Refuge islands was successful with Jackass Key winning the prize for the most nests. Little Bird Key, our longest consistent nesting island, again nested several species. The Pinellas Refuge islands, hosted nesting and resting Roseate Spoonbills, Reddish Egrets, Great Blues, Little Blues, Tri-colored, Black-crowned Night, and Yellow-crowned Night Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets, Brown Pelicans, White Ibis, Cormorants, Prairie Warblers, and more. Large numbers of White Pelicans utilize Tarpon Key for resting during the winter, and Magnificent Frigatebirds can be found nearly year round roosting on Jackass Key. We are most proud of our Reddish Egrets!

The Egmont Key Guardhouse is still closed. To open we must file a request to Fish and Wildlife Service showing that Covid-19 is not rampant in the area. Needless to say, there isn't a chance for approval.

We continue to do bird surveys on the Pinellas Refuges, a mission that is essential, but only including a few volunteers and require volunteers to be vaccinated and wear masks. Several bird stewards have been helping out on Egmont, weather permitting, since that is again an essential mission.

The Friends school environmental education program for K-5 is now set up to pay for buses only with no volunteer naturalists to lead. Instead, teachers are responsible for covering and presenting the field trip educational materials. When the pandemic is behind us, we intend to restart the program with our naturalist volunteers.

Please stay safe, wear your face masks, and get vaccinated if you can. You are important to us and our refuges!

Annual Egmont Key NWR Bird Sanctuary Tour

We had another great tour of Egmont Key's bird sanctuary areas and historical buildings in June. To meet demand and maintain social distancing, we scheduled the event for two days so the boat on each day would be about half capacity. Hubbard's ferry staff did a fantastic job piloting us around the island and we saw the closed sanctuary area with its amazing numbers of nesting birds and chicks.

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Mark Rachal and Ann Paul (retired), from Audubon of Florida's Coastal Island Sanctuaries, were our outstanding interpreters. They never cease to amaze us with the facts they teach us each trip. Our Refuge biologist, Joyce Kleen, joined us on Saturday to add to the tour expertise. Before touring the sanctuary, Pat Mundus and Dave Howard provided an historical overview of Egmont Key that was followed by a short walk to see the island's ruins and the Black Skimmer colony near Battery Howard.



Re-boarding the ferry, we headed to the southern Sanctuary. This year the nesting birds included Royal Terns, Sandwich Terns, Brown Pelicans, American Oystercatchers, Laughing Gulls, Black Skimmers, and a few White Ibis. Passage Key NWR also had successful nesting this summer.

Notes From Egmont Key

By Nancy Whitford

The Black Skimmers on Egmont Key had an eventful year. Our original Black Skimmer colony on the northwest corner grew quite large this year because someone set off fireworks and displaced the St. Pete Beach colony. That colony joined the Egmont colony in early July laying eggs right away. The original colony had been on the island since Memorial Day. The results were two hatching of



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chicks, one from the original birds and another hatching of chicks in late July. The last Skimmer chick hatched August 11. By September, the chicks had all fledged. A very different and interesting successful nesting season for the Skimmers!

Cute story, a larger fledge was trailing some fishing line from its feet and a seagull was pulling on the trailing end pulling the baby. The parent sat on the chick to keep it in one place. This happened to be right along the south border of the enclosure. As the parent had its back to me, I grabbed the chick, fishing line and all, with a towel and, very patiently, removed the line from its legs, then returned the chick to its same spot. It immediately ran to its parents. I'm grateful the parents trusted me and more grateful the chick was saved.



The northwest end and half of the north tip of Egmont, from Battery Howard to Battery Mellon, was the place to go after the chicks in the south sanctuary fledged. The Skimmer enclosure was filled with birds:

Willetts, Skimmers and fledged/unfledged chicks, Royal Terns and fledged chicks, Sandwich Terns and fledged chicks, occasional drop-in of the red banded and the green banded American Oystercatchers, Laughing Gulls, and Brown Pelicans. One Big Happy Family!

Egmont visitors have really enjoyed seeing all the birds and have been terrific about respecting them. They apparently understand that taking the detour around the birds gives the birds the space they need to thrive.



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The final pair of Osprey, who were on the Egmont Lighthouse, fledged their twins and can finally eat in peace. Fall and winter will bring a calmer season with birds disbursing to other areas.

We had 135 Loggerhead Sea Turtle nests as of Aug 31. Fifty-two nests have hatched with great success. The two storms with high tides that impacted Egmont this summer took their toll on the remaining nests except for 2 that we still expect to hatch. The nests wash out, wash over, or are impacted by ants or roots. The eggs incubate for approximately 55 days, we (State Park staff and volunteers) wait five days generally and sometimes four days after first hatch so any remaining turtles can hatch naturally. This is called a second or sometimes even a third emergence. It is recommended to wait only three days, but we have a much bigger success rate waiting a little longer as the natural process is best for the hatchlings.

Recently, a hatch after the waiting period, resulted in over 40 live hatchlings needing our assistance - they just could not climb up and out - the cavity was extra deep. All healthy, all ready to go, and all released after dark. Sea turtles do not reach sexual maturity until 35 years of age, and it is very rare to have that many live after a big first hatch. We believe it was a young mom that dug her cavity way too deep because she was not experienced. In this case, not only was the cavity too deep, she put too much sand on top during her body pitting to disguise the nest. This crawl, with a lay date of May 31 and hatch date of July 22, ended up super successful because we are one of 36 Index nesting beaches in Florida and verify every nest. Without verification, all these babies would have perished.

Red tide has come and gone, come again, gone, and come again. Each day is different and unique and largely depends on the direction of the wind and, of course, the tides. We have had a large number of Goliath Grouper and Black Drum, along with many smaller fish and eel that have died. It is sad and smells bad. State park personnel and bird stewards keep a very watchful eye on the birds to make sure they are getting good nutrition and aren't sick. We believe the birds are seeking fish farther off-shore where there is no red tide.

Birds of the Refuge: White Ibis *

(Eudocimus albus)

One of Florida's most ubiquitous wading birds, White Ibis can be found on all the Pinellas NWR islands, and commonly nest on both Egmont and Passage Keys.

White Ibises are highly sociable, feeding and roosting in small flocks, and nesting in larger colonies. These wading birds are easily recognizable by their red legs, down turned bill and black wingtips. The exception to that are the first year juvenile birds that

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brown above and white below.

Females of the species are smaller than males, weighing nearly 10 ounces less on average with a smaller bill and shorter wings. White Ibises nest in colonies near salt or fresh water edges, changing locations nearly every year. Adult birds rely on freshwater forage sites to nourish and raise their young. They are dependent on access to both salt water and fresh water



environments. For example, Ibises nesting on Egmont Key must leave the island each day to feed, and then return to feed their growing chicks. When White Ibis chicks hatch their bills are straight. Their bills don't start to curve downward until they are 14 days old. It takes the young about 7 weeks to leave the colony and forage with the adults.

Loss of quality nesting and feeding habitat is probably the biggest threat to White Ibises in Florida.

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

Little Bird Key Wins Golden Mangrove Award

We are proud, and certainly excited, to share that the Little Bird Key shoreline stabilization project was awarded a Golden Mangrove Award from the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. In 2019 we partnered with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Tampa Bay Watch, the Tampa Bay Environmental Restoration Fund, and the Tampa Bay Estuary program to stabilize Little Bird's degrading shoreline. This important work protects the small, but vital, mangrove island near Tierra Verde in lower Tampa Bay.

Little Bird Key is one of the seven



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mangrove islands that make up the Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge. All of these islands are important habitat for many native avian species including pelicans, egrets, herons, spoonbills, cormorants and others. Although Little Bird is a small island, less than one acre, it has been a consistent nesting island for many years. Since 1990, when USFWS bird surveys were initiated, Little Bird has hosted thirteen different species of nesting birds. Recently the island has been nesting Great Blue Herons, Reddish Egrets, Black-crowned Night Herons, Green Herons, Double Crested Cormorants, and Roseate Spoonbills.

Little Bird is free of pests, such as rats and raccoons, and is off limits to humans and their pets. It is surrounded by shallow waters and rich sea grass beds. Small mangrove islands are also important for the fishery and water quality of Tampa Bay, which has lost over 40% of its coastal wetlands (mangroves and salt marshes) over the last 100 years. The preservation of the remaining habitats is necessary for

both water quality and wildlife habitat. Projects such as this one are important for improving the water quality and general ecological health of Tampa Bay.

Over the years ongoing wave action from the large number of recreational boaters passing north of the island have undermined and toppled mangroves on its northwest shoreline. If not addressed, this erosion will continue to damage the mangroves holding the shoreline and reduce the size of the already small key, likely spitting it in half.

Tampa Bay Watch proposed installing a linear field of eco-friendly concrete reef balls to dissipate wave action and protect Little Bird's shoreline. Reef balls are an ideal substrate for bay oysters, which help clean the water by filtering between 2 and 5 gallons per hour. The balls also provide habitat for



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small fish and crustaceans within their holes, allowing for water and fish movement. The zone on the landward side of the balls allows for sediment accretion and will eventually provide the substrate for advancement (or re-advancement) of mangroves that are vital to the success of Little Bird as a nesting island for the area’s birds.

Calendar of Events

Months	Dates	Event	Details
October	October 15—16	Florida Birding and Nature Festival @ Manatee Center in Apollo Beach	Excellent festival. Friends will have a booth at the Center outdoors and under the shelter.
	October 23—24	Discover the Island at Egmont Key	
November	November 6	Wonders of Wildlife Festival, Plant City	

Monthly Bird Surveys: Reduced capacity on the boat—must be vaccinated and willing to wear a mask throughout the survey.

Field Trips: In the works: a kayak trip on the Little Manatee River and an overnight trip to Gainesville to visit some of its great wetland areas, sinkholes, bat house, and more.