

Friends Matter

Barb Howard, President

What's Up in the Refuges...



Spring is in full swing and the refuges and Friends have a lot going on! The Pinellas Refuges are fantastic this year with Little Bird and Jackass keys the main nesting sites. The *willa-willa* sounds of Snowy Egrets and the cacophony of chicks begging for food is a joy. Many of the birds nest in the interior or in the canopy; we can only imagine how it looks.

Things are not quite so busy on Egmont Key. It appears the Egmont birds have moved over to Passage Key. As of early May we have an Osprey and two pairs of American Oystercatchers with eggs. Disturbances from multiple sources like crows, humans, dogs, and more are major dangers for the eggs and the chicks when they hatch. On the plus side, Passage Key NWR is now up to about 12-acres and is loaded with nesting birds! We will keep you current on Egmont and Passage Key nesting when the wind slows down and USFWS staff can safely take out a boat to survey.

For the past year Friends has been producing a film entitled *Where Birds Can be Birds*, about the Tampa Bay Refuges. It is now completed. Jennifer Brown, of Into Nature Films, created the film and did a fantastic job. We can't wait to share it with you. The video will soon be available on our website, www.TampaBayRefuges.org, and we'll be sure to send you the link.

The Friends annual meeting was held via Zoom on March 14, 2022. Stan Garner, FWS Tampa Bay Manager, gave an update which, as always, was interesting and informative. Your Board of Directors elected for 2022 are Barbara Howard, Patrick Mundus, Debi Lanning, David Howard, Travis Knous, Sandi Johnson, Rick Powell, and Edie Stone. Dave Kandz has now retired and will be traveling, but he and his wife, Kim, will still be involved with our IT, website, and social media. We thank them for all their contributions since 2007!!! The board wants to welcome Joe Porter who joined the board this month.

We are looking forward to getting lots done this year, and that's because of YOU!. Please be sure to send us your ideas for conservation and/or education projects we could take on as we move forward,, or just any comments you may have. You can reach us at Friends@TampaBayRefuges.org.

WANTED—Bird Stewards



From mid-May through Labor Day, volunteers donate weekends and holidays as bird stewards, overseeing the designated Bird Sanctuaries on Egmont Key. A US Fish & Wildlife Service program, bird stewards help to protect nesting birds by assisting the agency's law enforcement officers and staff and the Florida State Park's staff. Stewards help to ensure that island visitors do not disrupt the birds habitat by entering the closed sanctuaries. Importantly, they also educate the public about birds, their behavior, and why the beaches have protected areas.

We're about to begin our 18th year as bird stewards out at Egmont. The simple presence of stewards has made a positive difference in the amount of disturbances to nesting seabirds which, ultimately, results in a successful nesting season! And while we can't directly measure the educational impact our stewards have made, we're confident that it's significant from the engaged and positive feedback stewards have received over the years from so many visitors. In preparation for stewarding, volunteers trained by US Federal Wildlife officers and Refuge staff and receive information packets that include pictures and talking points for educating visitors. Once the training is scheduled, we'll be announcing it via an email broadcast. If you can't attend on that date, but want to volunteer, on-site individual training may be available. WE NEED YOU!

Joyce Galiardo leads the steward effort on Egmont Key for the US Fish & Wildlife Service. If you'd like to learn more or would like to volunteer as a steward, you can contact Joyce at BirdsStewards@tampabay.rr.com.



Photo by Tom Bell

Spoonbills, Herons, and Egrets...Oh My!!

Spring is in the air and nesting season is off to a great start on the Pinellas refuges. These are mangrove islands located in the protected waters of the Boca Ciega Bay Aquatic Reserve between the north Skyway causeway and Tierra Verde. The islands, which are closed to the public year round, have dense mangrove habitats that make them inhospitable to people. Each spring USFWS, Florida Audubon, and Friends volunteers conduct “peak nesting” counts on each of the islands to help determine the then current status of the seabirds that nest there.

We are pleased that two of the refuge islands, Little Bird Key and Jackass Key, our most successful nesting islands over the last few years, are loaded with birds again this season! Nesting started with Great Blue Herons early this year and there are many very good-looking fledglings hanging out. Jackass Key is hosting a pair of Reddish Egrets with at least one adorable chick sighted, and Spoonbills have nested on the island and have two rapidly growing juveniles! Other wading and water-bird chicks we saw and heard are Cormorants, Snowy Egrets, Great Egrets, Brown Pelicans, Little Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, Black-Crowned Night-Herons, and of course Prairie Warblers. It is fantastic to hear the racket from all of those hungry chicks. The Magnificent Frigatebirds are hanging around as well, usually floating on the

thermals above the islands but occasionally coming down to rest. They do not nest here, choosing instead to nest only in the Dry Tortugas and further south.

The islands must be managed for predators every year since the refuges are adjacent to the urban areas of St. Petersburg and Tierra Verde. Predators like black rats and raccoons can make a leisurely swim to the islands for a snack, decimating a nesting colony in no time at all. Because USFWS was unable to fund the necessary management practice for 2022, the Friends did, stepping up and funding it through USDA. It has paid off in what so far has been a great nesting season.

Please remember if you are out boating or kayaking to keep your distance, and let the birds be birds. Too much disturbance can cause birds to leave their young unprotected, or abandon their nests. If you see birds stand up or begin watching you, pull away until they are comfortable with your distance.

Manatees Thrive at Crystal River Springs



Photo by Matt Beck

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Crystal River NWR report recorded manatee survey results for Citrus County, on Florida's west coast. Refuge Biologist Joyce Kleen monitors the number of manatees using Kings Bay and Citrus County by periodic aerial surveys timed with cold weather fronts. This is a large milestone for manatees and humans alike. Kleen's aerial survey data for the recent manatee season (November 15, 2021 – March 31, 2022) revealed the highest number of manatees ever recorded in Citrus County waters – **1,333 manatees** – were counted in the January 31, 2022, survey.

Other observations from that survey are:

- Largest manatee count in Kings Bay – 1,016 manatees
- Largest number of manatee calves in Citrus County – 212 calves
- Largest manatee count on the upper Homosassa River- 304 manatees

Since 1983, FWS has conducted monthly aerial surveys during the manatee season to assess manatee abundance and distribution in Citrus County. The number of manatees sighted is considered a minimum count. A review of manatee counts since 1983, when an average 129

manatees were sighted per winter season, certainly suggests a growing manatee population in the area.

Citrus County is home to the spring-fed Kings Bay, Crystal and Salt Rivers, and the Homosassa River, that attract hundreds of wintering manatees. Manatees are a subtropical species at the northern limit of their range in Florida and require sources of warm water, such as springs, to stay warm during the winter. For more information about the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge and manatees, see: <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/crystal-river>.

Crystal River NWR Volunteer Orientation



Photo by Dave Howard

In February, Friend's members had a terrific opportunity to attend a volunteer orientation at the Crystal River NWR, touring three amazing areas of the Crystal River Complex including a boat tour of Kings Bay and its springs, a walk along the Three Sister's Springs boardwalk, and a walking tour of Chassahowitzka's Salt Marsh trail. USFWS staff and Friends of Crystal River NWR were our docents, leading the tours and explaining the volunteers roles in both protecting manatees on Kings Bay and in Three Sisters Springs and offering education programs at the Chassahowitzka salt marsh trail.

We visited the new Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex offices and visitor center that replaced the original building destroyed by Hurricane Hermine 2016. The new center houses the Refuge staff, contains a gift shop and will house new displays.

Thank you to Stan Garner and Monica Scroggins from USFWS and Lace Blue-McLean, Ken Spilios, Bob Quarles, Bonnie Rybak, Jeff Rundell, and Debbie Younglove from Friends of the Crystal River NWR for making this orientation possible. We hope to reciprocate and host the Crystal River Friends group here at the Tampa Bay Refuges soon!

Birds of the Refuge

Spotlight on Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*)

Refuge Locations – Magnificent Frigatebirds can be found most months roosting on Jackass Key in the Pinellas NWR, or soaring high in the air above it. They do not nest here but take

up residence for much of the year. At times 500 – 1,000 can be found roosting in the mangroves and flying around Jackass Key.

Frigates are seabirds built for soaring.

They rarely flap their wings, but when they do their wing beats are slow and deep.

They have an extremely low wing-load, meaning that

they have great big wings and light bodies. They forage in the air, swooping close to water to take items from on or near surface, making very little contact with water. Famously they also feed by piracy (kleptoparasitic), chasing other birds, forcing them to drop or disgorge their food. Oddly Frigatebirds never swim, their feathers and wing shape do not allow them to do that. If you see a Frigate in the water, something is probably wrong.

These birds breed in colonies, with nests often very close together. Our closest breeding islands are the Dry Tortugas. The males display by inflating their bright red throat pouch to huge red balloon, raising bill high, vibrating partially spread wings, swiveling back and forth, and calling to attract females.

*information courtesy of Audubon.org field guide; All About Birds – Cornell Lab of Ornithology.



Friends in the Community

The Friends group is happy to be getting back to normal and once again out in the community talking about the refuges. We recently presented our overview program for the HarbourSide community in South Pasadena, Boca Ciega Yacht Club, and Tampa Bay Sea Kayakers club. We have done several booth events lately, including Raptorfest at Boyd Hill Nature Preserve, the Indian Rocks Green Festival, St. Pete Spring Market, and the Valencia Del Sol Market in Wimauma.



Ales and Wild Tales wrapped up this year with a presentation by George Heinrich and Elise Bennett about the current state of Diamondback Terrapins in Florida. We put together six presentations this season with our co-sponsors the Center for Biological Diversity. Many thanks to the Ale and Witch Tavern for hosting these events..

Adopt a Loggerhead Sea Turtle Nest

Don't forget summer is Loggerhead Sea Turtle nesting season on Egmont Key. You can help support the Friends group and the sea turtles by adopting a nest. Egmont is an important site for Loggerheads on the Gulf coast of Florida. Last year we had 80 successful nests, well above average. You can find all the details at TampaBayRefuges.org, click "Get Involved," click "[Adopt a Sea Turtle Nest.](#)"



Calendar of Events

We have a super busy year ahead of us. Here's what's cooking as of now:

June 3,4,5 – Friends field trip to Gainesville Area - Ruth B. Kilby Gilchrist

Blue Spring State Park, @Kanapaha Botanical Garden, Paynes Prairie Preserve, San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park

June 11 — Egmont Key Tour, with side trip to Passage Key

July 16 - 17: SharkCon at the Florida Fairgrounds in Tampa –

Huge, indoors, really fun activities and speakers! This event is to promote shark conservation and it does so in a big way. There are speakers from National Geographic, Animal Planet, Shark Week, and more. FWCC, Mote, and FL Aquarium have great exhibits, you can try your skills at diving, and visit the vendors and other conservation minded non-profits attending. (If you volunteer at the Friends booth you get a pass in for the day).

October 21-23: Florida Birding and Nature Festival in Apollo Beach

Great talks, field trips, and expo!

November 5: Wonders of Wildlife in Plant City

Amazing festival with lots of live wildlife being shown by rehabbers at Edward Medard Conservation Park. Proceeds from entrance fee benefit the Raptor Center of Tampa Bay, a 501c3 that rescues and rehabs raptors.

November 12 - 13: Discover the Island on Egmont Key

Plus Some Community Markets with great vendors!

November 20: Vista Palms Market in Wimauma

November 26: Waterset Market in Apollo Beach

December 11: Cypress Creek Market in Sun City Center

Come check out the wild side of Tampa Bay, there are lots of natural areas in Hillsborough County to visit after you visit us at the markets! TECO Manatee Center and conservation lands, Cockroach Bay, Little Manatee River State Park, and Terra Ceia Preserve State Park to name a few!