



FRIENDS MATTER

The newsletter of the Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges



Message from the Board - Fall 2023

Fall weather is finally here and we are looking forward to getting back out on the refuges. The summer nesting season of 2023 was much more successful than 2022, and we hope that wildlife continues to thrive on the refuges. The Egmont Guardhouse will be open weekends and holidays this Fall and Winter, after a short closure this summer. We are planning some cleanups for Egmont and the Pinellas refuges, and Pinellas bird surveys will continue monthly as long as the weather cooperates. Our festival season has wrapped up for 2023. We participated in Raptor Fest at Boyd Hill, Shark Con in Tampa, Florida Birding and Nature Festival in Apollo Beach, and Wonders of Wildlife in Plant City. We start all over again with some great outreach in February 2024. Field trips will be starting up soon as well. USFWS continues to work to work hard to maintain and manage the refuges for wildlife. Managing three national wildlife refuges in an urban area of 3 million people is not an easy task. Stan Garner, USFWS, has provided us with strong leadership, and done great things for the refuge islands this past year. Thank you Stan!

Hurricane Idalia Report



On August 30, 2023 Hurricane Idalia passed by our area causing Tampa Bay flooding, and greatly impacting the beaches and shoreline. Both Egmont Key and Passage Key national wildlife refuges were impacted. Egmont saw significant beach erosion on the southwest portions and there was widespread flooding on the island. The damage to infrastructure and equipment was minimal thanks to pre-hurricane preparation by USFWS/FPS staff. There was some fairly minor dock damage, damage to the water system in the pilot's compound, loss of regulatory signage on the west side, outbuilding flooding, and just general mess, but all in all Egmont fared well! A few of the late sea turtle nests were washed out, but the nesting birds had already fledged from both Egmont and Passage. Passage Key was reduced in size, and is now estimated to be about 2-3 acres. This was not unexpected as Passage shrinks and grows with tropical storm patterns. The Pinellas refuges were virtually unaffected by the storm – a testament to the resilience of mangrove islands!

Young Adult Field Trip



In October eighteen young people visited Fort De Soto Park for an immersive outdoor learning experience conducted in partnership between our very own Friends of the Tampa Bay Wildlife Refuges, the Tampa Housing Authority's Oaks at Riverview and Robles Park Community Centers, and US Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge Management. The trip was facilitated by faculty and students from USF College of Education's Literacy Studies Program. Kids were led through ecoliteracies activities while exploring the fort and the beach as they learned about Tampa Bay's waters and wildlife. Throughout the day, they took photos and participated in sensory and nature-based writing experiences. Next up for the kids is to compose and share their stories of what exploring Fort De Soto meant to them with their families, senior citizens from their community, and their public school teachers! This project was funded by the Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuge and the Tampa Housing Authority with other support coming from USF's College of Education.

Volunteer Update



The bird steward volunteer program wrapped up the year with a hurricane! Luckily the nesting birds on Egmont and Passage had completed their work and mostly moved on. Thank you to Joyce Galiardo and all the bird steward volunteers!

The Pinellas refuge bird survey crew has been out each month this fall and are happy to report that the White Pelicans are back! This group will be participating in the St. Pete and Fort de Soto Christmas bird counts in December. We will let you know what they find.

Friends volunteers recently assisted Florida Audubon staff with clean up, invasive control and fishing line removal on their Miller Family island property. This sanctuary is an important and reliable nesting island for Brown Pelicans, Great Blue Herons, and others. We are pleased to report the island looks great - very few invasives, native plants moving in, and 12 Great Blue Heron nests counted.

Florida Birding and Nature Festival



On Sunday 10/15, The Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges hosted a large group of folks from the Florida Birding and Nature Festival on a great tour of our beautiful local national wildlife refuges. The birders in attendance were treated to a rare sight, a Lark Sparrow on Egmont Key! Thanks as always to Hubbard's Marina for ferry transportation to and from the refuge island. Member Ann Paul (retired Florida Audubon) also delivered a wonderful presentation about the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges during the Festival. That presentation can be found at this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZFoqLlvjY>

Adopt A Turtle Program

Stuck on a gift for someone this holiday season? A wonderful idea is to Adopt a Sea Turtle Nest on Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge for the 2024 season for them. They will get a certificate of their adoption now and a wood turtle plaque with their nest information in the fall. Purchase a nest at TampaBayRefuges.org.

Gift Shop

Don't forget our great metal art ornaments and pin cards in our online gift shop at TampaBayRefuges.org. We also have great hats embroidered with the Friends logo!

Fundraising

Donations to Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges can be made in a variety of ways. Of course, cash, checks, and credit cards are welcome. But, did you know if you are over 70 ½ years old, you can have tax-free funds from your IRA donated directly to Friends. If you are required to take an RMD, donations can count towards that reducing the amount of tax you would pay. Talk to your fund holder or financial advisor for details. Other ways to donate are naming Friends as a beneficiary of your IRA or including Friends in your estate plans.

Member Volunteer Opportunities

You too can help us help wildlife!

Egmont Key Guardhouse Docents - Help us staff the Egmont Key Guardhouse. Volunteer members staff the Egmont Guardhouse each weekend. This is a great way to spend some time on Egmont and help visitors learn about the refuges. It is about a five hour time commitment from start to finish. Transportation is provided by Hubbards ferry from Fort de Soto. A three times/year commitment is required. Come out and enjoy the island. New volunteers can contact docents@tampabayrefuges.org for more info, and to set up a training date.

Bird Surveys - Monthly bird surveys of the seven Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge islands. Sign up at TampaBayRefuges@msn.com Tentative upcoming dates are; December 31, February (tbd), and March (tbd)

Cleanups - Friends is organizing beach and island cleanups for Egmont Key (easy duty), and the Pinellas NWR mangrove islands (hard work). If you are interested contact joe@tampabayrefuges.org

Communications Coordinator - Friends board is looking for a volunteer member to help with monthly communications and the quarterly newsletter. If you are computer savvy and have an eye for good design, we could use your help! This is a great way to help out from home with a modest time commitment. Contact docents@tampabayrefuges.org if you can help.

Outreach and Booth Events - Help us spread the word about the remarkable refuges of Tampa Bay. 1/2 day shifts in the Tampa Bay area. Contact TampaBayRefuges@msn.com to help out (see schedule below).

CALENDAR - WINTER 2023-24

Outreach Events

Ales and Wild Tails - second Wednesday of each month (October - April), Ale and Witch Tavern, downtown St. Pete, 6pm. Come on down, join us for a beer and an interesting environmental presentation.

December 13, 2023 - George Heinrich - Suwannee Cooters

January 10, 2024 - Justin Tramble - Tampa Bay Waterkeepers

February 14, 2024 - Tom & Lindsay Bell

Booth Events

February 3, 2024 - RaptorFest, Boyd Hill, St Petersburg

July 13 & 14, 2024 - SharkCon

Field trips

December 15, 2023 - Shark tooth hunting at one of the Venice Beaches and Venice Audubon Rookery Park to see nesting birds in the afternoon and bats at dusk.

January 15, 2024 (tentative) - Crystal River - tour Duke Energy's Crystal River facilities then a boat tour for Manatees in Crystal River.



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