

Friends Matter

Barb Howard, President

What's Up in the Refuges...



As fall starts up we look forward to a little cooler weather. This summer was a bit hot! I wanted to first thank all of our new and returning members for their support of the Friends group. Your membership helps us to continue to help the refuges and USFWS staff. National wildlife refuge budgets and staffing levels never meet the full needs of the properties, so our support is important. We continue to support the refuges with our labor, outreach, education, and funding. Thank you again!

Pinellas NWR had great nesting this year. Little Bird Key and Jackass Key again provided prime habitat and the best nesting success. The Friends of the Tampa Bay NWR were happy to be able to help out on the refuge islands with bird

surveys, cleanups and, this year, contributed funds for predator control. Without ongoing predator control for rats and racoons, our beloved spoonbills, herons, egrets, and more would likely abandon the islands. We have one of the rarest egret species in North America nesting on Jackass Key, the Reddish Egret. We also have at least one or two of the white morph of the Reddish Egret, which is even scarcer.

Sadly, beach nesting bird numbers were down on Egmont Key NWR this year. Sea turtles, however, had a good year. There were no early storms to inundate bird or turtle nests and the nests that were laid did well. We were also pleased to see very good nesting numbers on Passage Key NWR. You can find more details on summer nesting in this issue.

It was another very busy summer on Egmont Key. Visitation by private boats (and commercial ferries) has been crazy the past few years. A big THANK YOU to our volunteer Bird Stewards, USFWS managers and law enforcement, and State Park folks for managing the visitors on the island. There are now approximately 250,000 visitors to the island each year and there can be thousands over holidays and summer weekends. Most visitors are wonderful, respecting the island and the closed zones, but it is still a challenge to protect the nesting and resting birds, gopher tortoises, and sea turtle nests.

USFWS has given us the go ahead to reopen the Guardhouse, and staff it with volunteer docents and we are slowly bringing that program back to speed. Transporting volunteers to the island has been complicated by the reconstruction of the Fort de Soto Bay Pier. Hubbard's Marina Ferry, which has very kindly transported volunteer docents in years past, now must leave from the Fort de Soto boat ramp. This makes for a longer trip with less time on the island. That combined with record high fuel prices and high visitation numbers, has limited our ability to transport volunteers and impacted the restart of the Guardhouse docent program. This fall we hope to get back on track and be up and running. If you would like to volunteer as a docent, please contact us at Friends@TampaBayRefuges.org.

There are lots of upcoming festivals, Look for our outreach booth or join us as a volunteer, it's fun. See the calendar for dates.

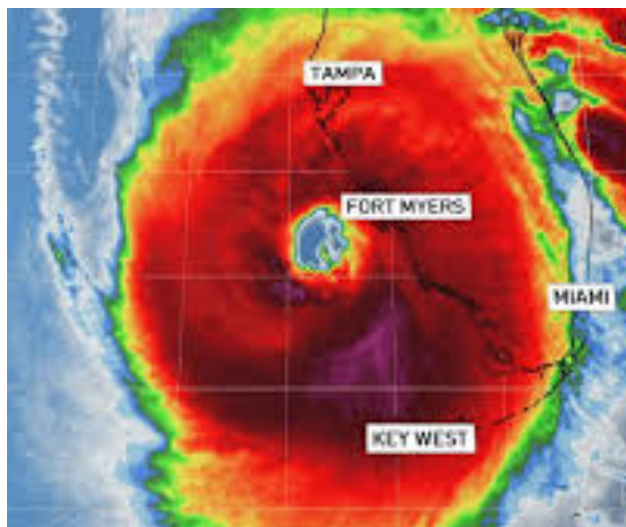
Thanks again to our Volunteers, Members, Donors and Sponsors for your support! We appreciate it more than you know!



The Friends group produced a 20-minute film about our remarkable national wildlife refuges in Tampa Bay. If you have not seen it yet, you should! You can find a link to it at www.TampaBayRefuges.org. The film which was filmed and produced by Jennifer Brown of IntoNature Films has been getting good press – see the recent article in Bay Soundings, <https://baysoundings.com/new-video-highlights-tampa-bay-national-wildlife-refuges/>. It has also been accepted at several film festivals including the 2022 Florida Environmental Film Festival and the 38th Festival of Menigoute in France.

Hurricane Ian and the Refuges

Hurricane Ian was brutal to south Florida and continued its destructive path through the center of the state. Our hearts go out to all who have been affected. Please be generous if you can, many people need help.



Our USFWS manager, Stan Garner, and Nancy Whitford sent early reports to us on the impacts to the refuges. All three Tampa Bay Refuges were effected but, all considered, the impacts were relatively minor. The Tampa Bay Pilots helped Stan get out to the refuges on the September 30th to assess the damages.

The Pinellas Refuge islands were the least impacted. We had some sign damage that is easy to fix. Friends volunteers will be checking for erosion and mangrove damage in the next few weeks.

At Passage Key we lost all the signs. The estimated cost of replacement is in the neighborhood of \$4,000. Some of the signs may be found buried in the sand upon further investigation. The good news is that Passage Key is still there! It has been washed away in previous hurricanes.

Egmont Key fared well, considering. There was flooding in the usual spots and lots of sand washed up onto the walkways. Some trees are down and there are innumerable palm fronds to clean up. The USFWS kiosk by

the Coast Guard dock where the ferries drop passengers was blown apart and pieces are down the beach near the Guardhouse (estimated replacement cost is about \$6,000). We lost sand on the beaches of course, the worst near the south tip. The storm could have at least taken the derelict sailboat off the beach, but no, it still remains. Good that sand is coming soon, Egmont needs it. The pilot compound and dock that USFWS and the State use is in good shape. There are about ten signs mangled at Egmont (\$3K to replace) and a few shingles on the the USFWS cabin came off. No vehicles, boats or equipment were lost.

This is all very minor in the bigger picture, and we feel lucky to have our remarkable refuges intact. We will be planning work days on all three refuges soon.

Summer Nesting Report: Egmont and Passage Keys

We had a bit of a surprise this summer, both some good news and some bad. Let's start with the good news – Passage Key. As Passage Key has slowly increased in size, now up to about 10 acres, the accumulating sand and vegetation have created good habitat for beach nesting birds. This summer the Laughing Gulls, Royal Terns, White Ibises, and Brown Pelicans returned for a pretty good nesting summer on the small island. The total nesting pairs on Passage were about the same as 2021 – around 3,000. The USFWS peak nesting season survey found the following numbers of nesting pairs: 100 - Brown Pelicans, 210- White Ibis, 1,310 –



Laughing Gulls, 1,180-Royal Terns, 130-Sandwich Terns. The small island was full of birds. Passage Key remains a very, very difficult island to patrol and protect from the impacts of recreational boaters. If you can please spread the word – **PASSAGE KEY IS A WILDLIFE REFUGE – THE BEACH IS CLOSED TO PEOPLE**. It is one of the few places left in Tampa Bay where birds can be birds.

The nesting season on Egmont was not as successful. The birds, for most part did not nest on the south end of the refuge. This was of course a great disappointment, and it means we are going to have to work even harder to lure them back. We did have success with the Black Skimmers with 180 nesting pairs on the north, gulf side beach. Their nesting colony was roped and protected by Florida Park Service staff and volunteers for the duration. Without that oversight the colony would have certainly been disrupted by summer recreational boaters and beach goers. The refuge is overwhelmed with visitors in the open area beaches. The obvious question is what happened at Egmont? Why did thousands of nesting pairs of birds not

return to Egmont? These are the questions USFWS is wrestling with right now. The reason is likely a combination of a few factors, both on-site and off-site: a wily trap-shy raccoon (caught in early spring); a narrowing of the beach due to erosion; too many predatory Fish Crows; repeated trespass by people and pets; a change in vegetation on the south portion of the island. Finally, and most frightening, might be the general decline of birds in the Tampa Bay area (author's opinion here). USFWS is working to address all of these issues in hopes of getting birds back to the island.

Finally, our Loggerhead sea turtles had a good nesting season. Egmont is an indexed sea turtle nesting site, meaning the numbers are collected annually to help track sea turtle populations across the globe. There were 120 nests laid on Egmont Key NWR this summer. State Park personnel take responsibility for digging up the empty nest a few days after the hatch to get the statistics. This year 12,367 hatchlings have made it out into the Gulf of Mexico! 874 eggs didn't hatch due to fire ants, root invasion, or washing over by salt water.

On the Road Again...

A baker's dozen had a great field trip to the Gainesville area June 3-5. It was a busy weekend of birding, hiking, swimming, and some memorable dining experiences.

Friday we visited Gilchrist Blue Springs state park, did a short hike, then cooled off in the spring. The day ended with bat viewing at Lake Alice on the UF campus.



Overlooking Paynes Prairie

Saturday we spent the morning at Kanapaha Botanic Gardens, walking the shady gardens and taking a docent led tour. That afternoon we visited Paynes Prairie and spent some time on the viewing tower looking for bison and horses – no luck but we did see quite a few birds, and some distant glimpses of a lone Whooping Crane. A birding highlight was spotting three different kites: Snail, Mississippi, and Swallow Tailed – that does not happen every day!

Sunday morning found the group hiking in the old growth hardwood forests of San Felasco State Forest , a beautiful forest full of songbirds. This was a fun trip. Many thanks to Edie Stone for organizing and leading us!



Night light on Chuck-will's- widow

(*Antrostomus carolinensis*)

Refuge Locations – If you are lucky, and a good listener, you can find these birds on Egmont Key, from dusk to dawn.

Egmont has unique night life that few people even know about. One of our most active night crawlers is the Chuck-will's-widow. This bird is the largest nightjar, and quite a name to say. Every year, right before or after the Osprey

have put down eggs, like clockwork, these nocturnal migrants arrive from the West Indies, Central America, and northwestern South America – not a local bird at all. We have over many, many years had many nesting on Egmont Key and of course this year no different. You can hear them by listening at dusk, and at night for the rolling, seemingly endless call – essentially calling their name through the forest. This bird nests on the ground in the woods, sleeps in the daytime, doing their hard work at night. Seeing one is rare – but if you do – it is usually because they are doing their mating dance. The dance is quite elaborate and very beautiful to watch. Their primary diet is flying insects, moths, beetles, butterflies and the like. No way to know for certain but we estimate we have 10 to 20 pairs on Egmont Key each season. We honor the Chick-will's-widow and wish them another great year of nesting. Thank you to Nancy Whitford for this content.

Information courtesy of: Cornell Lab of Ornithology, All About Birds



Ales & Wild Tales Fall Season

We are pleased to announce the fall 2022 schedule for the Ales and Wild Tales environmental presentations. These are presented by the Friends group with our partners the Center for Biodiversity, and the Ale and Witch Tavern. The events are at 6pm, the second Wednesday of each month November – March, at the Ale and Witch Tavern in downtown St. Petersburg. The fall's presentations are listed on page 8.



FRIENDS Holiday Gift Shopping

If you're looking for the right gift for a special person, or yourself, check out our gift shop at www.TampaBayRefuges.org! We have lovely metal art ornaments and pin cards made in a small village in Thailand. Your purchases don't just support the Friends, they have made a huge difference for the villagers. They now have schools, infrastructure, jobs, and they create these beautiful gift items without polluting the environment. Shop early for best selection!

Fall Calendar

- Oct. 12 Ales & Wild Tales. Kris Cole - Audubon Jay Watch – Scrub Jays
- Oct 16 Belmont Market in Riverview
- Oct 21-23 Florida Birding and Nature Festival in Apollo Beach with field trips all over Tampa Bay. Register for the event and field trips at Florida Birding and Nature Festival.org
- Nov 5 Wonders of Wildlife in Plant City. Proceeds from admission benefit the Raptor Center of Tampa Bay. Lots of great exhibits.
- Nov 9 Ales & Wild Tales. Jeanette Edwards, Friends of the Pelicans - Pelican Perils
- Nov 13 Cypress Creek Market in Sun City Center
- Nov 26 Waterset Market in Apollo Beach
- Nov 27 Valencia Del Sol Market in Wimauma
- Dec 10 Winter St. Pete Market
- Dec 14 Ales & Wild Tales—Roy Gardner from Stetson University discussing Wetland Protection
- Jan. 11 – Ales & Wild Tales. Dave Howard, Friends of TBNWRs – Where Birds Can Be Birds

If you are interested in volunteering at any of these events please contact friends@tampabayrefuges.org