



FRIENDS MATTER



Photo by Tom Bell

Stay Up-To-Date With the Refuges and Friends

From Barb Howard

Things are looking up as Covid-19 vaccines arrived for the general public in January 2021. Covid is still with us but most, if not all of our volunteers, are vaccinated and we feel much safer. Many things are still on hold including having docents in the Egmont Key NWR Guardhouse: it stayed locked all year. FTBNWR volunteers were busy all the same.

Mission critical (protecting the wildlife and habitat on the refuges) volunteering continued in 2021 with proper safety precautions. We were able to proceed with bird stewards on Egmont, bird surveys on Pinellas, and Refuge maintenance support.

Egmont Key bird stewards were again very busy protecting the sanctuary areas on the island this spring and summer. Record numbers of boaters and ferry operators came out to the Refuge in 2021. A small team of veteran stewards went out multiple weekends to assist with the task of watching the colony and educating visitors. They did a fantastic job!

Friends volunteers continued basic chores like repairing boats, installing signs, and rebuilding all the kiosks in the Tampa Bay area.

Small teams conducted bird surveys in the Pinellas Refuge. Kayakers were socially distanced and we limited the FWS boat occupants to 3-4 people. The number of birds we were able to see and count around the Pinellas Refuge islands was over 7,000! There would have been many that we couldn't see to count. We had to cancel a few counts this summer due to red tide. These islands continue to host great nesting sites for wading birds as well as roosting sites for our winter birds.

In addition to volunteer support, Friends provided almost \$14,500 in direct support to the Tampa Bay NWRs. We have our new Tampa Bay Refuges video, *Where Birds can be Birds*, releasing soon. We hired a professional film maker who has made numerous films for refuges, parks, and preserves. She is good! New cabinets for the Guardhouse turtle and military rooms on the upper floor are being worked on. We will also provide cabinets and a plexiglass display case downstairs for the 500-year-old canoe when it returns.

Outreach was of course limited this year, but we were able to participate in quite a few festivals as the year progressed and more people were vaccinated. We asked volunteers to be vaccinated and mask up even though outdoors. We had our outreach booth at EcoFest at the Suncoast Youth Conservation Center in March, Shark Con in August, Florida Birding and Nature Festival, and Discover the Island both in October, and the Wonders of Wildlife Festival in November. We gave zoom presentations about the Tampa Bay Refuges to Friends of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, Sensing Nature's Webinar, and Sarasota Audubon.

We restarted in-person Ales & Wild Tails in November in the courtyard of the Ale & the Witch located in downtown St Petersburg.

Great programs are coming up this winter/spring! So far we have had Center for Biological Diversity talking about the Piney Point spill and the following red tide and fish kills, and Boyd Hill Preserve's Raptors. The year will bring Sensing Nature, Brent Winner, FWRI, on sharks, and a terrapin turtle presentation that will end the season. Watch your emails for details. Talks are the 2nd Wednesday each month, November through April.

In the education department, Covid restrictions resulted in no response from the schools we typically provide funding for school busses for nature field trips. We will try again with the Title 1 schools in the spring 2022.





Member field trips were started up again with a trip to Felts Audubon Preserve in Palmetto in June and the 8th Annual Egmont Key NWR Bird Sanctuary Tour, also in June (2 separate days with the ferry at half capacity to get social distancing). We hosted a field trip to kayak on the Little Manatee River in Ruskin in November and a birding field trip for the Florida Birding and Nature Festival to Egmont Key to see the migrating warblers in October. A special treat on Egmont was sighting the 2 bald eagles on the lighthouse. We are hoping to schedule an overnight trip to Gainesville in 2022. With Covid-19 mutations we will wait and see.

For the second year we have given a grant to Friends of the Pelicans that provides a full time wildlife rescuer to monitor the Skyway Fishing Pier State Park, and other fishing entanglement hot spots on Tampa Bay. They rescue entangled birds, mostly Brown Pelicans. The birds are untangled and released or transported to licensed rehab facilities. In 2021 they rescued over 1,400 birds from fishing line entanglement and other injuries! Many Brown Pelicans nest on nearby Egmont Key.

We continue our special project from 2019 to protect Little Bird Key on the Pinellas Refuge from erosion. The oyster reef balls continue protecting the shoreline, accreting sand landward, and providing habitat for oysters and other benthic creatures as well as creating hiding places for small

fish. We haven't seen any more trees being undercut. Tampa Bay Watch is monitoring and recording the progress for us.

We held a fantastic garage sale in Gulfport in November. It was the same day as the community garage sale so not a dull moment the whole day. We were able to make over \$1,000 for all the donated goods we sold. Thanks to all our donors and customers!

Thanks to everyone who organized, volunteered, participated, joined, and made donations to the Friends!

Introducing the National Wildlife Refuge Association

Did you know that the Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges is one of roughly 200 individual Friends groups associated with the National Wildlife Refuge system? In turn, the National Wildlife Refuges are supported at the federal level by a larger non-profit organization that lobbies for us called the **National Wildlife Refuge Association** (refugeassociation.org). Their work is largely focused on vigilantly monitoring policies and legislation that undermine the integrity of the National Wildlife Refuge System, while advocating for efforts that advance wildlife conservation. The Refuge Association serves as our eyes, ears, and mouth on the ground in Washington, DC.

The Refuge Association also supports individual Friends groups with training, advocacy, and resources and is a communications clearinghouse for what is going on across the country. The Association is quite active in Florida, in fact last year (2021) the Friends of St. Marks NWR was awarded the prestigious 'friends group of the year' award.

The Refuge Association has been working for the last 4 years to protect the 6,200-acre Corrigan Ranch in south central Florida. It facilitated a state and federal funding partnership to protect this high-quality property, which features both significant upland and wetland habitat. This work resulted in the discovery of the largest remaining population of the [Florida grasshopper sparrow](#), the most endangered bird species in the continental United States. The state of Florida and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are in the final stages of acquisition. When it is finalized, this property will be permanently protected and managed for Florida grasshopper sparrows, other wildlife, and compatible recreational opportunities. The Refuge Association also facilitated a state/federal partnership to protect an additional 1,300 acres of Florida prairie at the Triple Diamond Ranch, which is adjacent to [Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park](#). The total protected at Triple Diamond is now up to 5,292 acres.

They were also involved in securing nine properties for inclusion in the Florida Forever Program. These properties are all extremely ecologically significant and all sit within the [Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area](#) and the [Peace River Watershed](#). Securing these properties are high priorities for the USFWS. Placing them into the Florida Forever Program will enable future state-federal funding partnerships.

We are lucky to have a non-profit organization working for us in Washington, and on the ground in Florida – support them if you can!

Birds of the Refuge: Snowy Egret*

(*Egretta thula*)



Refuge Locations – Snowy Egrets can be found throughout the refuge islands, and frequently nest in the mangrove islands of the Pinellas NWR.

Snowy Egrets are easily recognized by their yellow 'shoes,' and are found feeding in the estuaries, and shallow wetlands and waters of

Tampa Bay. They eat mostly aquatic animals, including fish, frogs, worms, crustaceans, and insects. Although snowies are found across North America, much of Florida's population are year round residents.

Typically nesting in multi-species colonies on thick vegetation in isolated places, small islands are perfect, they often change location from year to year. Male Snowy Egrets fight for breeding territories, choose nest sites, and perform noisy courtship displays to attract mates. After pairing up, Snowy Egrets continue defending the immediate area around the nest, raising their crests and giving rasping calls. Some of their nest predators include raccoons, rats, Fish Crows, and snakes.

This species was decimated by the plume hunting in the late 19th century. Their populations stabilized by the 1960s, but nowhere near the numbers found previously.

Their biggest continuing threat is habitat loss from coastal development, recreational disturbance at foraging and breeding sites, environmental degradation, human disturbance, and increased pressure from predators. The future of this and many other wetland species depends on coastal wetland conservation across North and South America.

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

It's Back! Ales and Wild Tales

We are back on track with our Ales and Wild Tales presentations. These are presented by the Friends group with our partners, the Center for Biodiversity, and the Ale and Witch Tavern, on the second Wednesday of each month November – April, in downtown St. Petersburg.



In case you missed it, our December Ales and Wild Tales presentation was fantastic! The Boyd Hill Raptor Program came out and gave us quite a show with their amazing avian cast. They brought their Crested Caracara, Red-tailed Hawk, Eastern Screech Owls, Great Horned Owl, and Short-tailed Hawk. It was really fun to learn about them and see them very up close and personal.

If you missed this you have another chance to see these birds and many more at RAPTORFEST, February 5, 2022. Come down to Boyd Hill Nature Preserve and check it out. Be sure to stop by the Friends booth!

Volunteers At Work!

Despite the limitations and our roller coaster COVID ride, Friends volunteers have been finding ways to get out and support the Tampa Bay refuges.



We have managed to complete bird surveys for almost every month in 2021, by boat and kayak. The kayakers try to go out on a weekend day and count Mule, Listen and Jackass Keys. The boaters usually go during the week, visiting Indian, Tarpon and Little Bird. If you are interested contact Pat Mundus for kayaking (byok), Dave Howard for boat surveys.

The repair and upgrading of the six interpretive kiosks on Tampa Bay and Egmont Key are pretty much wrapped up. We have a few finishing touches to add, but we are happy to have completed that work (180+ hours) in 2021. They



look nice, many thanks to everyone who pitched in, and thank you to the Friends group for funding the bulk of this work.

We continue to assist staff with a variety of tasks including boat maintenance, cleanups, land management and light construction. As you may know, working on a national wildlife refuge island always has its challenges – everything on and off by boat is not as simple as it sounds!



Although the Egmont Key guardhouse is closed, volunteers have been working on updating the exhibits and cabinets in two of the rooms. We hope to be ready to go once we re-open.



Scavengers, heroes of the natural world!

RAPTOR FEST

AT BOYD HILL NATURE PRESERVE

1101 Country Club Way South, St. Petersburg, FL

FEBRUARY 5, 2022 | 10AM-4PM

- Trained raptors in free flight
- Learn about Florida's native raptor species
- Photo ops with live birds of prey
- Environmental exhibitors
- Activities for children & families
- Bird walks & **MUCH MORE!**



NO PETS PLEASE

Food & drinks will be available for purchase.



PARKING

Lakewood High School (1400 54th Ave S.) & Lake Vista Recreation Center (1401 62nd Ave S.)

FREE shuttles from both locations to the event.

Parking at the preserve is for **HANDICAP PERMIT ONLY**



FOR MORE INFORMATION & DIRECTIONS, CONTACT

Boyd Hill Nature Preserve | 727-893-7326 | RaptorFest.org



SCAN ME!

For more information on this year's event

