



Habi-Chat

Newsletter of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Volume 19 Number 4

Winter 2013

MINWR 50th Anniversary “Space for Wildlife” Festival

The Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge celebrated 50 years in 2013 with a festival on November 9th. The theme for the festival was “Space for Wildlife” which is a double entendre, meaning we conserve the space wildlife needs and NASA operates space missions. Without NASA, the refuge would not exist; therefore, because of space missions, wildlife has space. Less than 10% of the 140,000 acres is used for NASA facilities, the rest is managed for wildlife. The festival was well attended by nearly 700 people who enjoyed the games and activities for kids, wildlife exhibits and presentations, archaeological and historic artifacts, food vendors, music and an art exhibit!

We were fortunate to have Nathaniel P. Reed speak at the Opening Ceremonies to kick off the day. Mr. Reed was the Assistant Secretary of Interior (1971-1977) who played an important role in the history of the Refuge. He negotiated and signed an agreement with NASA to expand the Refuge to 140,000 acres in 1972. Also speaking was our Project Leader, Layne Hamilton, NASA representative, Lynne Phillips, and Titusville Mayor Jim Tulley. All speakers praised the partnerships they have with the refuge and how important the refuge is for the environment and community.



Sheri Girard and Ed Larsen as Puddles the Blue Goose.
Photo by Sandee Larsen

Many live animals were on display throughout the day and live animal presentations were given in the auditorium. The icing on the cake, so to speak, was a cake-cutting ceremony with Project Leader Layne Hamilton and “Puddles” the Blue Goose! The cake went fast, and cupcakes were handed out by the dozen! The festival was lots of work and was loads of fun! Over 35 exhibitors stayed busy all day teaching people about natural and cultural resources. Several refuges joined us, with representatives from Lake Woodruff NWR, Okefenokee NWR, Pelican Island NWR, and Archie Carr NWR. The weather was perfect and everything ran smoothly! We couldn't have done it without our amazing volunteers and support from MIWA. Over 40 volunteers worked the festival! Thank you also to the 50th anniversary event sponsors: Delaware North Parks & Resorts at Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, Dixie Crossroads Restaurant, Walmart Foundation and Merritt Island Wildlife Association. Happy 50 years MINWR!

Candice Stevenson, Refuge Operations Specialist

MINWR Volunteers, Pillars of 50th Anniversary Celebration

What does it take to host a successful 50th Anniversary Celebration? The answer is a cadre of talented, hardworking and dedicated volunteers. Planning and preparation for an event of this size is a year in the making. The refuge volunteers, as they always do, stepped up to the occasion and were integral in implementing the 50th anniversary events. Volunteers created 50th brochures, flyers and an exhibit. They trimmed and landscaped the trails, drives and visitor center grounds and refurbished the visitor center memorial sign.

Forty-six volunteers performed numerous jobs at the Refuge's 50th Anniversary Family Festival including parking vehicles, setting up tents and tables, staffing information booths, and presenting programs and kid's activities. Many of these same volunteers helped for several days prior to the event and attended a pre-festival planning meeting. MIWA graciously sponsored lunch for the meeting. Bedrock, foundation, structure, backbone, indispensable, essential, and integral are the words that come to mind when describing our volunteers. A GREAT BIG THANK YOU TO ALL OUR VOLUNTEERS!

We couldn't do it without you!

Nancy Corona, Refuge Ran



*A few of our wonderful Volunteers!
File Photo*

Black Rails on the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge



Black Rail St. Johns NWR
Photo by Mike Legare, USFWS Biologist

As many of you know, the Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) is a highly sought after bird by bird watchers. Its cryptic nature, amusing call, and ability to hide seemingly under your feet, make this bird the ghost of the marsh. I first encountered Black Rails in Steinhatchee, Florida in 1992 while conducting research to refine a survey technique for the bird. This preliminary work led to additional studies on the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge and was the focus of my master's thesis research. At that time, the St. Johns NWR had a population of rails that could be heard along most of the 1.5 mile length of Hacienda Road, giving the St. Johns NWR a reputation as being a "hotspot" for the species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been petitioned to consider listing the Black Rail on the Endangered Species List. I recently attended a workshop on Black Rails and was disappointed to find out that the species is

experiencing declines on many of the known "hotspots" along the east coast from New Jersey to Florida. When asked the status of the population at the St. Johns NWR, unfortunately I was not able to give an accurate answer. This is because, aside from the Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival tours each winter, no additional work has been done with the birds since the late 90's. So, starting in January we, the Refuge staff, interns and volunteers are going to conduct some detailed surveys. Trapping and banding will be done with the goal of repeating some of the work from nearly 20 years ago and determining the current status of the Black Rail at the St. Johns NWR. In addition, we are going to test more modern techniques of surveying for elusive animals. This may help other biologists surveying for these ghost birds.

Mike Legare, Wildlife Biologist, Merritt Island NWR



The purpose of the Merritt Island Wildlife Association is to promote conservation, awareness, and appreciation of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and to provide assistance to Refuge programs.

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Refuge Manager Layne Hamilton **USFWS Liaison** Sandy Mickey
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The Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA) is a nonprofit, cooperating association for the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. The *Habi-Chat* is published quarterly. For MIWA information, call **321-861-2377**.

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"Then and Now" Watercolor Paintings Exhibit at the Visitor Center

The "Then and Now" exhibit of watercolor paintings inspired by photos of activities on the land before it was the Merritt Island National Refuge is giving Refuge visitors a look back in time as well as paintings of current images from the Refuge. This 11th annual exhibit by the Brevard Watercolor Society (BWS) features 40 paintings on exhibit in the Visitor Center auditorium. The show will run from now through the end of January. The "Then" aspect of the show was collaboration with the Refuge staff and the members of the BWS to help commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Refuge. The 50th anniversary is being celebrated in a number of ways during the next few months.

An opening reception for the artists was sponsored by MIWA on Saturday afternoon, December 7th. Attendees were greeted and served by MIWA staff and volunteers Connie Cranston, Sandee Larsen, Jenny Golyer, Maddi Chamberlain, Betty Salter and Joanne Heenan.

Approximately 50 attended the event which was open to all MIWA members. While guests enjoyed the refreshments, Scott Cockerham and his Blue Grass Band entertained guests in front of the Visitor Center. Everyone was delighted with the toe tapping music!

Nancy Corona, Supervisor Ranger, presented the Refuge Awards to Pat Mears for her historical painting "Allenhurst Fish Camp, There's A Catch" and "On the Prowl" by Cindy McKee. Other awards were presented by BWS President Elect Ken Spauling, along with Co-chairs, Therese Ferguson and Darleen Hunt, to the following individuals: 1st Place Historical category "Allenhurst Fish Camp, There's A Catch" by Pat Mears and 2nd Place Historical "Shared Habitats" by Cynthia Perry. Awards of Merit Historical were presented to "Bench Bunch" by Witha LaCuesta, "Duck Hunting" by Barbara Rios, "The Provider" by Mary Savage and "Grand Pa Sailing" by Marlene Woodside. In the "Now" category 1st place went to "Homeward Bound" by Cynthia Perry, Second Place for "On the Prowl" by Cindy McKee. Awards of Merit were presented for "I've Got My Eyes On You" by Therese Ferguson, "After the Burn" by Darleen Hunt, "What Big Teeth You Have" By Beth Kring and "Gull" by Lolly Walton.

The original artworks are offered for sale at the Visitor Center and matted prints are available in the Bookery. A percentage of the art proceeds are donated to MIWA. Don't miss the opportunity to visit the "Then and Now at the Refuge" exhibition when you are at the refuge this winter.

Darleen Hunt, MIWA Board Member and BWS Member

50th Anniversary Student Art Contest



Heidi Thamert with student art.
Photo by Nancy Corona

Astronaut High School Science Teacher and Space Coast Audubon Education Chair, Lora Losi, coordinated an art contest "50 Years of Providing Space for Wildlife" for Brevard County Students in honor of the Refuge's 50th Anniversary. Space Coast Audubon, Merritt Island Wildlife Association and the Refuge partnered to sponsor the event for students in grades kindergarten through twelve. Students were invited to submit a poster that portrayed the theme "Providing 50 years of Space for Wildlife." Local gallery owners Heidi and Jeff Thamert of *The Downtown Gallery* and Reva Harris of *Art Gallery on the River* graciously displayed more than 500 entries and hosted an evening reception for the students, their families and teachers. The Titusville Art League generously loaned their display boards. A local artist, a refuge staff member and a Space Coast Audubon board member volunteered to judge the contest. The winning entries were displayed at the

refuge visitor center. The students and their families enjoyed an award ceremony and reception and the winners received gift certificates to the MIWA bookstore.

Nancy Corona, Refuge Ranger



Hello to...

Sheila Holiday as a Visitor Services intern. Originally from Brewster, NY, she spent last summer at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska doing interpretation and environmental education. Sheila also interned at Marsh Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in

Vermont. She brings experience as an elementary school teacher in Arizona and Delaware. Welcome Sheila!



BWS Award Winners: (L to R) Beth Kring, Cynthia McKee, Cynthia Perry, Barbara Rios, Darleen Hunt, Pat Mears, Mary Salvage and Therese Ferguson
Photo by: Larry Ferguson



Keynote Speaker Charlie Venuto
Photo by Barbara Venuto

MIWA 2013 Annual Meeting, A Success!

Despite the nationwide shutdown of our National Parks and refuges system during October, our wonderful members continued to show their support for Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. On Friday October 25th the 2013 Merritt Island Wildlife Association Annual Meeting was held at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex Debus Center. The night was beautiful, with the meeting taking place in the Debus Center which is right by the Atlantis shuttle display! Over 118 members attended this popular annual event!

Florida Wildlife Hospital manned a table for the second year. Their staff, volunteers and feathered friends greeted the evening's attendees with information about their rehabilitating center. What a wonderful opportunity to have an up close viewing of a Screech and Great Horned Owls! The Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge has utilized the Florida Wildlife Hospital for injured animals and we encourage you to support FWH through donations or volunteer efforts.

MIWA President Dan Click hosted the evening's program that included: Board Nominations by Darleen Hunt, Refuge Report by Layne Hamilton and Keynote Program: "The History of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Heroes, Threats and the Creation of One of the Premier National Wildlife Refuges." by MIWA Board Member and Environmental Specialist Charlie Venuto.

MIWA Board Member Nominations/Elections were:

- Re-Elected Board Members are: Dan Click, Chris Fairey, Craig George and Charlie Ventuo.
- Newly Elected Board members are: Tom Altif, Thad Altman, Robert Champaigne and Eric Gardze.

MIWA Officer Nominations held at the November MIWA Board Meeting:

- MIWA Officer Election were as follows: President – Dan Click, Vice President – Craig George, Treasurer – Alton McKinley and Secretary – Jim Tulley. Congratulations to all!

The dinner served in the Debus Center was delicious. Afterwards the Keynote Speaker, Charlie Venuto, gave a wonderful presentation on the history of the MINWR. Throughout the evening silent auction bidding took place for the lovely donated items. What a success the silent auction was, with \$2,256 collected in bids! Thank you to Bill Moore of Delaware North Parks and Resorts at KSC for sponsoring our event. Thank you to our staff and volunteers: Maddie Chamberlain, Connie Cranston, Jenny Golyer, Carol Pedersen, Joanne Heenan, Shelia Holiday, Sandee & Ed Larsen and Carol Pederson. Your efforts made for another successful event! What a wonderful evening, thank you also to the continued support of our MIWA members, we look forward to seeing you next year!

Connie Cranston, **BOOKERY Associate**

Thank you to all the Silent Auction Donators:

Kathie Benson
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White Mountain Puzzle



Looking Forward - Changing Up Visitor Access

It is absolutely evident that this refuge is a gem. To have a refuge with such amazing wildlife experiences and recreational opportunities in a convenient proximity to other tourist destinations has led to the over one million annual visitors. However, the expansive refuge and the infrastructure not designed for high vehicle use has become incompatible with the high frequency of visitors. To help the Refuge plan for a new vision for visitation, Refuge Project Leader, Layne Hamilton, applied to the *Public Lands Transportation Scholars Program* to receive an individual with substantial knowledge in the transportation field which brought me here in June to help remedy this growing problem.

When I arrived to a land of pesky mosquitoes but beautiful Scrub Jays, I immediately began working on a *transit planning study*. The USGS *Visitor Use Survey* conducted in 2010 revealed that 94% of visitors accessed the Refuge using a private vehicle. Between our car-dependent society and the types of visitor uses found at the Refuge, this figure is not surprising. While I have not experienced it myself, I am told that parts of the Refuge can become quite congested during the peak birding season. From conversations with Refuge management, I have discovered that between budget constraints and the shrinking size of the staff, it is a challenge to maintain the current infrastructure and manage existing visitor use conflicts. The transit planning study is designed to address these problems.

With three established goals, the study will outline a transportation system that supports sustainable management at the Refuge including reducing congestion, utilizing modes alternative to private vehicles to expand access opportunities bringing in a more diverse group of visitors, and improving the connectivity between the Refuge and the surrounding region. Short term outcomes of the study may include developing ways to broaden the use of the existing 14 passenger bus such as using it to expand educational opportunities, attract underserved populations or more local residents, and disperse visitation around the Refuge. The study will also explore long term alternatives that will meet the needs of the Refuge and their community partners over a 5 to 20 year horizon. Alternatives may include planning for concession based visitor programs which would allow an organized opportunity for the Refuge to share its mission while providing for an enjoyable visitor experience that will reduce degradation to the Refuge's infrastructure or resources. The study is scheduled to be completed in June of 2014.

Just in my few short months, my knowledge of the wildlife refuge system has expanded immensely. I understand the value of having visitor services programs to not only educate society on the importance of providing *space for wildlife* but to also grant society the fortune of seeing wildlife in their natural habitat. This study will not detract from those essential purposes but instead, build upon the existing visitation and plan for effective management for the growing gravitation to the Refuge and the region.

Elisa Kropat, MINWR's Public Lands Transportation Scholar

Species in Focus: Feral Pigs

When visitors come to see the wildlife at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, feral pigs generally aren't high on their list.

Conservationists and refuge staff alike aren't particularly fond of the formerly domesticated swine, who are a rather *unwanted* inhabitant of the refuge. For this reason, feral pigs are hunted using live traps, in an attempt to maintain the population on the refuge with hopes to also minimize the damage. So why do an article on such a species?

The answer is simple - the feral pig is *everywhere* on the Refuge, and a persistent threat to its habitat. If you've ever driven along the roads on the refuge and noticed spots of upturned soil, where the grass and roots has been dug up violently, then you've seen the damage that these porkers have caused and *continue* to cause to the Refuge. Feral pigs are voracious omnivores, constantly rooting through the ground and underbrush for anything edible - be it plant, animal, bird, amphibian, or reptile. In the process, they tear apart the habitat around them - what they don't *eat*, at any rate. What makes matters worse is that the pigs are *breeding*, year round at about two litters on average with half with a dozen piglets each litter. It's not a surprise that it's proving difficult to keep these prolific porkers' numbers manageable on the Refuge.

The feral pigs on the refuge are precisely that - formally domesticated. They aren't native to the area. They are remnants of the farms that populated the area where the refuge now stands. When the land was taken to create the refuge, the pigs were simply let loose and have been a nuisance ever since. They're a rather unfortunate part of the refuge's past, one that is still affecting the refuge to this day.

Sheri Girard, MIWA Member



A feral pig on MINWR.

Photo by MIWA Member Cheryl Girard

MIWA Minute

Do you hear that? The sound of wings? Winter migration is happening once again! Here at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, we are welcoming not only our feathered friends but also the hundreds of daily visitors that make their own migration every winter to Florida. Large flocks of migrating birds, alongside our regulars, can be viewed from Black Point Wildlife Drive. Take a day and spend time at our amazing refuge, making sure to stop by our Visitor Center to see the Painted Buntings! They are beautiful and we are so happy to see them back for the winter.

I am thrilled to report that we have received numerous generous donations to MIWA. **Andrew and Rosemary Georganna** of Titusville, supporters of MINWR for many years, donated \$500! Rosemary is a very active volunteer at the Visitor Center front desk and also donates beautiful hand crochet items to our annual silent auction. Andrew and Rosemary are true nature lovers and we appreciate their fantastic generosity. Thank you both! Another one of our members, **Barbara Hoelscher**, donated \$200 to MIWA! Barbara is one of our wonderful Life members. Thank you for your kind donation! **Barbara and Charlie Venuto**, donated \$100! Charlie Venuto is not only an active MIWA Board member but was the Keynote Speaker at our Annual Meeting this year. Barbara and Charlie are also dedicated Life members of MIWA and we are thankful for their contributions! We received donations towards MINWR 50th Anniversary events from **Delaware North Parks & Resorts at Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex** for \$1,000, **Dixie Crossroads Restaurant/Laurilee Thompson** for \$1,000 and the **Walmart Foundation** for \$500. Thank you for your generosity!

With the New Year upon us, here at MIWA we want to extend a big **Thank You** to all of those who volunteer at MINWR. We are continuously grateful for the devotion, hard work and love that the volunteers bring to the refuge and look forward to next year! We wish you all a happy, healthy and nature filled 2014!

I'll see you at the Refuge!

Connie Cranston, Bookery Associate

Stepping Up to the Pollinator Challenge



For the past several years, the USFWS invited each region to join the Service's Pollinator Challenge. Each Region is tasked to earn and track points for pollinator conservation and educational activities. This year's challenge period is April 1 – September 30 emphasizing connecting youth to nature. Merritt Island NWR staff and volunteers worked hard during the 2012 challenge earning the greatest number of points for the Southeast Region. For 2013, the refuge stepped up efforts by presenting a Family Pollinator Event during National Pollination Week, June 17- 23 and a "Moth Night" during National Moth Week, annually celebrated during the last full week of July.

During the Family Pollinator Event, the Sea Rocket Chapter of the Native Plant Society educated the public about native plants and sold pollinator friendly plants. A number of kids' activities were offered including pollinator face painting, a pollinator scavenger hunt and a variety of crafts. Families completing the pollinator scavenger hunt were awarded a native plant to take home. The most popular kids' craft involved creating a

butterfly from a coffee filter, paint, pipe cleaners and of course glitter glue. A local nursery set up a live butterfly exhibit. Bat Belfry's Inc. presented a live bat program and volunteers presented butterfly programs.

Volunteer Chuck Tague was the driving force behind the refuge's moth night programs. Chuck enthusiastically hung white sheets and black lights. Volunteer Barbara Peterson accompanied by a "flutter" of children painted the sides of trees with an intoxicating moth brew, fermented beer and rotting fruit. Volunteers, visitors and staff visited the black lights and moth bait for several hours taking pictures of the many visiting moths.

Merritt Island NWR staff would not be able to sustain the pollinator education efforts without the hard work and dedication of its many wonderful volunteers and support by the Merritt Island Wildlife Association. Every Friday, the garden team pursues weeding and planting of the pollinator garden, the monthly butterfly surveyors brave the heat and mosquitoes to collect data for the University of Florida's Butterfly Monitoring Network and volunteers present a variety of pollinator education activities monthly. Volunteers and staff are rewarded with spectacular sights of colorful wildflowers and an array of beautiful butterflies and bees and the knowledge that they are educating the public about our essential pollinators.

To learn more about the USFWS Pollinator Challenge and other pollinator information please visit:

<http://www.fws.gov/pollinators/Index.html>, <http://nationalmothweek.org> or <http://pollinator.org/nappc/index.html> (North American Pollinator Protection Campaign, NAPPCC)

Nancy Corona, Refuge Ranger

Pollinators "buzzin" with activities!
Photo by Louise Robertson

New Items in



Bird Color

By Alison Hill Spencer

.....\$6.95

This delightful, colorful book introduces kids to birds they might see but also reinforces color concepts.



Bird Count

By Alison Hill Spencer

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This delightful, colorful book introduces kids to birds they might see but also reinforces number concepts.



101 Ways to Help Birds

By Laura Erickson

.....\$19.95

There are 101 meaningful things you can do to help birds – around the house, in the yard, on the road, and in the wild. This book tells you how to make that impact a positive one and how that can make a world of difference.



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MIWA Office at 321-861-2377*

Visitor Information Center Hours

OPEN DAILY-CLOSED FEDERAL HOLIDAYS

Monday - Sunday

9:00 am – 4:00 pm

The Refuge is open daily from sunrise – sunset.

Habi-Chat has email! If you would like to be on our mailing list to receive MIWA announcements, please add us to your safe senders list and send a request to HabiChat@MerrittIslandWildlifeAssociation.org



*Donations in remembrance of loved
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MIWA, P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781



Merritt Island Wildlife Association

Supporting the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge

Joining is simple. Just fill out this form and mail

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Type of Membership:

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