

# THE IBIS



Sept. 2016-editor Jay Bushnell

The IBIS is the journal publication of The Friends of the Lower Suwannee and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges-Friendsofrefuges.org

OUR MISSION: is to provide active advocacy and physical support for the successful stewardship of the Refuges.

*Advocating*

*Educating*

*Volunteering*

*Funding*

*Fellowship*



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

On September 1, Hurricane Hermine, a Category 1 storm came onshore over St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, near Tallahassee, Florida. The Cedar Keys and Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuges were on the southeast side of the storm, where a nearly 10 foot storm surge and winds gusting up to 75 mph brought down trees, tore numerous docks loose from their moorings, and brought water levels not seen in decades into the numerous small coastal communities along Florida's Big Bend region.

Refuge staff were not only on standby to help out nearby communities during and after the storm, but they quickly went to work on the refuges afterwards to get storm damage cleaned up. I'd like to give all the staff and refuge volunteers, especially Ron Black a huge shout out for their tireless work. Although

natural resources and wildlife protection are part of why are refuges exist, it is the human resources that keep the refuges up and running, especially in times like this.

I've been reflecting a lot on the interaction of humans and the environment in the aftermath of this storm. While it's often very easy to see the toll storms take on human construction, it's a lot harder to see or know what toll that this takes on wildlife. Wildlife that can move may make for higher ground.

On Cedar Key, where I live, I saw several salt marsh snakes in places where they wouldn't normally be, presumably



brought to these spots by the tidal surge. Often they were trying to move in the direction back towards water. Your President, Maria Sgambati

### EDITORIAL

by Jay Bushnell

Clearly, Hurricane Hermine brought major destruction to Cedar Key and other coastal communities in the Big Bend. What it did not destroy was the spirit of Cedar Key folks. It was refreshing to witness the sense of community. Young and old turned out to help with the clean up. Labor Day events had to be cancelled but by the 17th there was a Pirate Invasion Festival and the Coastal Clean Up as scheduled! Many businesses opened their doors in record time.

## **REFUGE UPDATES**

### **Hermine and the Refuges**

by Vic Doig

Suwannee NWRs took a glancing blow from Hurricane Hermine a few weeks ago, and refuge



facilities took on a fair amount of damage, but thankfully things could have been much worse. There were lots of trees down and flooding due to the wind and rain, but the worst damage was from the 9' storm surge along the coast.

Cedar Keys NWR damage included the beach trail boardwalk at Atsena-Otie Key, the old dock/observation platform at Atsena Otie, the floating dock at Seahorse Key, and the beach stairway at Seahorse. At Shell Mound, the fishing pier sustained significant damage. The restroom was washed over and damaged. It has been closed for a long time. Signs and trash cans were displaced throughout here and the rest of the refuge.



Most public roads, and virtually all service roads on the Lower Suwannee NWR behind gates, were flooded and blocked by downed trees, but have since been cleared in

preparation for archery hunting season in late September. Significant damage to the road beds on the Nature Drive and the Dixie Main Line occurred as base material was washed away. The River Trail boardwalk was damaged. Some culverts were blown out, and Dixie Co. facilities at Salt Creek and Shired Island were damaged as well.

The Refuge work crew has been busy with



repairing damage and most of the roads and facilities have been re-opened. There remains additional work such as bringing in fill on the main roads, and replacing the missing section of the Shell Mound dock which will take a bit longer. But the Refuges are certainly back open for business and public visitation!

### **Seahorse Key Rookery Update**

by Vic Doig

The Refuges and Cedar Keys areas have long been a very important breeding ground for wading and sea birds, such as herons, egrets, ibis and pelicans. We all probably remember the mass abandonment of the Seahorse Key colony in April 2015. That colony had been in existence for many decades, and was the single largest wading bird colony on the Gulf Coast of Florida, with recent annual counts stable at 10,000+ nests of about a dozen different species. All birds of all species abandoned their nests, already with eggs, during the 3rd week of April, 2015. Roughly, a third of those nesting pairs settled on and re-nested on nearby Snake Key later that spring and successfully produced young. The remaining birds

simply did not nest in 2015, but rather hung loosely around the Cedar Key area.

In 2016, despite attempts to lure the nesting birds back to the much larger Seahorse Key rookery with decoys, the birds did not return to Seahorse Key, but there were 3,000 - 4,000 successful nests at the new Snake Key rookery. All local species were well represented, with good hatches of young White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbills recorded. In addition, there were two new rookeries in the region that were discovered via aerial surveys: One on the Pepperfish Keys north of Horseshoe Beach, and the other further north on Rock Island near Keaton Beach. Both of these are smaller rookeries however, with hundreds, rather than thousands, of nests. They also lack the species diversity of the Cedar Key area rookery. Still, these new Big Bend area rookeries likely represent some of the Seahorse Key nesters.

A UF graduate student, Mark Sandfoss, is investigating the ecological effects of the abandonment on Seahorse Key's cottonmouth moccasins - who shared a unique symbiotic ecological relationship with the nesting birds on the island. That island's cottonmouth population is suffering with the loss of the birds, and many of the surviving snakes have turned to cannibalism to survive. On Snake Key, the opposite is occurring; the few cottonmouths there are thriving with the new bird residents, and the population there is expected to grow. The snakes help to protect the bird nests from mammalian predators, while they benefit from feeding on the leftover scraps dropped for the nests.

The Refuge is working on the seasonal closure of Snake Key for the nesting season, like the arrangement that has been in place for Seahorse Key, and that closure is expected to be in affect by nesting season of 2017.

### **A Conservation Team**

Meet the wife and husband team Samantha Gibbs and Jim Wortham. Prior to last year they popped in and out for short business visits. For the last year, they have taken up full time residence with us. They have a home in Cedar Key and they decided to make it their base of operation instead of Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland. They are not an

official part of our refuge staff, but clearly their presence enhances our refuges.

Now, Samantha is a real home grown lady. She grew up in Gainesville. From the University of Florida, she earned a B. S. in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation in 1998 and a Doctor of Veterinarian Medicine degree in 2001. Sam completed a PhD in medical microbiology at the University of Georgia's Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study in 2005. She stayed on at UGA for another year to do a post doc in 2006. Sam then moved to Australia to work with the Australian federal government at the Australian Animal Health Laboratory until 2008. With her epidemiological background, her main research focused on bird flu issues in Indonesia.

Sam came back to the States in 2008 as a Wildlife Veterinarian for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Today she leads the Wildlife Health office, a Service-wide program housed under the National Wildlife Refuge System.



Jim grew up on a row-crop and livestock farm in northern Missouri. Beginning in 1983, while still in high school, he worked summers with the Missouri Department of Conservation applying his farming and equipment skills to habitat management and wildlife research on state wildlife management areas along the Mississippi River. After graduation from high school he went on to earn a B.S in Fish and Wildlife Management from the University of Missouri while continuing to work with Dr. Leigh Frederickson, a renown waterfowl and wetland ecologist and Director of the Gaylord Memorial

Laboratory from which Jim accepted a staff position. “Working for Fredrickson and with his many graduate students introduced me to wildlife and wetland ecosystems across the continent.” One of Jim’s favorites regions was Alaska, and he worked several waterfowl and habitat projects in Alaska. He eventually completed his graduate degree while researching the marshes and breeding waterfowl of the Kanuti River system along the Arctic Circle in the north-central portion of the state. During his time in Alaska, he also became passionate about aviation and earned his pilot’s license, learning from various bush pilots, and was able to buy a small airplane of his own. The combination of wildlife experience and pilot skills lined him up for his dream job of becoming a Flyway Biologist/Pilot and he was able to join a small cadre of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service biologists who traveled throughout Canada, the U.S, Mexico, and the sometimes central America to survey migrating bird populations and assess habitat conditions. In 2005, he took over as the youngest Chief to head up this program which also included administering the joint waterfowl leg banding programs conducted with the Canadian Wildlife Service. Leg bands were placed on between 25,000 and 50,000 birds annually. Jim served as Chief of the aerial survey and banding programs for 8 years. Beginning in 2014, he stepped aside to increase his time in the air, and to develop techniques for using aerial remote sensing technology to survey wildlife and to map and assess habitats. In his current role, he collaborates extensively with the National Park Service, USGS, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, NOAA and various universities and non-Government organizations on numerous wildlife ecology and landscape-scale research projects. He serves on the Executive Board of the International Association of Natural Resource Pilots and is also a Board member of the Florida Nature Coast Conservancy.

Samantha and Jim have been married for 3 1/2 years. They have a home in Cedar Key. Sam, as she is often called, loves to kayak and she is a birder. Jim likes to hunt and is learning saltwater fishing.

## Upcoming Friends Events

### Pepper busting

Work to control the invasive Brazilian Pepper will again start in November when the weather cools down. Contact project leader Roger McDaniels (321-698-1688) to learn more. Visiting former sites that have been busted verifies definite success.

### **Suwannee Waterways Cleanup**

Thursday, October 20, 2016, 9:00 am  
Suwannee Community Center

Trash bags and grabbers are supplied

*Thanks to Hurricane Hermine  
we have plenty of litter!*

**Lunch** provided by:

- Suwannee Chamber of Commerce
- Friends of the Lower Suwannee Refuge

Friends of the Lower Suwannee Refuge board meeting at 1:30 pm  
*Sit in and catch up on what's going on in the Refuge*

**Sign Up:** Debbie Meeks  
352-278-5088  
dmeeks352@gmail.com

This cleanup is part of Current Problems' Great Suwannee River Cleanup, CurrentProblems.org  
The Great Suwannee River Cleanup is part of the Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup



A refuge boat will be available to ferry folks from Fowlers Bluff. Contact Debbie for details.



### Seahorse Key Marine Lab update

UF/IFAS press release Sept. 21, 2016

GAINESVILLE, Fla. --- The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, the UF College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Santa Fe College have teamed up to manage the Seahorse Key Marine Laboratory, an off-shore facility in the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge.

“This collaboration across our campus and between UF and Santa Fe College will increase our capacity for research, extension and teaching on the Nature Coast,” said Micheal Allen, director of the UF/IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station, a research unit located in Cedar Key, Florida. “Our combined efforts

will enhance UF's impact on the local community and its natural resources."

Seahorse Key is home to a laboratory, marine specimen collection site and a pre-Civil War era lighthouse, which has a bunkhouse with 26 beds for overnight stays. The island is also a field site for snake and bird

research, Allen said.

"Seahorse Key is three miles from the island of Cedar Key, so it's

relatively remote. This natural, rustic environment provides a unique educational experience for school groups and visiting college students," said Allen. "On the other hand, the Nature Coast Biological Station will provide on-shore, modern amenities and equipment for marine research and teaching. Together, the two facilities will offer the best of both worlds."

Seahorse Key Marine Laboratory continues to welcome UF and Santa Fe College faculty and students, as well as people from all Florida and out-of-state institutions, said Allen.

UF/IFAS is outlining ways to improve and update the island's operations, Allen said. There are plans to bring Internet service to the facility, upgrade the laboratory and switch the island's power source from propane to solar power, he said.

### Advocacy Update

by Jay Bushnell

You may remember the article in the May issue of the IBIS, that described our support of The



Conservation Fund's grant application from the Natural Resource Conservation Service of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. Again, TCF is applying for NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) funding for the *Lower Suwannee & Gulf Watershed* conservation easement project. The areas in red are lands being targeted for conservation easements. **Good news**-the grant application made the first cut. Final word will be in December.

### The Forgotten Coast: Florida Wildlife Corridor

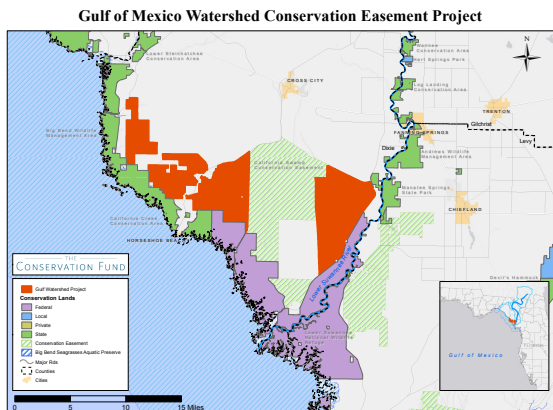
Glades to Gulf Expedition, Mallory L. Dimmitt, Joseph M. Guthrie & Calton Ward, Jr. (2015)

These three intrepid conservationists followed their 2012 hike, bike, paddle, and horse back from the southern tip of Florida to the Okefenokee Swamp with another equally grueling trip. Their quest has been to demonstrate that it is still possible to create wildlife corridors that would help save the wildlife of Florida. It is fun to read about their trip.

Levy, Dixie, Taylor and Jefferson counties, known as the Big Bend Region of Florida are a very important part of the corridor. The fact that our region has been forgotten is in part positive. Our natural resources have not been compromised like what has happened in South Florida. However, according to the 2015 study of the Big Bend Region pointed out these four counties only have 93,000



people or 0.5% of the total population of Florida. Young people are moving away. The challenge will be how to develop an economy that protects the resources and provides a healthy economy.



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