



News & Notes

Calhoun County father and son netted on marijuana charges

A Calhoun County father and son were jailed in Liberty County after officers found 26 6-foot marijuana plants in their truck.

John Gordon Layfield, 54, and his son Patrick Wayne Layfield, 21, Blountstown, face felony marijuana cultivation and possession charges.

FWC Officer Ros Welborn said the pair was stopped on Forest Road 118 and offered no resistance to officers.

He said the FWC, Liberty County Sheriff's Office and U.S. Forest Service were working in a joint effort to arrest marijuana growers inside the national forest.

Welborn said officers worked all day pulling up more than 200 additional marijuana plants from several sites, some of the plants as tall as 8 feet. He said the estimated street value of the plants is \$60,000 to \$100,000.

FWC to research gator management options



JACK ROGERS

The FWC directed its alligator management staff to meet with stakeholders to find out if better options exist for managing the reptiles.

During the Dec. 6 meeting in Key Largo, Commissioners heard a staff report regarding a recent online survey concerning public attitudes about Florida's alligator management

program. The report indicated Floridians are fairly evenly divided over whether alligator harvest regulations are too restrictive or too lenient. Public comments during the meeting reflected similar division.

Commissioners unanimously passed a motion to continue gathering public input to evaluate all possible options for improving management.

63-pound Choctawhatchee River catfish almost a record

Ponce de Leon resident Doyle Ammons has caught plenty of fish during his 76 years. None of his fish compare, however, to the near-record 63-pound blue catfish he caught Nov. 6 from the Choctawhatchee River.

Ammons' fish was 48 inches long and almost certainly would have been certified as the new Florida record, except for one thing – he caught his fish on a bush hook, sometimes called a "limb line." It is legal to fish with bush hooks or trotlines, but fish caught by such methods are not eligible for certification as new records. Only record freshwater fish caught by conventional hook-and-line or rod-and-reel can be accepted.

His fish weighed 1.5 pounds more than the recognized state record

blue cat. That fish was caught by rod-and-reel from Little Escambia Creek in Escambia County in 1996.

Despite the fact his catfish won't show up in the record books, Ammons said it was satisfaction enough to catch the biggest blue cat ever landed in Florida.

Ammons said his bush hook was tied to a limber green vine hanging over the edge of the river, a factor he credits in "wearing down" the catfish. For bait he used chunks of bowfin.

This was his second large blue catfish in the past two months; the other weighed 55 pounds.

Doyle Ammons (right) caught this 48-inch-long, 63-pound catfish from the Choctawhatchee River.



LT HAMPTON YATES

Reward offered in dead bear case

FWC investigators are hoping a reward up to \$1,000 will prompt someone to step forward with information about who killed a large black bear Oct. 25 in the Lynne area on the edge of the Ocala National Forest.

Bear hunting is not legal in Florida. However, investigators confirmed the 350-pound male bear had been shot. The bear was found in the 14000 block of Northeast 10th Place, southeast of East Marion Elementary School.

Anyone with information may call Lt. Don McMillen on the Wildlife Alert Hotline at 1-888-404-3922 or at the regional office at (352) 732-1225.



FWC FILES

Anyone with information about this case or any other wildlife law violation may call the hotline and remain anonymous. If the information leads to an arrest, callers may qualify for a reward.

New, bigger barnacle discovered on Florida's East Coast

Experts aren't sure what the oversized barnacle's (*Megabalanus coccopoma*) impact will be, but it was spotted this fall in St. Augustine and last year in Port St. Lucie.

The barnacle — known to grow at least as large as a woman's palm — is seen as a potential "fouling" nuisance, because barnacles can cement themselves to everything from boat hulls to intake pipes.

"I think it's fair to say it will have an impact," said Maia McGuire, a marine extension agent with Florida Sea Grant, a University of Florida-affiliated coastal research and education program.

Experts don't know how the barnacle ended up in Florida. It's native to the Pacific Ocean, from Mexico to Ecuador, but in the past few years has been reported in Brazil, Texas and Louisiana.

Barnacles, arthropods that are related to crabs and lobsters, fix themselves to objects or other animals and wait for food to come to them.

The creatures can hitch a ride to their new destinations by attaching

themselves to ship or boat hulls, or their larvae get sucked up in ballast water used to balance large vessels, such as cruise ships.

Ballast-water transport is believed responsible for many invasive species around the globe, such as zebra mussels in the Great Lakes area. Officials estimate ballast-water transport causes an estimated \$10 billion in damage a year.

Amy Benson, a Gainesville-based fishery biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, said it's too early to know what the volcano-shaped barnacle's impact will be.

"The current barnacles we have cause problems, and they're much smaller," she said. "This one is so large, I can see it being a big problem."

By comparison, most native Florida acorn barnacles are much smaller, only growing about a half-inch in diameter.

In 2002, another invasive species — the Asian green mussel — found its way to Northeast Florida. That invasive mussel already plagues the state's Gulf Coast, killing native shellfish and covering man-made objects.

IGFA Fishing Hall of Fame enshrines Floridian Jack Anderson



IGFA FISHING HALL OF FAME

Big game fisherman John W. "Jack" Anderson, II was one of five men inducted into the 2006 class of the International Game Fish

Association Fishing Hall of Fame.

The eighth annual IGFA class also included New Zealand sportsman Charles Alma Baker, bass angling legend Bill Dance, Japanese conservationist Hidenori Onishi and California oceanographer Milton C. Shedd.

Anderson has fished for virtually all species all over the world. An IGFA trustee since 1976, Anderson served on the advisory committee instrumental in making the IGFA Fishing Hall of Fame & Museum in Dania Beach a reality. Anderson, who resides in Palm Beach, said he was surprised to be inducted.

The five join 60 other previously enshrined Hall of Fame members that include Ernest Hemingway, Zane Grey, Ted Williams, Curt Gowdy, Michael and Helen Lerner and Philip Wylie. For more on the IGFA Fishing Hall of Fame visit www.igfa.org/hall.asp.

Founded in 1939, the IGFA is a not-for-profit organization committed to the conservation of game fish and promotion of responsible, ethical angling practices through science, education, rule making and record keeping. The IGFA welcomes visitors to its 60,000-square foot interactive Fishing Hall of Fame and Museum, headquartered in Dania Beach.



News & Notes

FWC readies Brevard manatee zone signs

Manatee protection zone signs in Brevard County, damaged by hurricanes, deteriorated from age or subjected to vandalism are being repaired or replaced by FWC marine contractors.

The work is taking place in Mosquito Lagoon and the Indian and Banana rivers and should be finished in February.

Boater noncompliance has been high in Brevard County waters where manatee zone signs have been damaged or don't exist. Up to now, FWC officers have written a significant number of warnings to boaters who ignore or don't know the rules. But that will change once the signs are repaired and in place. Instead of warnings, boaters who violate the rules will get tickets.

"By making these repairs and corrections, we hope to alleviate confusion and achieve improved boater understanding within the zones," FWC Officer Jeff Luce said.

Preliminary data indicates Brevard County has had an unusually high number of manatee deaths caused by watercraft this year (20 incidents through the end of October), and low compliance within the protection zones could be a factor.

Boaters are responsible for knowing the rules of the waterways whether there are signs up or not. They also are responsible for knowing what is going on in front of, alongside and behind their vessels. This time of year, manatees are on the move looking for warmer waters, and it's critical for boaters to keep an eye out for them to avoid colliding with the slow-moving sea mammals.

Maps of the FWC manatee protection zones in Brevard County as well as other parts of Florida are at MyFWC.com/psm/gis/mapref.htm.

The Nature Conservancy Fire Team completes season of successful prescribed burns

Florida's fire team personnel were in full force this fire season. From last year to this, The Nature Conservancy conducted 40 prescribed fires, burning a total of 4,814 acres, throughout its preserves in Florida – including The Disney Wilderness Preserve and Tiger Creek Preserve, both in Central Florida.

The Nature Conservancy's Lake Wales Ridge Florida Scrub-jay Fire Strike Team and the Panhandle's Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership Fire Team also assisted a diverse range of partners with implementation of 41,269 acres of prescribed fire throughout the state and in the Bahamas.

Despite the occasional inconvenience of smoke, prescribed fire remains the most cost-effective tool for maintaining natural habitats for wildlife and for keeping wildfire fuel levels (built up debris) low. By reducing fuel loads under suitable conditions, prescribed fires benefit Florida's wildlife and reduce the

threat of catastrophic wildfires to nearby homes and communities.

As Florida continues to set aside land for the preservation of native plants and wildlife, land management practices become more pertinent. There are approximately 9.5 million acres in conservation management, of which about 75 percent require some form of prescribed fire. Because the job is so large, and resources limited, many of these lands have gone without fire for years. These overgrown lands lose their ability to sustain Florida's native wildlife and become dangerously thick with wildfire fuels.

The Nature Conservancy is a leading international, nonprofit organization that preserves plants, animals and natural communities representing the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. With funding from the voter-approved Florida Forever program and generous donors, the Conservancy has helped protect more than 1.1 million acres in Florida since 1961.



Prescribed burning helps maintain habitat, such as this prime quail forest.

TONY YOUNG



News & Notes

Florida hunter wins Streamlight Challenged Hunter of the Year



JEREMY DIXON

A Sopchoppy resident has been named Florida's first winner of a prestigious national award for physically challenged hunters.

Jay Leonard, paralyzed from the waist down and wheelchair-bound after falling from a tree stand in 1990, was named the "2006 Streamlight Challenged Hunter of the Year" by the worldwide flashlight company and Buckmasters American Deer Foundation.

The award is given to an outstanding disabled outdoors person who "has overcome great obstacles in order to participate in the sport of hunting, then applied his or her knowledge and insight to help and inspire others to do the same," according to information provided by Buckmasters and Streamlight.

"We are really proud to recognize Jay for being such an accomplished deer hunter and for what he has done for other disabled hunters. He is so deserving of this award," David Sullivan, director of Buckmasters Disabled Hunter Services, said.

Leonard was featured in the September/October 2006 issue of *Florida Wildlife Magazine*.

If it wasn't for these mobility-impaired hunts, there's no way I would've been able to do what I've done. It really proves what kind of great opportunities we do have for hunters in this state – disabled or not," Leonard said.

Counting on bird counters in the Southeast

Northern cardinals were reported at more feeders in the Southeast last winter than any other species. Close behind in the rankings were the mourning dove, American goldfinch, Carolina chickadee and tufted titmouse. These rankings are based on reports to Project FeederWatch, a popular citizen-science project from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology that helps answer questions about bird populations.

According to project leader David Bonter, counts were below normal last winter.

"A lot of people from Florida and the Carolinas, west to Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana reported fewer birds at the start of the last FeederWatch season. That may have been a result of the relatively mild temperatures," Bonter said.

Feeder activity did pick up as the winter progressed but numbers of some species were still markedly lower than normal, including blue jays, dark-eyed juncos and northern flickers.

On the positive side, FeederWatchers reported record numbers of chipping sparrows, eastern bluebirds and white-winged doves.

They also found a few rarities in the Southeast.

"Some western hummingbirds spent the winter in Virginia and Florida instead of going to their normal wintering areas in Central America, and there was a Bullock's oriole visiting a feeder in Tallahassee when it should have been in Mexico," Bonter said.

Project FeederWatch participants have submitted more than 1.1 million checklists to date, helping scientists track changes in bird populations and distribution. People of all ages and skill levels are welcome to participate. To learn more about Project FeederWatch or to register, visit www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw or call the Lab toll-free at (800) 843-2473.

In return for a \$15 fee, participants receive the *FeederWatcher's Handbook*, a poster of common feeder birds, complete instructions on filing reports, a subscription to the Lab's newsletter and more. The season runs from Nov. 11 to Apr. 6, and participants may join at any time.

"It's our 20th year," Bonter said, "and we're counting on citizen scientists to help us track birds for the next 20 years."



American goldfinch females usually nest twice a year, sometimes leaving their mate to raise the first brood and finding another male to father a second brood.

JACK ROGERS

Coalition proposes raising Florida Forever funding



THOMAS J. DUNKERTON

A coalition of 16 regional, state and national nonprofit organizations has announced support for extending and expanding the state's conservation land-buying program.

"We propose that, by 2008, Florida Forever or a successor program spend up to \$1 billion per year preserving environmentally sensitive land, buying parkland and securing our water resources," the Florida Forever Coalition stated in an open letter that appeared in the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

For more than 15 years, the state of Florida has been a national leader in the preservation of conservation lands. Starting with Preservation 2000 in 1990, then Florida Forever in the year 2000, the state has dedicated \$6 billion and acquired more than 2 million acres of fragile natural areas. Despite such successes, however, conservation funding has not kept pace with Florida's incredible growth. Between 1999, when Florida Forever was conceived, and 2005, the price the state has paid for conservation land has increased 112 percent, according to the Land Conservation Statistical Abstract, prepared by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Due to Florida's incredible growth, the annual conservation funding that represented \$23 per person in 1990 has dropped to \$15 today.

Florida's lands and waters remain vulnerable due to increasing urban and suburban development pressures, altered or inappropriate fire regimes, invasive species, pollution and excessive water withdrawal, escalating land prices, and the increasing need for management of public lands.

The Florida Forever Coalition proposes a commitment of \$1 billion per year toward securing the legacy that began so long ago. Members are: The Nature Conservancy, Audubon of Florida, The Trust for Public Land, Florida Recreation & Park Association, Florida Wildlife Federation, the Alliance of Florida Land Trusts, American Society of Landscape Architects, Conservancy of Southwest Florida, The Conservation Fund, Defenders of Wildlife, Everglades Trust, Florida Chapter of the American Planning Association, Florida Native Plant Society, Florida Trail Association, 1,000 Friends of Florida and Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

Florida Department of Transportation agrees to help battle destructive plants

Florida's Department of Transportation (FDOT) has joined an effort promoted by The Nature Conservancy to control invasive species. FDOT is the first government agency in the country to sign on.

FDOT refined the Voluntary Codes of Conduct developed for government agencies and will incorporate them into their statewide policy for roadside landscaping. The codes were developed as part of a collaborative response to the No. 1 threat to biodiversity — invasive species that escape from landscapes and overtake native plants.

In Florida, the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association suggested the most effective approach to reduce the commercial reliance on invasive species is to reduce demand for those species. FDOT is one of the largest consumers of plants in the state. The Lowe's home improvement chain in Florida also has agreed to a set of Voluntary Codes of Conduct.

"FDOT has shown real leadership among state and federal agencies in adopting a set of codes and in responsibly managing vegetation on rights-of-way. Negative impacts from invasive plants on public and private lands in Florida should be reduced as a result. We are excited to have worked with the department on this proactive approach to a problem that is costing the state of Florida millions of dollars," said Valerie Vartanian, the Conservancy's horticulture liaison.

In adopting the codes, FDOT agreed to identify known invaders, develop specifications to lessen their impacts, provide staff training on invasive plant identification and management, dispose of unwanted invasives using appropriate safeguards and support the development of environmentally sound methods to manage invasive plants. FDOT also agreed to phase out the use of invasive plants and encourage plant nurseries to increase availability of non-invasives, and will develop an effective, enforceable plan to manage and remove invasive plants from the rights-of-way.



THOMAS J. DUNKERTON

The Brazilian pepper is one of the most aggressive nonnative invasive plant species growing in Florida.