



News & Notes

Giving credit where credit is due

In the Jan./Feb. issue of *Florida Wildlife*, a footnote to the article “Ridge Rangers to the rescue” was inadvertently omitted. Credit should have been given to Archbold Research Institute for data describing the acreage of the Lake Wales Ridge. “Weekley, C.W., E.S. Menges, and R.L. Pickert. 2008. An ecological map of Florida’s Lake Wales Ridge: a new boundary delineation and an assessment of post-Columbian habitat loss. *Florida Scientist* 71:45-64.”

FWC expands RSS offerings

The FWC is making greater use of those little, orange rectangles seen on many Web sites to provide customized delivery of news and information over the Internet.

The FWC uses a technology called Really Simple Syndication (RSS) to alert interested parties when news releases are published on its Web site: MyFWC.com. Recently, the FWC doubled its offering of “feeds” to deliver various categories of news releases via RSS.

For more about RSS, visit MyFWC.com/RSS.html.

Join in the fun at Tosohatchee

A Taste of Tosohatchee happens Saturday, April 19, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Tosohatchee Wildlife Management Area (WMA) 20 miles east of Orlando. FWC staff will demonstrate management techniques used to restore natural communities and highlight recreation opportunities available on the WMA. Hands-on dynamic activities will make this a wonderful event for the whole family.

Try your hand at an archery range, learn fly-fishing, take a hike along a Florida trail with a guide and learn to identify native plants, including species good to eat at the Incredible Edibles display. Watch a muzzleloading demonstration, learn about the Youth Hunting Education and Becoming an Outdoors Woman programs, and let the kids safely learn how to cast for fish. Take a guided hayride and see a demonstration about prescribed fire and watch huge roller chopping machines.

Early-morning birding tours will be offered in Spanish and English by reservation – call 850-922-6160. Tours by horseback will be offered and outdoor tips and survival skills will be shared.

2006 and 2007: South Florida’s driest back-to-back years on record

Meteorologists at the South Florida Water Management District have confirmed that 2006 and 2007 were the driest back-to-back calendar years in South Florida since rainfall record-keeping began in 1932. The 2006-07 rainfall total of 83.63 inches District-wide displaces by nearly an inch the previous low of 84.59 inches that fell 50 years ago in 1955-56.

With annual District-wide rainfall of 42.88 inches, or 82 percent of the historical average, 2007 was the ninth-driest year in the 76-year record. It

followed rainfall of only 40.75 inches in 2006, the sixth-driest year on record. The combined two-year total is nearly two feet less than the historical District-wide average of 104.5 inches for a typical two-year period.

“The District’s rainfall data confirms that South Florida is still in the grips of a severe regional drought, which has led to a multi-year water shortage the likes of which we have never experienced,” said SFWMD Governing Board Chairman Eric



After two years of drought, Lake Okeechobee’s water levels are low enough to expose the lake bottom and its fish nests.

Buermann. “South Florida residents – as well as water managers – must live with limited water supplies this dry season, and we all must practice conservation and follow the one-day-a-week restrictions if we are to successfully minimize the impacts of this water shortage.”

In December, and for the first time in the agency’s history, the SFWMD declared an extreme District-wide water shortage, instituting a one-day-a-week watering schedule for residential landscape irrigation. Landscape irrigation

accounts for up to half of all household water consumption in the State of Florida and totals more than 7 billion gallons per day nationwide.

The new restrictions became effective Tuesday, Jan. 15. Enforcement, including the issuance of civil fines and notices of violation, commenced on that date. For information on watering days and times, as well as restrictions on specific use classes, visit www.sfwmd.gov/conserves.

© PATRICK LYNCH / ALAMY

Florida's hunters and anglers spend \$4.8 billion a year

Florida's 2 million hunters and anglers are among the most prominent and influential of all demographic groups, spending more than \$4.8 billion a year on hunting and fishing, according to a new report.

The report, "*Hunting and Fishing: Bright Stars of the American Economy – A force as big as all outdoors*," spotlights the immense impact hunters and anglers have on the economy at the national and state levels.

In Florida, spending by hunters and anglers directly supports 85,000 jobs, which puts \$2.5 billion worth of paychecks into pockets of working residents around the state. Government coffers also benefit – spending by sportsmen in pursuit of these outdoor activities generates \$484 million in state and local taxes. These latest figures demonstrate that, season after season, hunters and anglers are driving the economy from big businesses to rural towns, through booms and recessions.

- Sportsmen support more jobs in Florida than Disney World (85,000 jobs vs. 61,000).
- Annual spending by Florida sportsmen is more than twice the revenues of Miami-based Burger

King (\$4.8 billion vs. \$2.05 billion).

- Annual spending by Florida anglers is three times greater than the cash receipts from the state's orange crop (\$4.4 billion vs. 1.2 billion).
- Florida sportsmen spend \$1.1 billion annually on outboard boats and engines to get them onto the water and around the marshes for fishing and hunting.
- More Florida residents fish and hunt each year than attend Miami Dolphins, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Jacksonville Jaguars games (2 million vs. 1.6 million).
- The economic stimulus of hunting and fishing equates to an astounding \$13 million a day being pumped into the state's economy.

"Spending by sportsmen benefits not only the manufacturers of hunting- and fishing-related products, but everything from local mom and pop businesses to wildlife conservation," noted Doug Painter, president of National Shooting Sports Foundation. "And because most hunting and fishing takes place in rural areas, much of the spending benefits less-affluent parts of the state."



ROBERT J. LA FOLLETTE

Report shows increasing human contact with Florida panthers



RUSSELL KINDL

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has released the 2007 Interagency Florida Panther Response Team Report that summarizes human-panther interactions investigated by the Interagency Florida Panther Response Team between December 2003 and June 2007.

The team includes biologists, law enforcement officers and other agency representatives from the USFWS, National Park Service and the FWC. As more humans move into panther habitat, the potential for human-panther interactions increases. Therefore, the team developed a plan to promote public safety and panther conservation.

Reported interactions included panther sightings and encounters, such as one involving a panther that was removed from the wild because it was deemed a potential threat, and multiple domestic animal depredations.

Additionally, the report summarizes outreach and educational efforts completed by the team, as well the work of partnering organizations and local government agencies, which provide the public with the information and tools needed to live and recreate in panther habitat. To view the report, visit www.fws.gov/verobeach or MyFWC.com/panther.



News & Notes

FWC and the University of South Florida create center for prediction of red tides

The University of South Florida (USF) and the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) have established a Center for Prediction of Red Tides at the University's College of Marine Science in St. Petersburg. The center will develop, test and implement models to forecast Florida red tide conditions.

A five-year, \$1.25 million contract from FWRI will help finance the center that will assist the state's red tide monitoring program. USF is matching the state's contribution with a \$400,000 computer cluster along with staff support for the center.

Florida red tides are natural phenomena caused by a microscopic organism, *Karenia brevis*. *K. brevis* produces a toxin that can kill fish, birds and marine mammals, such as dolphins and manatees. Also, it can cause respiratory problems in people.

The factors contributing to red tide formation are extremely complex. Oceanic currents, nutrients, weather and interactions among numerous marine algae species contribute to bloom conditions.

"For the first time, the Center for Prediction of Red Tides will pull together biological, chemical and physical scientific expertise and couple it with advanced computing power to model factors contributing to red tide formation across all appropriate spatial scales," said Gil McRae, FWRI director.

The long-term goal of this collaborative partnership is to create a routine capability to predict Florida red tides and their potential impacts.

To learn more about FWRI's red tide research program, visit research.MyFWC.com/redtide.



A spotted seatrout killed by red tide along with pinfish, scaled sardines and other species.

FWC FISH AND WILDLIFE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Wal-Mart grant program helps provide protection for an important conservation connector



WILLIAM J. WEBER

More than 11,200 acres that connect important wildlife habitat and buffers two important military installations were purchased in October by the State of Florida from The Nature Conservancy with help from the Wal-Mart Acres for America program. The land in Santa Rosa and Okaloosa counties protects historic longleaf pine habitat, outstanding river frontage and threatened ravine systems.

"Thanks to this grant made possible by Acres for America, we are grateful for the opportunity to help the state protect this important conservation land. Through collaborative partnerships like this, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) works to ensure the health and survival of the natural world that sustains us all," said Jeff Danter, state director for TNC.

Acres for America is a partnership conservation program that includes Wal-Mart Stores, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Turner Foundation, Inc.

The state acquired 11,209 acres of the long-sought Yellow River Ravines Florida Forever project, which TNC bought last year from International Paper and held for the state. The site links outstanding natural areas in Eglin Air Force Base with those in Blackwater River State Forest. The Florida Division of Forestry will manage the Yellow River lands as part of the Blackwater River State Forest. The protected area will continue to provide critical habitat for black bears and other species.

Florida Black Bear Festival

Welcome the cubs with a bear of a festival

Come celebrate as bear cubs first leave their dens to explore the world. The 9th Annual Florida Black Bear Festival, Saturday, April 12, in Umatilla (Lake County), is expected to attract more than 8,000 people. This year's theme is Living Safely in Bear Country.

The festival is presented by a partnership of Defenders of Wildlife, U.S. Forest Service, City of Umatilla, FWC, Umatilla Chamber of Commerce, Florida Chapter of the Sierra Club and Walkabout Adventures.

"The Florida Black Bear Festival is a fun event full of activities, presentations and field trips that provide participants with information about how bears live, bear behavior, how we can avoid attracting them to our homes and how we can live and recreate in bear country safely" said Susan R. Martin, executive director of the Umatilla Chamber of Commerce.

Festival Highlights Include:

- Music by Ken Skeens, Leigh Goldsmith and The Remnants
- Live animals from the Central Florida Zoo
- Authors' Corner featuring national and local writers
- Presentations offering bear country safety tips and ways residents can co-exist with bears
- Guided field trips into the Ocala National Forest
- A family activity pavilion, children's paleontology dig, animal

- track casting and bear scavenger hunt
- Presentations by well-known naturalists, bear experts and authors
- Beary good food and fun for young and old alike

The U. S. Forest Service will conduct free two-hour field trips

into Ocala National Forest bear habitat. Trips are by bus and a moderate hike to a field site where FWC biologists will provide participants with interactive lessons about bear biology, behavior and management. Reservations fill quickly on a first-come basis. Register at the festival early to reserve your spot.

The Florida Black Bear Festival is free and open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Cadwell Park in Umatilla. Umatilla, known as "The Gateway to the Ocala National Forest," is located in Lake County. For a map of the event location and more information, visit floridablackbearfest.org or call 352-669-9600.



Sturgeon returning to Suwannee River

Gulf sturgeon are returning to the Suwannee River, and the FWC reminds boaters to slow down and be aware these fish are jumping.

Eight people were injured by direct sturgeon collisions during 2006. Two other boaters suffered injuries when they swerved to avoid a jumping sturgeon and hit a bridge support in the river.

"We have posted signs along the Suwannee at each boat ramp, explaining the risk of impacts with these fish," said Maj. Bruce Hamlin, regional commander for FWC's North Central Region, based in Lake City. "We recommend boaters reduce their speed to reduce the risk of impact and to give people more time to react if they do encounter a jumping sturgeon."

In the Suwannee River, which appears to support the most viable population of Gulf sturgeon, biologists estimate the annual population to be between 2,250 and 3,000 fish,



averaging about 40 pounds. Adult fish spend eight to nine months each year in the river spawning and three to four of the coolest months in Gulf waters.

Adult sturgeon frequent areas near the mouths of springs during the summer months. They tend to congregate in deeper waters with moderate currents and sand and rocky bottoms.

Biologists are unsure why sturgeon jump.

According to Jerry Krummrich, FWC regional freshwater fish biologist, "I have seen these collisions referred to as 'attacks.' However, these fish are in no way 'attacking' when they jump. They are simply doing what they have been doing for millions of years – jumping. They aren't targeting the boaters."

Gulf sturgeon can grow to 8 feet in length and weigh up to 200 pounds. Sturgeon are a protected species and may not be harvested.

To report sturgeon collisions, call 1-888-404-FWCC (3922).



News & Notes

Freshwater fishing is free April 5-6

Here's a freebie for anyone fishing in Florida's fresh waters April 5 and 6: You don't need a fishing license. It's free fishing during the first full weekend in April in the state's fresh waters.

"Free fishing days means you don't need a license to fish in freshwater lakes and rivers during this special weekend," said Sam McKinney, regional freshwater fisheries biological administrator for the FWC's Northeast Region.

Anglers fishing in salt water will still need a license.

"We hope that fishing for free will remind those anglers who haven't fished in awhile how much fun and relaxing a day of fishing can be," McKinney said.

During Free Fishing Weekend, all other freshwater fishing laws and regulations will remain in effect. To learn the regulations, obtain a copy of the *Florida Freshwater Sport Fishing Guide and Regulations Summary*, available from tax collectors' offices or authorized license agents, and all FWC offices. It can also be found online at MyFWC.com.



Be careful of alligators this time of year



JOHNNY VILLARONGA

Never feed or entice alligators – it's dangerous and illegal. When fed, alligators overcome their natural wariness and learn to associate people with food.

Spring is when Florida's alligators start getting active, and the FWC urges Floridians and visitors to be cautious when having fun in and around water.

Alligators abound in all 67 counties and have shared marshes, swamps, rivers and lakes with people for centuries. But because more individuals are seeking waterfront property and water-related activities increase during the warm months, people should be alert when they are in areas where alligators could be present.

Closely supervise children when they are playing in or around water. State law prohibits contact with alligators, and it is against the law to feed them.

There are other precautionary measures people should take to reduce potential conflicts with alligators, and they are available in the "Living with Alligators" brochure at MyFWC.com/gators.

The FWC annually receives more than 18,000 alligator-related complaints. The agency removes more than 7,000 alligators each year when the reptiles present danger to people or property.

If you encounter an alligator that poses a threat to you, your pets or your property, and the alligator is more than 4 feet long, call the FWC's toll-free Nuisance Alligator Hotline at 1-866-FWC-GATOR (392-4286). The telephone number is the primary contact for all alligator complaints and is available to customers 24 hours a day.

Alligators are an important part of Florida's heritage and play a valuable role in the ecosystems where they live. Visit MyFWC.com/gators for more information on alligator behavior.



FWC biologists examine dead sperm whale at Fort De Soto Park



FWC STAFF

FWC researchers perform a necropsy (animal autopsy) to try to determine why the whale beached itself.

Biologists from the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI), in a collaborative effort with partner organizations, examined a sperm whale carcass at Fort De Soto Park Jan. 1.

Preliminary necropsy findings indicated the whale was emaciated and suffered from chronic illness. The animal was likely an older female approximately 30 feet in length.

Sperm whales are present year-round in deep water areas of the Gulf of Mexico. Typically, healthy sperm whales are not found near shore. In the past 10 years, three other sperm whales stranded themselves on Florida's West Coast.

In addition to the FWC, the multiple-agency event response included the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service, Mote Marine Laboratory, the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, Fort De Soto Park, U.S. Coast Guard, the St. Pete Beach and Treasure Island police departments.

To learn more about FWRI research projects visit research.MyFWC.com.

Don't buy mallard ducks for Easter

With Easter approaching, many parents contemplate purchasing mallard ducklings as gifts for their children. The FWC suggests buying the stuffed-animal version instead.

"Although ducklings might make nice pets while they're young, they can live 10 years and quickly outgrow the cute-and-fuzzy stage, leaving full-size droppings on your patio and outdoor furniture," said FWC waterfowl management coordinator Diane Eggeman. "When this happens, parents and children often grow tired of caring for them and decide to turn them loose into the wild."

What they may not realize is this is illegal and puts Florida's native wildlife in jeopardy. By law, no one may possess, buy or sell mallards in Florida without special permits from the FWC, and releasing them is prohibited.

These activities are against the law because domesticated ducks, once released, are capable of transmitting diseases, and they compete with native wildlife for food and habitat. The most important reason is that releasing mallards threatens the existence of the Florida mottled duck, a unique subspecies found only in peninsular Florida.

"These domesticated mallards are interbreeding with the mottled duck, producing hybrid offspring," Eggeman said. "This is a serious concern and if not stopped, this hybridization could result in the Florida mottled duck becoming extinct."

Pet mallards will not migrate when they are released. They become established, year-round residents of our state. When they mate with wild mottled ducks, it pushes Florida's mottled ducks closer toward extinction.



AIDA VILLARONGA

The Florida mottled duck, often called the Florida duck or Florida mallard, is a unique subspecies found only in peninsular Florida and resides in both brackish and freshwater marshes.

The Florida mottled duck population is relatively small, and already FWC biologists are saying as many as 12 percent of these ducks are showing genetic evidence of hybridization.

Today, the future of our mottled duck is uncertain, but its fate is in Floridians' hands. The solution starts with not buying your child a live duckling for Easter.

For more information on protecting Florida's mottled ducks, contact the FWC's waterfowl offices at 850-488-5878 or 321-726-2862, or visit MyFWC.com/duck/mottled.