

## Summer is still a great time to see wildlife!

Even though our Florida summers are hot, you can still take advantage of the early mornings and evenings to get out and enjoy our wildlife. Birds and other animals tend to be more active during these cooler times as well.

In this issue, we showcase some great places to find birds during the summer. We also feature the Florida Shorebird Alliance, migrating Monarchs and an update on the oil spill in the Gulf. Lastly, we highlight the Brazilian Free-tailed Bat, one of our most common bat species in Florida.

Have a “wild” summer!

-Great Florida Birding Trail and Wildlife Viewing staff

## Florida Shorebird Alliance

During summer, Florida’s beaches come alive. However, we’re not just talking about sunbathers. Our feathered inhabitants, from Snowy Plovers and American Oystercatchers, to Least Terns and Black Skimmers, are busy raising young this time of year. Unfortunately, these shorebirds (and others) are declining, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission lists them as threatened or as species of special concern. Shorebirds need undisturbed beach areas to feed and raise their nestlings, and with so many competing users for beaches these days, good nesting areas are increasingly hard to come by. So, how do we provide enough protected beach areas for these sensitive species?

This is where the Florida Shorebird Alliance (FSA) comes in. The FSA is a statewide partnership composed of governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations. Together they work to develop and implement conservation strategies for Florida’s shorebirds and seabirds, through research, education and management. Public awareness is a key goal for the FSA. By promoting shorebird protection through outreach and education, the FSA plays a crucial role in helping communities understand shorebirds’ need for disturbance-free areas on beaches.

When visiting the beach, you may see roped-off areas and signs that ask you to keep back from nesting colonies. Some areas are not well marked, so make sure to not step on eggs or nestlings, which blend in with the sand. If you notice terns or skimmers defensively “bombing” you, you are too close to their nests and need to back away.

You can also help shorebirds by participating in various citizen-science projects conducted by the FSA and its partners. There is a Winter Shorebird Survey, as well as a Florida Snowy Plover Survey during the spring. For more information about Florida’s shorebirds, and how you can help them, please visit the FSA website at [www.flshorebirdalliance.org](http://www.flshorebirdalliance.org). There are outreach materials you can download, as well as information on how to participate in surveys and report banded shorebirds.

## Feature Species: Brazilian Free-tailed Bat

By Selena Kiser

With wrinkled lips, a skinny tail and large, round ears, the Brazilian Free-tailed Bat is not the cutest mammal. However, of 13 regularly occurring bat species in Florida, it is one of the most common.

### Appearance

“Free-tails” belong to a group of bats whose tail protrudes beyond the tail membrane. Brazilian Free-tailed Bats are grayish-brown with short fur. They weigh between one-third and one-half of an ounce (30 to 45 bats per pound) and have a body length, including the tail, that averages just less than four inches. However, with their one-foot wingspan, they look much larger when flying. Their long wings give them the ability to fly fast and at high altitudes.

### Range

Although first recorded in Brazil, this species’ range covers much of South America, Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean and the southern half of the United States, from southern Oregon to the Carolinas. They occur throughout Florida, with the exception of the Keys. Much like neotropical songbirds, this species undertakes long-distance migration in many parts of its range, particularly in the Southwest. However, in Florida they remain year-round, moving locally depending on temperatures and available food. Unlike many other bats in the United States, Brazilian Free-tailed Bats do not hibernate. Living in a warmer climate enables them to keep active throughout the year. When temperatures drop, these bats can go into a temporary torpor, but will become active as soon as temperatures rebound.

### Roosting

Unlike birds, bats don’t build nests; instead, they live in roosts. Although Brazilian Free-tailed Bats form large colonies in caves in other parts of their range, in Florida, historically they lived in hollow trees. Eventually, with few large, hollow trees left, free-tails began to rely on bridges, buildings and other human-made structures for roosts. Some bats are lucky enough to have people create artificial roosts especially for them, called bat houses (similar to birdhouses). Brazilian Free-tailed Bats are the most likely users of bat houses in the Southeast. There are a handful of other species that use bat houses in Florida, too, such as the Evening Bat, Southeastern Myotis, Big Brown Bat and the endangered Florida Bonneted Bat.

### Feeding

Most of the nearly 50 bat species in the U.S. are insectivorous. Only three nectar-eating bats occur in the Southwest, and there are a few Florida Keys records of stray fruit-eating bats from the Caribbean. Insect-eating bats are highly beneficial to humans, as they chomp down on moths, beetles, mosquitoes and other pesky insects. Each bat can eat half its weight in insects per night (much more when pregnant or lactating), which doesn’t seem like a lot until you add up the total number of bats. A maternity colony of 1,000 Brazilian Free-tailed Bats might eat up to 30 pounds of insects a night! Since free-tails are fast and high-flying, they catch their prey on the wing. Their favorite foods are moths, which can also fly at high altitudes, although they also eat other insects, such as stinkbugs. These bats play a major role in helping farmers with agricultural pests.

## Reproduction

Insectivorous bats differ from other small mammals in terms of reproduction. They are not rodents, and instead of having several large clutches of young per year, like mice, most bat species have one baby at a time, usually only once a year. In Florida, Brazilian Free-tailed Bats give birth usually between late May and mid-June; the pup may weigh nearly one-third the weight of the mother. Mothers and pups live together in a nursery colony, and after about six weeks, the pup is weaned and ready to fly on its own. That means that flightless pups may occur as late as the beginning of August. Before they can fly, they are dependent on their mother's milk for food. At night, each mother returns to the roost to nurse her pup.

## Threats

Although more and more people are becoming tolerant of bats, there are still those who kill bats out of fear. There are plenty of other threats, too, including loss of habitat. Free-tails often live in buildings where people prefer that they didn't. It is okay to evict and exclude bats if performed in a humane way, with an alternate roost already in place, such as a nearby bat house. Moreover, it is important that pups are not present. This means exclusions should not take place from May through August, when pups are flightless. In addition, bats are very sensitive to pesticides and other chemicals. Eating sprayed bugs, or being in direct contact with these chemicals, can weaken bats, causing sickness or death. Another threat to bats, called white-nose syndrome, is decimating bat populations in the eastern U.S. There is not sufficient data to determine the culprit. However, all the bats that die have a white fungus that grows on the face and wings. These bats end up starving to death during hibernation in caves. It is spreading quickly and may affect cave-dwelling bats in northern Florida, but we don't know if this disease will affect species that don't hibernate, such as the Brazilian Free-tailed Bat. To learn more about this disease, visit [www.fws.gov/WhiteNoseSyndrome](http://www.fws.gov/WhiteNoseSyndrome). Although Brazilian Free-tailed Bats are not currently threatened or endangered, it is important to protect their colonies. Since insectivorous bats are the slowest reproducing mammals for their size, and since free-tails live in large roosts, they are very susceptible to population decline. The destruction of a single colony in Florida could kill thousands.

## What can you do?

If you own land, try attracting bats by installing a well-built bat house. Volunteers can encourage public land managers to do the same. Remember, though, that bats are much fussier than birds and need a properly designed house (not the typical hardware store design). In addition, the installation location is extremely important, with the best sites on buildings or on strong poles, more than 12 feet off the ground. For those bat species that live in trees and vegetation instead of bat houses, you can simply leave dead palm fronds (particularly from sabal palms) and Spanish moss in place, rather than removing them.

## Where can I see Brazilian Free-tailed Bats?

There are several great places to see colonies of Brazilian Free-tailed Bats in bat houses. It is quite a spectacle to watch a colony emerge from their roost in the early evening. The largest known bat colony in bat house is on the University of Florida campus in Gainesville, with approximately 150,000 bats ([www.wec.ufl.edu/extension/wildlife\\_info/wildlife\\_uf](http://www.wec.ufl.edu/extension/wildlife_info/wildlife_uf)). In spring 2010, the university built a new, larger, bat "barn" beside it, hoping to entice even more bats. Here are some other locations you can visit: Chinsegut Nature Center near Brooksville ([MyFWC.com/recreation/chinsegut\\_nature\\_center\\_index.htm](http://MyFWC.com/recreation/chinsegut_nature_center_index.htm)); Big Bend Wildlife Management Area, Hickory Mound Impoundment ([MyFWC.com/recreation/WMASites\\_BigBend\\_index.htm](http://MyFWC.com/recreation/WMASites_BigBend_index.htm)); Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters ([www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee](http://www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee)); and the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park ([www.musicliveshere.com/content/index.php](http://www.musicliveshere.com/content/index.php)).

For more information on the Brazilian Free-tailed Bat and other Florida species, how to perform a proper exclusion, and how to build and install bat houses, visit the Florida Bat Conservancy ([www.floridabats.org](http://www.floridabats.org)) and Bat Conservation International (BCI) ([www.batcon.org](http://www.batcon.org)) online. BCI's website lists certified bat houses for sale, as well as bat exclusion professionals who are committed to performing humane exclusions.

## **Birding Trail Site Highlights: Summer birding sites**

Summer may not seem like an ideal time to bird in Florida, but there are many opportunities to find unique breeding birds and year-round residents at plenty of great sites. Try summer birding at some of these locations, but remember to bring extra water as well as sun and insect protection.

### **Panhandle: Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park**

Ten miles south of Tallahassee is one of the largest freshwater spring systems in the world, located at Wakulla Springs State Park. The park recently grew to more than 6,000 acres, protecting various sinks that feed into the spring. In addition to the beautiful scenery and wildlife, it has an interesting historical and cinematic past. There is always good birding, but summer brings breeders to the park, such as Swallow-tailed Kites, Mississippi Kites and plenty of Chimney Swifts. Year-round resident Yellow-crowned Night-Herons nest right along the river. If you take the delightful, covered riverboat ride, you can see these nests at eye level just a few feet from the boat. If you're lucky, you might even have a Prothonotary Warbler visit the boat as you go by. These colorful gems nest in the forests along the river. Hike the trails, too, and if you need to cool down, have a relaxing meal in the historic lodge, or go for a swim in the 68-degree spring water.

[www.floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings/](http://www.floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings/)

Phone: 850-926-0700

Open: 8 a.m. to sunset daily

Admission: \$6 per vehicle (2-8 occupants); \$4 (single occupant)

### **West: Sawgrass Lake Park**

Sawgrass Lake Park is a little nature oasis amidst the densely populated St. Petersburg area. This 400-acre park is a result of the partnership between Pinellas County and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. It has one of the largest maple swamps on Florida's Gulf Coast. There are good opportunities to find wildlife along the mile-long boardwalk through the swamp, the Sawgrass Lake overlook, and the trail that winds through an oak hammock. The covered overlook at the lake makes a nice shady spot to watch wading birds and Mottled Ducks during the summer. Don't forget to look up while walking on the boardwalk, as this site has recently become a great place to spot the elusive Short-tailed Hawk. These rare raptors have nested here the past few years, and in the spring and summer, you have very good odds of finding them. Summer is also a good time to find Gopher Tortoises and various butterflies. You may even observe a tortoise eating vegetation beside the parking lot.

[www.pinellascounty.org/park/16\\_Sawgrass.htm](http://www.pinellascounty.org/park/16_Sawgrass.htm)

Phone: 727-217-7256

Open: 7 a.m. to sunset daily

Admission: free

## **East: Hal Scott Regional Preserve and Park**

Although this large, 9,515-acre park, co-owned by St. Johns River Water Management District and Orange County, can be quite hot during the summer, it is a wondrous place. Visit in the mornings or early evenings, or spend the night in a primitive campsite to immerse yourself in the beauty and solitude. Primarily consisting of pine flatwoods and prairies, Hal Scott Regional Preserve and Park has great opportunities to see flatwoods specialties. You'll find breeding Northern Bobwhite, Eastern Bluebird, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Bachman's Sparrow and Pine Warbler. And, of course, the highlight in this habitat is the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. It is easiest to find them as they emerge from their nests in the early morning or return in the early evening. Look for painted pines (white rings around the trunks signify woodpecker nests) while hiking on the red, green and yellow trails. In the middle of the park, along the riparian corridor of the Econlockhatchee River, you'll find pockets of swamps and live oak hammocks. Here you can cool off in the shade and find nesting songbirds, such as Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Acadian Flycatcher and Northern Parula. You may explore the many miles of trails on foot, by bike or on horseback.

*[www.sjrwmd.com/recreationguide/halscott/index.html](http://www.sjrwmd.com/recreationguide/halscott/index.html)*

Phone: 386-329-4404

Open: sunrise to sunset daily

Admission: free

## **South: Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park**

On Key Biscayne, just east of Miami, is one of the few undeveloped coastal habitats in the region. When Hurricane Andrew passed through in 1992, it took down the mostly exotic vegetation that existed at the time. Now you can enjoy the newly restored native habitats of coastal strand, mangroves and maritime hammock. Besides being a mecca for beachgoers, the 431-acre park offers a wide variety of activities. Hike the nature trails on the west side, where you can get away from the tourists and enjoy some wonderful birding opportunities. Scan the mangroves and maritime hammock for White-crowned Pigeons and Black-whiskered Vireos, and search for Magnificent Frigatebirds soaring overhead. Gray Kingbirds are easy to find on wires or exposed tree branches. If you're lucky, you might run across a Mangrove Cuckoo or the elusive Smooth-billed Ani. Kayaking is another alternative to hiking; you can rent kayaks at the park to explore Biscayne Bay. Or, if you're into history, climb the Cape Florida Lighthouse built in 1825. A nice breeze and view of the surrounding area await you. And, when you're just too hot, you can go for a swim in the calm waters at one of the most scenic beaches in Florida.

*[www.floridastateparks.org/capeflorida/](http://www.floridastateparks.org/capeflorida/)*

Phone: 305-361-5811

Open: 8 a.m. to sunset daily

Admission: \$8 per vehicle (2-8 occupants); \$4 (single occupant)

## **Monarchs and Migration**

Monarch butterflies are one of the best-known butterfly species in the United States. However, their populations are declining rapidly with loss of habitat due to development and use of pesticides.

Although most people think of flower nectar as a necessity for butterflies, many forget that the caterpillar, or butterfly larva, cannot reach the adult butterfly stage without larval host plants. Most butterfly species have specific plants on which their larvae can feed and mature. Larval

plants are more specific to the caterpillars than nectar plants are to adults. In the case of Monarchs, their larvae are dependent on various milkweed plant species. A decrease in milkweed numbers causes a direct decrease in Monarch numbers.

### **Start a Monarch Waystation**

You can help Monarchs by supplying both their larval and adult stages with food. Planting various milkweed plants for the caterpillars and nectar plants for the adults is an easy way to create new habitat, right in your backyard. Join Monarch Watch and start your own Monarch Waystation. For information on Monarch Watch's program, visit their website at [www.monarchwatch.org/waystations](http://www.monarchwatch.org/waystations). It's always best to plant native plants for wildlife; the Florida Native Plant Society has a list of natives you can plant in your county: [www.fnps.org/pages/plants/landscape\\_plants.php](http://www.fnps.org/pages/plants/landscape_plants.php).

### **Become a Monarch tagger**

In addition to planting for Monarchs, you can also help by participating in hands-on research. There are still many questions as to where the eastern population of Monarchs migrates in the fall. One of Monarch Watch's programs involves tagging Monarchs in the late summer to fall. Tiny tags, less than 1/2 inch, are gently attached to the hindwing. These tags help researchers figure out where Monarchs are traveling during their fall migration, which peaks in October in Florida. You can even involve your children in this activity (their small hands are often better at attaching tags than adults!): [www.monarchwatch.org/tagmig/tag.htm](http://www.monarchwatch.org/tagmig/tag.htm).

## **Great Florida Birding Trail News and Notes**

### **South Florida**

At long last, road sign installation is scheduled to begin! We will select a contractor this summer. Given the recent economic downturn, the size of the project is smaller than originally planned, as some counties and cities were unable to assume the required maintenance duties for their signs. Stay tuned for more updates on this project.

### **East Florida**

Work continues on the new guidebook, although no printing funds are currently available (we are looking for sponsors; please contact us if you are interested). Therefore, we will post the guidebook online (date to be determined). Initial work has begun on the sign plans for the 47 East Florida Birding Trail locations accepted in 2008. We are excited that some sites are helping by purchasing Birding Trail signs for their entrances. Road signs are the most expensive component of the GFBT program. To date, we have installed more than 1,350 signs in 50 counties.

### **Panhandle Florida**

The new guidebook is nearly complete and will be online by fall 2010. As with the East Section guidebook, printing funds are currently not available, so plans are to post it online. The revised guidebook features photos and larger maps with county borders, rest areas and exit numbers. Updated site accounts include GPS coordinates, street addresses, and county and nearest city information. In addition, for the first time, we are noting which sites are good for viewing butterflies.

## New Great Florida Birding Trail website!

In May, we launched the new Great Florida Birding Trail's website: *floridabirdingtrail.com*. The updated site has a fresh look and feel, with improved organizational features and outstanding bird photos. The website includes new birding resources and trip-planning functions, to help birders find Florida's best locations and specialty birds. We added new menu categories, including a section on bird conservation, with topics such as protecting birds, birding ethics and volunteer opportunities. The website is still a work in progress, and we will be adding more information and photos in the coming months. Please let us know what you think!

## Deepwater Horizon oil spill update

We know that many of you are extremely concerned about the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on Florida's coastal waters and wildlife. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) along with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and other partners are proactively working to minimize the potential impacts of the spill. The short- and long-term effects on wildlife are unknown at this time, but FWC staff is performing extensive monitoring of wildlife and their habitats, including nesting areas for sea turtles and shorebirds. To find out more about the ongoing efforts, visit the FWC's Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Response page at *MyFWC.com/OilSpill*. Also, for additional information on volunteering, go to Volunteer Florida's disaster site: *www.volunteerfloridadisaster.org*.

## Upcoming Wildlife Festivals

For more information, visit *floridabirdingtrail.com/index.php/events*.

### **Sept. 22-26**

Florida Keys Birding and Wildlife Festival, Marathon  
305-872-0774

### **Sept. 25-26**

Butterfly Days, Miami  
305-667-1651

### **Oct. 2**

St. Joseph Bay Buffer and Aquatic Preserves Day, near Port St. Joe  
850-229-1787

### **Oct 2**

Chinsegut Reptile and Amphibian Festival, Brooksville  
352-754-6722

### **Oct. 16**

Forgotten Coast Black Bear Festival, Carrabelle  
850-697-2585

### **Oct. 17-23**

"Ding" Darling Days, Sanibel Island  
239-472-1100

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## Help us keep *Kite Tales* aloft.

Please consider sending a tax-deductible donation to the Wildlife Foundation of Florida on behalf of the Great Florida Birding Trail.

Please make checks (in U.S. funds only) to the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, with “GFBT/Kite Tales” written in the memo section of your check. Please send to:

**Wildlife Foundation of Florida**  
**Attention: GFBT**  
**P.O. Box 6181**  
**Tallahassee, FL 32314-6181**