

Spring is in the air!

April is one of the best times of year to go birding in Florida. The weather is still pleasant, and the number of bird species is at a peak. Some wintering birds still are lingering before heading north to breed, migrating birds are coming through in high numbers, and breeding birds that winter elsewhere are arriving.

April is also the peak time of year for wildlife festivals in Florida. Visit our Web site floridabirdingtrail.com/events.asp for a list of events. See our following article for the Chinsegut Nature Center Birding and Wildlife Festival, presented by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

This edition of the newsletter features birding hotspots for the spring migration season. In addition, since birding is often at a lull during the hot summer months, we have recommendations for other wildlife viewing activities, such as sea turtle walks and night prowls with children.

Have a great spring and summer, enjoying Florida's vast array of wildlife with your friends and family

Happy viewing!

-Great Florida Birding Trail and Wildlife Viewing staff

Chinsegut Nature Center celebrates wildlife

This FWC-managed nature center is near Brooksville at the Chinsegut Wildlife and Environmental Area in Hernando County. Chinsegut Nature Center director, Kristin Wood, and volunteer program specialist, Becky Brown, always are happy to talk to visitors and find ways for them to get involved in Chinsegut activities.

The Chinsegut Nature Center is open to the public on Fridays and Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. However, hiking trails near the center are open during daylight hours, seven days a week. The center holds a wide variety of events and classes, covering topics from butterflies to edible wild plants. In April, the big event is the Chinsegut Birding and Wildlife Festival. On Friday, April 17, come out for a talk on Florida's hummingbirds (6:45-7:50 p.m.) followed by a bat, owl and beetle prowl (8-9:30 p.m.) where you can watch the resident bats leave their bat houses at dusk. Saturday, April 18, is the main day for festivities, including programs on bird banding, birds of prey, bats and several guided nature walks. Activities for children include a puppet show, bird games and birdhouse building. There will be fun for all, so don't miss it!

For more information, please visit MyFWC.com/calendar/calendar_chinsegut.htm or contact staff at 352-754-6722.

Feature Species: sea turtles

By Selena Kiser

When summer comes around and birding slows down, there are other wildlife activities to enjoy. In Florida, we are fortunate to have five of the seven sea turtle species that occur worldwide: loggerhead, green, leatherback, hawksbill and Kemp's ridley. As sea turtles lay eggs during the peak summer months, nighttime turtle walks are a great way to beat the heat and enjoy a spectacular natural event that you likely will never forget!

Loggerhead sea turtle

By far, the most common sea turtle nesting in Florida is the loggerhead turtle, named for its boxy-shaped head. Loggerheads are large turtles, weighing 275 to 350 pounds. They possess strong jaws and prefer to eat shellfish such as crabs and clams. There are two main nesting grounds for loggerheads. One is in Oman, in the Middle East, and the other is the Southeastern United States, with Florida's East Coast having the most nests. However, since 1998, the number of loggerhead nests in Florida has declined more than 40 percent. Between 2004 and 2008, numbers of loggerhead nests averaged 51,000 annually.

Green sea turtle

This species is the second largest in Florida, weighing approximately 300 to 400 pounds. Green sea turtles are the only species of sea turtle that, as an adult, eats primarily plant matter. As young turtles they eat a wide variety of foods, including aquatic insects, worms and crustaceans. However, as they get larger, their diet shifts to predominantly sea grasses and algae. Because of this herbivorous diet, green sea turtles prefer to stay along shorelines where sea grasses grow in both temperate and tropical waters worldwide. Fortunately, the number of nests found on the Atlantic Coast of Florida is increasing (averaging around 8,000 nests annually in the past five years).

Leatherback sea turtle

The unusual leatherback sea turtle is the largest in the world, averaging 550 to 1,500 pounds. Unlike other sea turtles, leatherbacks do not have a hard shell, but instead have a rubbery skin that is extremely tough and protective. Even though they are large, leatherbacks have weak jaws that can only bite through soft-bodied animals. As a result, their diet consists almost entirely of jellyfish. This sea turtle is the most widespread on the planet, and it can handle much colder temperatures, down to 40 F. Leatherback nesting is declining across most of its range, except along Florida's East Coast, where nesting activity increased to an average of about 800 nests per year in the past five years.

Hawksbill sea turtle

Hawksbills are smaller turtles, weighing 100 to 150 pounds, and they prefer tropical and subtropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. With their pointed head and specialized jaws (shaped like a hawk's bill), they are adept at finding prey in small crevices. A favorite place to hunt for food is in coral reefs, where they feed primarily on sponges. Biologists estimate there are nearly 23,000 nesting females worldwide, however, the number of nests each year has been declining. This species rarely nests in North America; there are zero to five nests per year in Florida.

Kemp's ridley sea turtle

This is the smallest sea turtle found along the Florida Coast. Although only weighing between 75 and 100 pounds, they have very strong jaws, which enable them to eat a wide variety of foods, including crabs, shellfish and sea urchins. Young Kemp's ridley sea turtles may occur in the Atlantic, but adults nearly all reside within the Gulf of Mexico. This is the most endangered of all sea turtles, with only about 2,500 nesting females remaining. Most nesting occurs in Mexico, although some occurs on Padre Island, Tex. Nests in Florida are rare, but may be increasing. Biologists documented 13 Kemp's ridley nests in Florida in 2008.

Protecting sea turtles

All sea turtles are classified as endangered in Florida, except the loggerhead sea turtle, which is threatened. There are many natural threats to sea turtle survival, such as predators and beach erosion from hurricanes. However, human activities are the main causes for the endangered or threatened status of sea turtles. In Florida, the major land-based pressures include beach dredging and nourishment, sea walls and other beach obstructions and artificial lighting. At sea, the main problems are entrapment by commercial fishing gear, boat collisions and pollution (toxic chemicals as well as plastic debris that resembles jellyfish or other prey). However, as stewards of wildlife, we can help protect turtles by switching to approved lighting in beach areas, keeping seawalls and obstructions to a minimum, reducing pollution into the ocean and finding ways fishermen can reduce their bycatch. Another way you can support sea turtle conservation in Florida is by purchasing the "Helping Sea Turtles Survive" license plate. For information on this plate, please visit www.buyaplate.com/turtle.html. Proceeds from the purchase of this plate help fund FWC's sea turtle research and conservation.

Observing sea turtles

Remember that lights may discourage an adult female from nesting or disorient her when she is trying to return to sea. Lights also affect the hatchlings. If natural lighting is overpowered by artificial lights from developments along the beach, the hatchlings may become disoriented and crawl toward buildings and roads instead of the ocean. Please do not use lights or camera flashes if you see sea turtles on the beach. Also, if you find an injured or dead sea turtle, please report it to the FWC at: 888-404-FWCC. The best way to observe a sea turtle is to go on a public sea turtle walk. For more information on where to go, please visit MyFWC.com/wildlifehabitats/Seaturtle_Facilities_Walks.htm.

Additional sea turtle information:

FWC Marine Turtle Program:

MyFWC.com/wildlifehabitats

FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute:

research.MyFWC.com

Caribbean Conservation Corporation:

www.ccturtle.org

Sea Turtle Preservation Society:

www.seaturtlespacecoast.org

Birding Trail Site Highlights: Florida spring bird migration

Just as temperatures begin to rise in Florida, birding for migrants also heats up. Mid- to late April and early May are fabulous times to look for an abundance of small, colorful, flitting warblers. Along with warblers are the vibrant tanagers, buntings and grosbeaks that also migrate this time of year. Cuckoos, nightjars and thrushes are some of the other elusive migrants you might encounter.

There are plenty of places and opportunities to see migrating songbirds in spring in Florida, but we've chosen four that you might not have visited before.

Panhandle (#44): Dr. Julian G. Bruce St. George Island State Park

With its beautiful, well-renowned beach drawing in loads of tourists, you may not realize that St. George Island State Park in Franklin County is an ideal birding site. But away from the sunbathers, you can find a multitude of bird species. In spring, the beachfront offers good birding with shorebirds, pelicans, gulls and terns. But the real attraction this time of year is in the trees beyond the dunes. Instead of parking along the beach, visit the youth group campground and picnic area. If there are no groups camping, explore the live oaks, saw palmettos and wax myrtles. This spot attracts huge numbers of migratory songbirds, making it one of the hottest spring migration sites in the Panhandle. The live oaks do not get very tall here, and often the birds flit around at eye level. Finding 15 or more species of warblers is possible on a good day, along with other migrants such as scarlet tanagers, rose-breasted grosbeaks and painted buntings.

www.floridastateparks.org/stgeorgeisland/

Phone: 850-927-2111

Open 8 a.m. to sunset daily

Admission: \$5 per vehicle

West (#72): Robert K. Rees Memorial Park at Green Key

Robert K. Rees Memorial Park on Green Key, near New Port Richey is the site for one of the best spring songbird migration events in Florida. Birders can find huge numbers of warblers and other neotropical migrants on mornings (between 6 and 9 a.m.) following nights with easterly winds of 10 miles per hour or more. Green Key has a unique shape and location which funnels the warblers as they continue northward on their journey. Ken Tracey, president of the West Pasco Audubon Society, discovered the "Green Key Funnel" phenomenon in 2001 near the entrance of the park, where hundreds of warblers can pass through in an hour. Blackburnian warbler, Cape May warbler and blackpoll warbler are some of the 26 species of warblers recorded here. Large numbers of bobolinks and black terns also migrate through. There have been more than 200 bird species documented at this 45-acre park.

portal.pascocountyfl.net/portal/server.pt/community/parks_and_recreation/

Phone: 727-834-3252

Open sunrise to sunset daily

Admission: free

East (#88): Lori Wilson Park

This small, 32-acre Brevard County park in Cocoa Beach is a great place to find spring migrants. Inland from the beach is a maritime hammock of live oaks that provides shelter and food migrating songbirds. Birders can observe many warbler species here by walking

along the hammock's nature trail, which includes a half-mile boardwalk. There are often surprising finds at this park, including Connecticut warblers, which occurred here in early May 2008. Others include Wilson's warbler, blue-winged warbler and worm-eating warbler. A Florida specialty, the black-whiskered vireo is a possibility in late spring. There is another boardwalk that parallels the beach alongside the edge of the dunes and coastal strand. Scan the beach and surf for shorebirds, gulls and terns.

www.brevardparks.com/parks/prkbch3.php

Phone: 321-455-1385

Open: 7 a.m. to sunset daily

Admission: free

South (#111): Crane Point Museum and Nature Center

In Marathon, about halfway down the Keys, is a little gem with excellent viewing opportunities for spring migrants. The Crane Point Museum and Nature Center, just off of U.S. Highway 1, has 63 acres of freshwater swamp, hardwood forests and mangroves abutting the open ocean. There's a lot to cover at this site, with more than 1.5 miles of loop trails as well as a butterfly meadow and the Marathon Wild Bird Center for rehabilitating injured native birds. Finding 15 or more species of warblers here is not difficult in late April. Black-throated blue warbler, Kentucky warbler and ovenbird are some of the exciting migrants you may find. After hiking the trail to the north terminus, a wondrous look at Florida Bay awaits you, where an osprey may join you for the view.

www.cranepoint.net

Phone: 305-743-9100

Open: Noon to 5 p.m. Sun.; 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mon. – Sat.

Admission: \$7 - \$11 per person

Get Kids Involved!

During spring and summer months, as temperatures warm up, nocturnal creatures are more active and easier to locate. This is the perfect time of year to go out with children for a night prowling! Learn about the animals yourself so that when you do run across one, you'll have some fun facts to pass along to your kids. Or, look up any animals you find in a guide book with your children when you get back inside.

Insects are particularly active on warm nights. Try looking for fireflies, moths and crickets. A great way to look at them closely without causing injury is by capturing the insect in a clear jar (cover the top with cheesecloth held down by a large rubber band around the rim). Cicadas are a favorite with kids, as they are strange-looking, make very loud sounds and are fun to handle.

Other than insects, look and listen for birds and mammals that might be out and about. Owls, such as barred, great horned and eastern screech, are often quite vocal at night. Learning the calls with your children and listening for them is a lot of fun, especially if you learn to call back. Chuck-will's-widows also call actively on moonlit nights. They sing loudly, mimicking their name.

Bats are also a favorite with children. Watch for bats feeding on insects near streetlights, along woodland edges or over water. Flying squirrels are also nocturnal. Though they don't really fly, they can glide up to 150 feet and are adept at sneaking seeds at bird feeders. Many other mammals are nocturnal. Skunks are fun to watch, but don't get too close!

Armadillos are also fun to follow as they dig for grubs. Be observant for predators such as bobcats and coyotes; if you're silent, you might catch a glimpse at dusk.

Frogs and toads are a kid's delight. There are 30 native frog and toad species in Florida. These amphibians love to sing on summer nights, especially if there has been a recent rain. Learning the calls of these animals is challenging, but fun. If there is a source of water nearby, you're likely to find some. Try to catch a couple, but you'll have to be quick (and remember to wash your hands well afterwards).

Make your nature adventures a regular feature, and your children or grandchildren will begin looking forward to getting outdoors. Remember to make it fun and a hands-on experience. Soon your children will be telling *you* about the critters you find.

Visit our Web site for more activities you can do with children:
MyFWC.com/LEARNING/Learn_AdultsFamilies_withYourChild.htm

Helpful books with audio CDs by Lang Elliott:

- *A Guide to Night Sounds*
- *The Songs of Insects*
- *The Calls of Frogs and Toads*

Welcome Back, Cranes!

Operation Migration (OM), a nonprofit organization established in 1994, has been teaching birds, such as geese and cranes, to migrate following ultralight airplanes. These aircraft serve as surrogate parents, guiding the young birds along the migration route. After successfully teaching Canada geese, trumpeter swans and sandhill cranes to follow ultralight aircraft, OM then turned its attention to the endangered whooping crane. OM, along with several other nonprofit organizations and government agencies, formed the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership to reintroduce whooping cranes to the eastern part of their range.

At the start of the reintroduction project in 2001, biologists and pilots worked together to raise whooping cranes so they imprinted on the aircraft as if it was their parent. Eventually juvenile cranes successfully followed the planes south from Wisconsin's Necedah National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to Florida's Chassahowitzka NWR. This amazing journey, where juvenile cranes follow ultralight aircraft for their first fall migration, continues each year.

Sadly, in February 2007, 17 of the 18 cranes from the 2006 class died in a thunderstorm that drowned or electrocuted them while in their pen at Chassahowitzka NWR. This event convinced biologists that there should be two wintering locations for the cranes in Florida to prevent another catastrophe. As a result, OM separated the 2008 flock of 14 birds and led half to Chassahowitzka NWR and the other half to new overwintering grounds at St. Marks NWR in the Panhandle.

On Jan. 17, 2009, three months after leaving Wisconsin, seven cranes were set to arrive at their new winter home in St. Marks NWR. On a very cold morning, nearly 2,000 people bundled up in the town of St. Marks and waited for the cranes to fly over. They weren't disappointed! Around 8:45 a.m., the ultralight planes finally appeared in the distance, and following behind one of them were all seven whooping cranes. It was a wonderful sight to see, with cheering and waving from below as the planes and cranes flew over the crowd. Only six days later, the remaining seven cranes arrived at Chassahowitzka NWR, where

they were welcomed for an eighth straight year. To date, there are now 86 surviving whooping cranes in the eastern migratory population.

For more information on Operation Migration, please visit www.operationmigration.org. Also, please visit both refuges' Web sites at www.fws.gov/saintmarks and www.fws.gov/chassahowitzka, or visit them in person. But, please remember that the young whooping cranes are not viewable by the public, as they are wintering in special enclosures in remote areas that protect them from predators as well as from human contact.

Great Florida Birding Trail News and Notes

Panhandle Birding Trail sign update

We are pleased to report that our sign contractor is nearly finished with the road sign installation in the Panhandle Section. The few remaining signs will be up by April 2009. We thank Traffic Control Products of Florida for permit acquisition and sign fabrication and installation; Genesis Group for engineering services; and the Florida Department of Transportation for grant funding and assistance with this project. Thanks also to St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge for hosting our sign dedication celebration in January, and to the Inn at Wildwood for providing refreshments.

Upcoming Wildlife Festivals

For more information, visit floridabirdingtrail.com/events.asp.

April 2-4

Wakulla Wildlife Festival, Wakulla Springs
Phone: 850-926-4293

April 3-6

Big "O" Birding Festival, Clewiston
Phone: 863-612-4783

April 4

Turtle Fest, Flagler Beach
Phone: 386-763-0977

April 11

Pinewoods Bird Festival, Thomasville, GA
Phone: 229-226-2344

April 17-18

Chinsegut Birding and Wildlife Festival, Brooksville
Phone: 353-754-6722

April 18

Annual Sea Turtle Festival, St. Augustine Beach
Phone: 904-209-3740

April 18

Walton County Earth Day Festival, Santa Rosa Beach
Phone: 850-267-0299

April 23-26

Florida's Birding and FotoFest, Marineland
Phone: 800-418-7529

Sept. 23-27

Florida Keys Birding and Wildlife Festival, Marathon
Phone: 305-852-4486/305-289-2690

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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

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