

# FWC VOLUNTEER NEWSLETTER

Summer 2014



## Hot! Hot! Hot!

One word comes to mind when describing summer in Florida: HOT! If you stop, look and listen to your environment, you'll notice that Florida summers bring many spectacular sights and sounds. Black bears are breeding, bluegills are spawning, the scallop harvest begins, and a new generation of Southeastern American Kestrels, Burrowing Owls and alligators are ready to take on the world.

As hot as the weather is in Florida, so are Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) volunteer accomplishments. Our summer newsletter values the hard work and commitment to conservation shown by our volunteers. The FWC is teeming with volunteer opportunities ranging from native plantings and species monitoring to education and outreach. Volunteering is a valuable way to experience, appreciate and ensure that the spectacular wildlife in Florida is around for generations to come.

To heat up things even more, we welcome our volunteers to contribute to the FWC's evolving volunteer newsletter. We encourage you to submit articles, ideas and/or perspectives about wildlife, volunteering and conservation.



*Volunteer Nico Bakomilhalis clears around trees with Red-cockaded Woodpecker cavities at Citrus wildlife management area, managed in cooperation with the Florida Forest Service, in Citrus and Hernando counties.*

In addition, get creative and help us name our newsletter! We invite you to share your ideas with us, keeping in mind that our goal is to continue to develop a newsletter for you and about you.

In this edition, we share highlights from many exceptional volunteers, a successful citizen-science effort, Florida's struggle to manage invasive plants and wildlife, how you can help by planting a refuge for natives, new citizen-science tools and how to get involved.

We hope you enjoy the close of summer with us and we look

forward to working with you this fall!

*– FWC Volunteer Program Staff*



*Volunteers post signs protecting Snail Kite nesting habitat on Lake Tohopekaliga in Osceola County.*

## FWC opens doors

By Rachel Richard

In September 2013, I moved from Massachusetts to Florida to pursue a career as a wildlife biologist. I began volunteering for the FWC to learn about the ecology and biodiversity of Florida, acquire knowledge of Florida's land management practices, gain work experience and network. Volunteering for the FWC gave me the opportunity to participate in field studies, assist with multiple projects and visit many places in Central Florida.

Some of the volunteer projects I worked on include trap conditioning Florida Scrub-jays at Ross Prairie State Forest and Ocala National Forest, as well as installing rooftop



Volunteer Rachel Richard plants a longleaf pine at Triple N Ranch, an FWC lead wildlife management area, in Osceola County.



Volunteers (from left), Pam DeNeve, Ted Herrman and Jo Ann Herrman, along with FWC staff (center) and volunteer Rachel Richard (right) at Triple N Ranch.

chick fencing for Least Terns on Merritt Island. I also helped with groundcover restoration projects by planting longleaf pine saplings at Triple N Ranch and Three Lakes wildlife management areas (WMAs). In addition, I helped set and check traps for spotted turtles at Rice Creek Conservation Area and Caravelle Ranch WMA.

Volunteering for FWC has definitely brought me closer to fulfilling my objectives. I was recently recommended for a position with the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. I am now a biological scientist on the Ocala National Forest Scrub-jay project. I believe that volunteering for the FWC and working as a biological scientist will open even more doors for my career in wildlife conservation.

## Volunteers truly make a difference!

By Rachel Cimino

With more than 50 active volunteers capable of assisting with marine mammal rescues, necropsies and other marine mammal research, the FWC's Northeast Field Laboratory Marine Mammal Section has a great deal to be thankful for. The laboratory has successfully recruited volunteers, thanks to help from Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, Jacksonville University and University of North Florida. Professors, supervisors, managers and co-workers have aided in promoting the marine mammal section and are enthusiastic about the involvement of their students, employees and co-workers with the volunteer program.

While assisting the field lab with general workload, volunteers are provided with opportunities that immerse them in the marine mammal discipline. Field experiences are intended to benefit volunteers and facilitate learning to aid in their future endeavors. Trainings and refreshers are offered periodically to better equip volunteers for the field. Trainings integrate basic job functions (e.g., rescues, carcass salvaging, necropsy), current events (unusual mortality events), hands-on experiences (e.g., mock rescues, animal handling, equipment use) and safety practices.

The Northeast Field Laboratory has remarkable volunteers, and we wish to celebrate a few exceptional individuals! Jenell Larsen, Zack Cole and Greg Woodham have each worked more than 50 hours as volunteers in the past year. They are enthusiastic individuals and always drop what they are doing when called upon. Larsen, Cole and Woodham have positive attitudes and often call the lab asking if they can come in to volunteer.

Jenell Larsen is a recent graduate of Jacksonville University, where she earned her Bachelor of Science Degree in Marine Science and minored in psychology. Larsen began volunteering with the FWC in 2013 after meeting staff during a dolphin photo-identification abundance survey. Larsen is always ready and eager to



*Volunteer Dylan Van Pelt counts teeth during a dolphin necropsy at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.*



*Volunteer Gregory Woodham helps rescue an orphaned cold-stressed manatee calf from Ormond Beach.*

assist with necropsies and is not deterred by the various aspects of carcass salvaging. Larsen would like to continue working with marine mammals to further her knowledge and skills.

Zack Cole is an undergraduate student seeking a marine

science degree. Cole began volunteering with the FWC in 2013 after a professor at Jacksonville University encouraged him to get involved to gain field experience. Cole is passionate about marine science and is willing to volunteer during the holidays and work long hours. He is a positive



*Volunteer Jenell Larsen assists with a humpback whale necropsy in Ponte Vedra Beach.*

personality and a pleasure to work with. He hopes to utilize his degree and talents to craft a children's television program focusing on the ocean.

Greg Woodham attended the University of Florida, where he earned a Bachelor's Degree in Animal Sciences. Woodham is currently working as a veterinarian technician and hopes to attend veterinary school. He aspires to work in his father's veterinary practice. Woodham began volunteering in 2013 and has assisted with numerous manatee rescues, transports and necropsies, as well as vehicle maintenance. Woodham is a great problem-solver and brings technical experience to the field lab team!

All of the lab's volunteers are unique and hard working. Their dedication and interest make the work environment exciting. Because volunteers have received training and enjoy being involved, the Northeast

Field Laboratory is able to excel and reach new heights. Thank you to everyone who has been part of our journey.

## **Hundreds of volunteers collecting, potting acorns to restore Florida scrub habitat**

*By Diane Hirth*

About 700 to 800 volunteers have gathered and potted thousands of acorns to help restore scrub habitat at the FWC's Lake Wales Ridge wildlife and environmental area (WEA) in Highlands and Polk counties. Project Acorn started with a \$25,000 grant from the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund. The FWC staff then enlisted the WEA's established volunteer corps, the Ridge Rangers, to begin collecting

acorns and also recruited community groups like a Junior ROTC class to help.

More children and adults got involved when they stopped by the Project Acorn booth at local festivals and were invited to pitch in by potting the acorns. They learned about the conservation value of their efforts, since scrub habitat is critical for imperiled species such as the gopher tortoise, Florida Scrub-jay, eastern indigo snake and Florida mouse. Ridge Rangers counted 4,357 oak sprouts in the nursery as of May 2014. And in June, thousands of these acorn seedlings were planted. Once again, volunteers helped by digging holes for the seedlings.

While 90 percent of the state's scrub habitat was lost over the past century, this project will restore 20 acres of scrub at the Lake Wales Ridge WEA.



*Volunteers gather scrub oak acorns, as part of an FWC Ridge Rangers project, along a firebreak at the Silver Lake Unit within FWC's Lake Wales Ridge wildlife environmental area.*



*A future volunteer learns how to pot scrub oak acorns during a Ridge Ranger outreach event at Highlands Hammock State Park in Highlands County.*

Project Acorn was also recently featured in [Florida Wildlife magazine](#).

## **The Southeastern American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius paulus*) has ally**

*By Joe Murphy*

Among the pines, a species in peril moves toward population recovery, thanks to the hard work and passion of dedicated citizen-science volunteers. Their hard work can be measured in hours and data, but the true final measure is found when fledgling birds take flight and become the next generation of kestrels to call the skies home.

Southeastern American Kestrels are the smallest falcons in North America. These beautiful, amazing creatures call Florida home year-round. They are most common to the upland sandhill pine forests in areas like the Brooksville

Ridge and are a joy to watch. Kestrels nest in cavities excavated by other species in old growth pines. However, as pines are fewer in number than in years past, Florida kestrels are a threatened species.

While past human activity has reduced the number of trees that kestrels can use for nesting,

the actions of dedicated humans are now providing a nesting alternative. Hard-working FWC biologists, land managers, partner agencies and organizations, along with citizen-science volunteers, are working together through the Kestrel Nest Box Monitoring Program to provide kestrels nesting places to continue their legacy while their natural nest areas are being restored.



*Volunteer Heather Sharkey prepares a nest box for the Southeastern American Kestrel in Hernando County.*



*Two-day-old kestrel nestlings. Photo by Karl Miller.*

Volunteers gather critical data for the Southeastern American Kestrel Partnership, which houses information on 653 nest box locations, with approximately 525 boxes actively used by kestrels. Most nest boxes are on public lands (52 percent), with 35-40 percent occupied by kestrels each year. Since 2011, the FWC has expanded the number of nest boxes monitored by citizen-science volunteers, from ten in Hernando County to currently more than 95 nest boxes throughout north and south central Florida.

Each year citizen-science volunteers build, mount, prep, maintain and monitor kestrel nest boxes. Volunteers visit boxes monthly from April through July and track nesting activities, such as number of eggs, hatchlings and kestrels that have successfully fledged the nest. Citizen-science volunteers will continue to work with the FWC and partners to ensure species like kestrels will grace Florida's skies for generations to come.

Please visit [MyFWC.com](http://MyFWC.com) for more information regarding the Southeastern American Kestrel.

## Florida invaders

By Necia Godzisz

Please take a moment to study the Florida landscape on this page: A beautiful blue sky contrasts with a lush green field of plants against a backdrop of

large trees. You can practically hear the birds singing and insects buzzing. But there's something very wrong with this picture and the truth is not as pretty as the picture I painted. This field is overrun by invasive plants, specifically Cogon grass and the invasive vine, air potato!

Throughout Florida, invaders—plant and animal alike—are taking over our natural (and unnatural) areas with brute force.

Let's put invasives in context. Organisms can be native, nonnative or invasive.

Native plants and animals have historically been found in Florida and have supported each other's existence, the plants providing food and shelter and the animals providing a natural means of control and propagation. Some examples of natives are longleaf pine, oaks, wiregrass, pawpaw and some sedges, and, in the animal kingdom, the Florida black bear, gopher tortoise and Scrub-jay.

Nonnative plants and animals are species that have not historically been found in Florida, and have either been introduced or found their way here by some other method. Although the animals and plants aren't native, their impact on ecosystems is not very severe (armadillos) or they are fulfilling a role of an animal no longer present in Florida (coyotes). In fact, some nonnative species can even be beneficial, like grass carp, fish imported from Asia for use in controlling aquatic vegetation, or like cultivated roses and crops used in horticulture and agriculture.

Some nonnative species, however, are classified as invasive by the federal government because their introduction to Florida or the United States causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm to an area. Many nonnative species are found in Florida, but the vast majority of them do not result in an invasive problem. However, when the conditions are just right, an organism can gain foothold on an area and start negatively affecting the habitat and



*Cogon grass and air potato are two common invasive plant species found in Polk County. Photo by Necia Godzisz.*

wildlife. Coral ardisia, a small upright shrub often called Christmas berry, displaces native plants upon which native wildlife depend. Nothing grows under Australian pine, an evergreen tree, altering food availability to wildlife, plus the trees have shallow roots and are subject to blowing over, allowing erosion to occur. Water hyacinths, free floating aquatic plants, choke waterways and air potato vines cover everything. All are typical of invasives, which tend to grow in such a thick monoculture that it is impossible for other plants to grow in the same area. Additionally, some invasive plants, like cogon grass, have special adaptations like serrated leaf edges so things don't want to eat it, and it burns so hot in a fire, due to flammable oils in the grass blades, that the intense heat can cause natives to die that otherwise might thrive in a fire-

rich environment. According to the University of Florida's Institute of Agricultural Sciences, cogon grass is categorized as one of the ten worst weeds on the planet in the [Global Invasive Species Database](#) due to its devastating behavior.

Invasive animals can have a huge impact on the environment too. When an animal becomes invasive, it is usually due to a fast reproductive rate, a lack of predation, disturbance to an ecosystem, and/or being a very adaptable species. These organisms do not face the pressures that native species face because the natural dynamics of the ecosystem have not evolved to deal with them. Invasive species can also prey on or out-compete natives, making it even harder for the natives to thrive. Prime examples include the Burmese python and lionfish.

Sometimes humans brought invasive species here. Sometimes they arrived by accident. Regardless, what can we do? Is it all doom and gloom? What are we to do with so many invasives and so few hours in the day?

The [FWC Volunteer Program](#), in conjunction with many agencies throughout the



*Volunteer Ashlynn Skeen pulls air potato for an invasive workday at the Osprey Unit within FWC's Hilochee wildlife management area. Photo by Necia Godzisz.*

state, is working hard to combat the invasive species menace. Biologists routinely combat invasive plants with management practices such as prescribed burns, herbicide application, mechanical removal and even simply hand-pulling plants like air potatoes. Volunteers throughout the state help with all aspects of these projects, and innumerable invasive plants have been removed, but there is still work to be done, from individual yards and fields to parks and forests.

Invasive animals are also more than happy to make a new home in Florida's warm climate, such as the Argentine black and white tegu, and dine on our native plants and animals, including species already struggling to survive. Tegus reside primarily in Hillsborough, Polk and Miami-Dade counties in Florida,



*Cogon grass in Polk County. Cogon is a perennial grass that can negatively affect the productivity and survival of pines, wildlife habitat, native plants and fire behavior. Photo by Necia Godzisz.*



An Argentine black and white tegu in Hillsborough County. Photo by Necia Godzisz.

though originally they were from South and Central America. Tegus lizards are gregarious, using whatever areas they can to make a home and may eat native wildlife, eggs of ground-nesting animals, berries and dog or cat food. Volunteers also help biologists remove this contender from Florida's invasive crowd. Numerous tegus have already been removed from southwest Florida through trapping efforts with the University of Tampa and the FWC.

The invasive species discussed here are only a drop in the bucket. Millions of acres of land are affected by invasive plants, and over 500 species of nonnative wildlife have been documented in Florida to date.

The important thing to know about what you can do to help is to understand the plants and animals you intend to bring or have brought into our state. If you buy plants, check with local nurseries or FWC's website, [MyFWC.com](http://MyFWC.com) to ensure

the plants you are buying will not negatively impact the environment. If buying an exotic pet, understand the full extent of what bringing this animal into your life will mean. How big does it get? How long will it live? Even if you have purchased an animal that might have gotten a bit out of your control, never let it loose! The [FWC's Exotic Pet Amnesty Program](#) is available for pet owners to bring their exotic pets in to be re-homed with approved adopters. This helps pet owners

keep nonnative animals out of Florida's environment. Plants and animals are a wonderful and enriching experience for everyone to have in their lives, but always remember the environment when considering your choices.



The fight against invasive plants and animals is a tough one. However, the FWC is determined to protect Florida's habitats and keep them native. If you can take a few hours out of your week to volunteer, that will make a huge difference to those plants and animals fighting for their homes. Together, we can make a difference, against the odds, and protect one of the most beautiful and diverse ecosystems in the world!



Florida sunset at Fort De Soto Park in Pinellas County. Photo by Necia Godzisz.

## Transform your yard into a haven for wildlife

By Ann Morrow

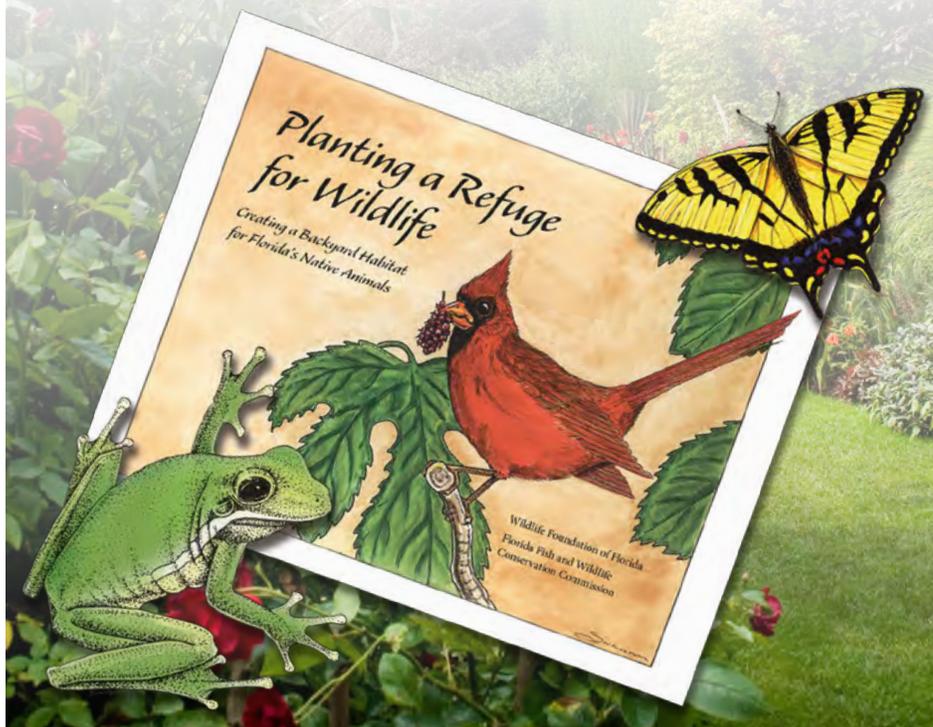
Back by popular demand, “Planting a Refuge for Wildlife” is now available to property owners eager to increase the number and variety of animals in their yard.

The 40-page booklet, revised and updated, encourages property owners to help wildlife by creating habitat that provides the food, water and shelter they need to survive. Photos and original artwork, tables of native plants and plant zones, and lists of common bird species and their food preferences create an easy-to-use resource. The booklet will help people evaluate their current landscape and create

a habitat plan, select the appropriate native plants, and design a wildlife habitat such as a bird, butterfly or pollinator garden.

As homeowners discover the joys of wildlife viewing close to home, they’ll also be part of a larger movement to restore wildlife habitat in their communities.

Produced through a grant from the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Planting a Refuge for Wildlife is available for \$4.99/copy (plus shipping and sales tax). Order copies from the Wildlife Foundation of Florida at [wildlifeflorida.com/PARFW](http://wildlifeflorida.com/PARFW). For 10 or more copies or for wholesale inquiries, contact [PlantingaRefuge@MyFWC.com](mailto:PlantingaRefuge@MyFWC.com). Visit [MyFWC.com/Viewing/](http://MyFWC.com/Viewing/) to learn more about creating wildlife habitat at home.



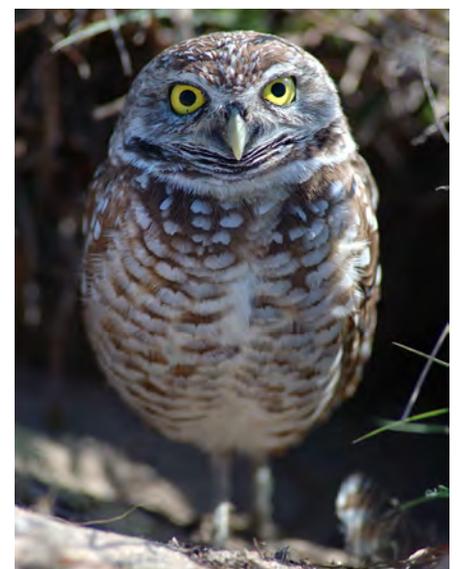
## Spot these birds

By Karl Miller

Help the FWC locate three rare bird species during their breeding season: the Southeastern American Kestrel, Burrowing Owl and Painted Bunting. These rare and declining species are often overlooked by traditional



*Southeastern American Kestrel. Photo by Meaghan Manning.*



*Burrowing Owl. Photo by Meaghan Manning.*



Painted Bunting. Photo by Doug Becker.

monitoring programs such as the North American Breeding Bird Survey. You can use the new [Rare Bird Registry](#) to quickly map locations where you observe these species, with the option to upload photos and additional comments.

This resource will help the FWC better understand the distribution at a fine scale, build better habitat models and target where to implement conservation actions. The registry is accepting sightings from previous years as well.

“The Rare Bird Registry is an excellent opportunity for the public to participate in research,” said Karl Miller, a biologist at the FWC’s Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. “Sightings will provide the FWC with valuable data that will help us study and conserve some of Florida’s most unique and interesting species. This new website provides a great way to get involved.”

## Lionfish invasion

By Amanda Nalley

See a lionfish in the wild? Report it using the new Report Florida Lionfish app. Lionfish are an invasive species, negatively impacting Florida’s reefs and wildlife. The new Report Florida Lionfish app includes educational information on lionfish and safe handling guidelines, as well as an easy-to-use data reporting form so divers and anglers can share information about their sighting or harvest with the FWC. App users can also take and share a photo of their catch.

These photos may be used in future publications or social media efforts. All data will be available to the public and shared with other groups and agencies that collect this kind of information. Don’t have a smart device? Submit your data to us online at [MyFWC.com/Fishing](#) by clicking on “Saltwater,”



“Recreational Regulations” and “Lionfish.”

## Florida Gopher Tortoise app

By Alexandra Perryman

The gopher tortoise staff has developed the “[Florida Gopher Tortoise](#)” app for iOS and Android. This app is available for download on the Apple App

## How to Get Involved

The FWC has a variety of volunteer and internship programs. Visit our website for more information on how to [GET INVOLVED](#). The FWC benefits from the skills, experiences and dedication of our volunteers and, in turn, we strive to offer a fulfilling, meaningful and satisfying volunteer experience. We also encourage you to visit the [FWC Calendar](#) for upcoming events; and to sign up with [GovDelivery](#) to receive news and information updates on the topics you select. We cannot accomplish our mission without your support!

If you need further assistance in locating a volunteer program that suits your interests, would like to submit an article for an upcoming volunteer newsletter or have ideas for our volunteer newsletter title, please contact the FWC Volunteer Program Manager or a Regional Volunteer Coordinator.

# FWC VOLUNTEER NEWSLETTER

Store and Google Play. The public is encouraged to use the app to learn more about the natural history of the species, report law enforcement violations and submit photos to the FWC. These photos are being used to create an online interactive map for viewing photos and displaying how close to human settlement gopher tortoises exist.



The FWC needs your support to further develop citizen-science throughout the state. By donating, you can help the FWC Volunteer Program expand and improve training and educational materials, project supplies, recognition awards, recruitment events and volunteer management capacity. The goal of the FWC Volunteer Program is to further build partnerships, implement a statewide network of trained volunteers and establish more volunteer coordinators throughout Florida.

If you know of a corporation or are a corporation interested in sponsoring FWC Volunteer Programs, please contact Sharon Tatem, FWC's Volunteer Program Manager. In addition to your generously donated time and talent, we welcome tax-deductible monetary contributions. Donations can be made online through the **Wildlife Foundation of Florida**. Donations can also be made via check, payable in U.S. funds only, to the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, with FWC Volunteer Programs in the memo section. Please send checks to:

FWC Volunteer Programs  
c/o Wildlife Foundation of Florida  
P.O. Box 6181  
Tallahassee, FL 32314-6181

Thank you for your consideration! The FWC Volunteer Program would not be successful without your generosity.

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