

We hope you enjoy the inaugural edition of “Kite Tales!”

This biannual newsletter highlights the Great Florida Birding Trail (GFBT), as well as other opportunities for watching wildlife in Florida. The GFBT is a program of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), housed within the Wildlife Viewing Section of the Office of Recreation Services.

Since you last received this newsletter, there have been several staffing changes within the Wildlife Viewing Section. Our team of dedicated and energetic staff is involved with various aspects of wildlife viewing around the state. To bring you up to date, here are our current staff members and their roles.

Anne Glick took over the position of Wildlife Viewing Section leader in early 2006; she administers all aspects of the wildlife viewing, partnership and outreach programs. Chantal-Marie Wright became the new information specialist in fall 2007; she handles requests for GFBT publications and other general questions, including inquiries about photographs for nonprofit use. Selena Kiser began in summer 2008 as the new planning and evaluation specialist; she manages the newsletter publication and subscriptions as well as the Wings Over Florida Program, the Loaner Optics Program, the GFBT Web site and the wildlife viewing pages on the FWC Web site. These three also assist the GFBT coordinator, Mark Kiser, who has been in that position since fall 2005. He handles most everything else involved with the GFBT, including the addition of new sites and sign installations.

We are excited about expanding the newsletter to include more wildlife viewing opportunities. There are many other species in Florida, such as butterflies and manatees, that entice visitors and residents alike to observe and enjoy. There will be regular columns highlighting Florida wildlife and places. One of the main columns is the “Feature Species,” which covers species that people enjoy watching in Florida. There will also be a recurring feature article that highlights several sites along the GFBT. Of course, we will continue to keep you informed about the latest GFBT news, and any wildlife events occurring in Florida. In this issue, we also announce the launching of our new butterfly booklets and Web page to encourage people to give butterfly watching a try.

We hope you will enjoy our new newsletter format. If you would like to share your stories, we will be accepting articles for publication, along with high-quality photos. If you have any comments or questions about the GFBT or wildlife viewing, please do not hesitate to contact us. Please see the back page for contact information.

Happy Viewing!

—Great Florida Birding Trail and Wildlife Viewing staff

Feature Species: sandhill crane

By Selena Kiser

Thousands of tall, graceful birds fill the horizon. Their bugling calls permeate the morning, as we gaze out over the prairie. There are couples dancing and other couples walking with their nearly adult-size offspring, but most of them are busy feeding on seeds and small creatures in the mud and grasses.

This winter morning we are at Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park. Encompassing 21,000 acres, this state park is located just south of Gainesville, and it includes one of the best examples of a basin marsh and wet prairie in Florida. In winter, it is also one of the best places in Florida to see large numbers of cranes aggregating in one place.

Of the 15 crane species found throughout the world, sandhill cranes are the most common. Even so, they still have a way of captivating people. Sandhill cranes are tall birds, reaching three to five feet in height, with long legs and necks. They are gray overall, excluding the white feathers on their cheeks and a red patch of skin on the forehead and crown that they develop as adults. They are surprisingly lightweight for their size, averaging between 6.5 and 14 pounds, depending on the subspecies. They are also fairly long-lived, with life spans up to 20 years in the wild.

There are six distinct subspecies of sandhill crane—three migratory and three non-migratory. In Florida, we are lucky to have two subspecies: the greater sandhill crane and the Florida sandhill crane. They both look very much the same, but follow very different yearly cycles.

Greater sandhill cranes

There are several distinct populations of the largest subspecies, the greater sandhill crane, found in different regions of North America. The birds that migrate to Florida and southern Georgia for the winter are from the eastern population. This group currently consists of approximately 30,000 birds, and unlike other populations, its numbers are increasing.

In April, the eastern population begins its breeding cycle in the Great Lakes region, mostly in Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and southern Ontario. There they breed and raise their young, called colts. After breeding, they leave with their colts in late September and October. They feed and rest at several stopovers along the way, and start arriving in Florida in late October, with most arriving between mid-November to mid-December. Here they winter until late February or early March, when most begin their annual journey north. By early April, all have departed.

Florida sandhill cranes

The Florida sandhill crane subspecies is unique to the Florida peninsula and extreme southeastern Georgia. These cranes do not migrate; instead, they remain year-round. There are only about 4,000 to 6,000, but their population seems to be stable because of their protected status (they are currently listed by the FWC as threatened) and because there are vital wetlands and prairies across the peninsula that have been preserved. In addition, Florida sandhill cranes have become somewhat tolerant of humans and have adjusted to certain kinds of development. They often feed in people's yards, in pastures and agricultural fields, and on golf courses. However, they raise young more successfully in areas unaltered by humans.

It is important to remember that feeding cranes is illegal, even though it may be enticing to do so. They can become used to humans feeding them, and may become aggressive, as well as cause property damage. For more information about living with our resident Florida sandhill cranes, visit MyFWC.com/Wildlife2060/LivingWithWildlife/sandhill_cranes.htm.

Reproduction of sandhill cranes

Most sandhill cranes form monogamous pairs that stay together for life. Florida sandhill cranes typically lay eggs from January to March, but will lay them later if earlier attempts have failed. Up north, greater sandhill cranes lay their eggs from April to May. All sandhill cranes raise only one brood per year. Nests are usually mounds of vegetation made in shallow water, such as in marshes or wet prairies, or sometimes on dry land adjacent to water. The typical number of eggs laid is two, with an average incubation time of 30 days. When the young hatch, they can leave the nest and begin feeding themselves within 24 hours.

Even though the female lays two eggs, usually only one colt survives. This is caused by sibling aggression, where one outcompetes the other for food. In years with an abundance of food, two colts may survive. The young can fly at approximately 10 weeks of age, but they stay with their parents until they are 9 to 10 months old. For cranes that migrate, young travel in the fall with their parents to wintering grounds.

Range

Sandhill cranes are truly a North American specialty. They occur predominantly in the United States and Canada; wintering grounds extend from the United States into the northernmost part of Mexico. There is also one endangered non-migratory subspecies that occurs only in Cuba.

Sandhill cranes reside in much of the Florida peninsula, but in the Panhandle they are far less common and are observed mostly during migration. However, at one time, there was a population that bred throughout the southeastern United States, extending to coastal Texas. The Florida subspecies is likely a remnant of that population.

Threats

The main threat to cranes in Florida is loss of wetland and prairie ecosystems; fragmentation of remaining habitat is also a serious problem. Human disturbance may force cranes to leave areas they once relied on for nesting or foraging. Other threats include collisions with fences and cars, as well as disturbance by domestic cats and dogs.

Sandhill cranes are a very ancient species. In Nebraska, where huge numbers of western populations converge during migration, scientists have found fossil remains, nearly identical to the sandhill cranes of today, that are 10 million years old! To keep these ancient beauties thriving, we must continue to protect freshwater habitats throughout their wintering, breeding and migration stopover grounds.

Great places to see sandhill cranes in the winter along the Great Florida Birding Trail include (from north to south):

Jennings State Forest

www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/jennings.html

Phone: 904-291-5530

Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park

www.floridastateparks.org/paynesprairie/

Phone: 352-466-3397

Sawgrass Island Preserve

www.lakecountyfl.gov/bird_watching/birding_spots.aspx

Phone: 352-343-3777

Brooker Creek Preserve

www.pinellascounty.org/Environment/pagesHTML/envlands/el1030.html

Phone: 727-453-6800

Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area

MyFWC.com/recreation/three_lakes/

Phone: 352-732-1225

Joe Overstreet Landing

www.osceola.org/index.cfm?lsFuses=Department/Parks/9273

Phone: 407-343-7173

Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park

www.floridastateparks.org/kissimmeeprairie/

Phone: 863-462-5360

Fred C. Babcock/Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area

MyFWC.com/recreation/babcock_webb

Phone: 941-575-5768

Dinner Island Ranch Wildlife Management Area

MyFWC.com/recreation/dinner_island/

Phone: 863-902-3349

Picayune Strand State Forest (Sabal Palm Hiking Trail)

www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/picayune_strand.html

Phone: 239-348-7557

To learn more about sandhill cranes, please visit these Web sites:

All About Birds (Cornell Lab of Ornithology)

www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Sandhill_Crane_dtl.html

International Crane Foundation

www.savingcranes.org/sandhillcrane.html

U.S. Geological Survey (Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center)

www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/birds/cranes/gruscanam.htm

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's report, "Ecology of the Florida Sandhill Crane"

research.MyFWC.com/publications/publication_info.asp?id=49382

Florida Natural Areas Inventory's Field Guide to the Rare Animals of Florida

www.fnai.org/FieldGuide/pdf/Grus_canadensis_pratensis.pdf

Birding Trail Site Highlights: Florida winter birding

Winter is often the best time to see birds in Florida. The weather is great, and there are actually more winter resident bird species than permanent year-round resident species! Many shorebirds, ducks and sparrows come down from the chilly north to winter in the Sunshine State.

There are many great places to see wintering birds in Florida, but we'll highlight four, one from each section of the GFBT. Hopefully one of them isn't too far from your neck of the woods.

Panhandle (#29): Ponce de Leon Springs State Park

This 420-acre state park near the town of Ponce de Leon in Holmes and Walton counties, off of Interstate 10, is only about 15 miles from the Alabama border. Because of its location, this site provides an excellent opportunity to find winter specialties that occur only in the northernmost parts of Florida. Species such as red-breasted nuthatch, brown creeper, winter wren, golden-crowned kinglet and dark-eyed junco may winter here. This park has a beautiful spring, which is quite busy with swimmers in the warmer months. During winter,

however, there are fewer crowds. Near the spring area, two short nature trails take you through floodplain swamps and forests. In the near future, the park will develop a longer trail in the southern half, which will take you through upland pine forest.

www.floridastateparks.org/poncedeleonsprings

Phone: 850-836-4281

Open 8 a.m. to sunset daily

Admission: \$3 per vehicle

West (#22): Big Bend WMA: Hickory Mound Unit

The Hickory Mound Unit of the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area encompasses 14,427 acres in coastal Taylor County. The best birding in the winter is along the Hickory Mound Impoundment. A beautiful salt marsh awaits your exploration by hiking, biking or driving the impoundment road. A tall observation tower overlooks the marsh. In winter, one of the main draws here is the large number of ducks and shorebirds. Looking for sparrows is another delightful challenge, especially if your goal is Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow, found in salt marshes along Florida's coastlines in winter. The FWC is the lead manager at this site and allows only waterfowl hunting in the impoundment area during winter before 1 p.m. With these regulations, hunting pressure is low within the impoundment. Deer and hog hunting occur outside the impoundment. For a downloadable bird list of the entire Big Bend WMA, please visit *MyFWC.com/recreation/bird-lists/BigBend_web_01.29.07.pdf*, or call 850-488-8755.

MyFWC.com/recreation/big_bend

Phone: 386-758-0525

Open sunrise to sunset

Admission: Free

East (#TBD; new site): Circle B Bar Reserve

This 1,267-acre reserve is a part of the Polk County park system and is located between Lakeland and Winter Haven on the south side of Winter Lake Road (State Road 540). Among the habitats found there are freshwater marsh, hardwood forest and freshwater swamp, with views of Lake Hancock. There is a diverse range of bird species here, and in winter the number of ducks and other water-loving birds is very high. Wading birds are abundant, with thousands of herons and egrets. Large flocks of American white pelicans and wood storks are possible, too. There are several bald eagle nests on the property that are active in winter. Ospreys and other raptors also make the reserve their home. The Polk's Nature Discovery Center is a new facility that opened in November 2008. The center offers educational exhibits and workshops.

www.polk-county.net/subpage.aspx?menu_id=52&nav=res&id=6040

Phone: 863-534-7377

Open 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily; Discovery Center open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tues. - Sat.

Admission: Free

South (#47): Stormwater Treatment Area 5

In South Florida, stormwater treatment areas (STAs) are manmade wetlands designed to reduce phosphorus levels from surface water before returning it to the Everglades. However, in addition to helping clean the water, STAs have become fabulous birding areas, as they attract thousands of birds to their shallow waters. STA 5, managed by the South Florida Water Management District, is located in Hendry County, south of Lake Okeechobee. Its 7,680 acres have become an oasis for birds. Winter brings in huge flocks of American white pelicans and hordes of ducks. Shorebirds flock here by the thousands too, and there are always plenty of wading birds, including the roseate spoonbill and the white morph of the great blue heron (great white heron). For now, the site is only open for special birding tours (see the Hendry-Glades Audubon Web site for more information:

www.orgsites.com/fl/hgaudubon/). STA 5 will likely be fully open to the public in 2010.

my.sfwmd.gov/pls/portal/docs/page/common/pdf/splash/sta_rec.pdf

Phone: 866-433-6312

863-674-0695 for reservations

Admission: \$5 suggested donation per vehicle

Updates to the East Florida Birding Trail

To keep the GFBT fresh and exciting, we consider site nominations for the trail on a rotational basis. In 2000, the East Section of the GFBT was the first section completed. Being the oldest, it was the first section reopened for the addition of new sites. Mark and Selena Kiser visited 53 sites in fall and early winter 2007 to ensure that they met the high standards of the trail. In addition to making sure the sites were great for birding, they also had to meet a set of criteria, including accessibility and maintenance, and ecological and educational significance.

After the inspections, a steering committee, consisting of representatives from the FWC, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Audubon of Florida, Visit Florida and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service met to discuss which sites should be included. We are happy to announce that the committee accepted 46 new sites.

You can find a list of the new sites (along with links to their Web sites) at: floridabirdingtrail.com/howsite.htm. By spring 2009, we will add descriptions of these sites. A printed version is temporarily on hold until additional funding is available. The next section reopened will be the West Section. Stay tuned for more updates!

Butterfly Viewing in Florida

Most people know that birding is a huge outdoor recreation activity in the United States. But did you know that butterfly viewing is also a rapidly growing hobby? Thanks to our mild winters, butterflies are active year-round in most parts of the state. There have been 187 species of butterflies recorded in Florida, more than any other state east of the Mississippi River. With the large numbers of butterflies to see, it can seem overwhelming to learn them all. However, with a little patience and some basic knowledge, butterfly watching can be just as exciting and fun as birding.

Florida Butterfly Encounters is a series of four booklets designed to help people learn about and appreciate butterflies. Butterfly expert, Dr. Jaret C. Daniels, developed the booklets with funding from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and cooperation from the Florida Museum of Natural History, the McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity, and Disney Animal Programs. *Florida Butterfly Encounters* includes *50 Common Butterflies of Florida*, *Butterfly Watching Basics*, *Florida Butterfly Gardening* and a *Checklist of Florida Butterflies*. You can purchase the series of booklets for \$10.00 through University of Florida's IFAS Extension bookstore at: ifasbooks.ufl.edu and enter "Florida Butterfly Encounters" in the search box.

For additional information, please visit MyFWC.com/viewing/butterfly/index.html.

New Online Birding Trip Planner!

We have been working hard on an interactive, trip-planning tool to help birders find destinations and species of interest. Amenities, habitats and 40 featured species are categories you can search to find GFBT sites to visit. It is a work in progress, and there are opportunities for you, the public, to comment. The trip planner provides information about each of the featured species, along with links to external Web sites, including *All About Birds* (by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology).

We hope this planning tool will be useful, and we know that birders like you will want to give us feedback (there is a "Feedback" button for your suggestions and comments). Please remember that this is an early version, and in the future, it will have improved search capabilities. Look for the new feature on the GFBT Web site at floridabirdingtrail.com.

Numerous birders provided comments on the early drafts of this feature. We thank everyone for their valuable input.

Birding Trail Road Sign Update

We are happy to announce West Section signs were completed in 2006. And at long last, Panhandle Birding Trail sign installation has begun! Our sign contractor started putting signs in the ground in December 2008 and will finish in early 2009. We will hold a sign dedication ceremony on Jan. 17, 2009 at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in Wakulla County. Please visit the GFBT Web site for more details.

Engineering services for road signs in the South Section are complete. We are now in the process of securing sign maintenance agreements with the counties, cities and towns in South Florida. We anticipate that signs will be installed at all 116 locations by the end of 2009. For the 46 newly added sites in the East Section, we are currently seeking funding to begin the first step, the engineering services component. At this time, we do not have a timetable for completing work at these new locations, but we'll keep you posted.

Upcoming Wildlife Festivals:

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

Jan. 14 – 19

Everglades Birding Festival, Hollywood

Phone: 954-926-5458

Jan. 16 – 18

Southwest Florida Birding and Wildlife Festival, Naples

Phone: 239-417-6310

Jan. 17

Panhandle Birding Trail Sign Dedication, St. Marks

Phone: 850-488-9478

Jan. 21 – 26

Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival, Titusville

Phone: 321-268-5224

Jan. 24 – 25

Orange City Blue Spring Manatee Festival, Orange City

Phone: 386-775-9224

Feb. 7

Orlando Wetlands Park Festival, Christmas

Phone: 407-246-2213 or 407-568-1706

Feb. 7

Wildlife Heritage and Outdoors Festival, St. Marks

Phone: 850-925-6121

Feb. 21

Burrowing Owl Festival, Cape Coral
Phone: 239-980-2593

March 14

Pelican Island Wildlife Festival, Sebastian
Phone: 772-562-3909, ext. 258

March 22

Backyard Habitat Festival, Orlando
Phone: 407-876-6696

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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