

Winter 2025

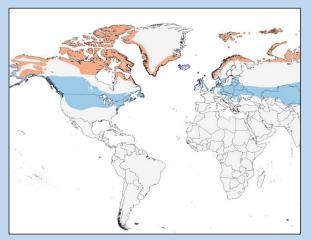
News from the Merritt Island Wildlife Association, Friends of Merritt Island NWR

Snow Bunting: A Rare Visitor To The MINWR



Photo by Diana Fasanella

A lone snow bunting, thought by some to be a juvenile male, brought many visitors to the Merritt Island NWR in December.



Snow bunting partial range map courtesy of Cornell Lab All About Birds

A snow bunting, *Plectrophenax nivalis*, was spotted on the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR). The bird first appeared in early December at the north entrance to the Shiloh Marsh Road. This little songbird normally winters in the prairies along the US - Canada border, often foraging in crop stubble, especially near lake shores. It breeds even farther north, along Arctic shores, where it nests in rock crevices.

Such a rare sighting attracted visitors from many surrounding counties and even some out of state birders. No recent sightings suggest the snow bunting has continued on its journey.

It was a perfect night to enjoy the Winter Solstice Luminaria Walk on the Refuge's Oak Hammock Trail on Friday, December 20th. Over 500 sand bags with lit candles lined the one mile loop trail. This annual MINWR event is now a popular holiday tradition for many families.













MIWA President's Message



Nancy Bray

Greetings! For those I Treasures Gift Shop. haven't met. I am Nancv Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA) Board of Directors to serve as President for Fiscal Year 2025. I have served on the board for two

years after retiring from NASA at

the end of 2022. I spent 34 years at the Kennedy Space Center and retired as the Director of Spaceport Integration and Services. A crucial role in my job jar was liaison to the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), working with the Refuge Manager to ensure the two Federal Agencies supported each other's mission.

Since retiring, I have also become a volunteer for the FWS at Merritt Island in addition to volunteering for MIWA. If you take a bus tour at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR), I might be your driver!

2025 will be a challenging year as we manage MI-WA operations during the construction activity at the Refuge Visitor Center. We will do our best to keep you informed via email. At the time of this publication, the plan is for FWS to establish a visitor contact station at the parking lot adjacent to West Gator Creek road (just east of the Max Brewer Bridge). In that location you will find the always helpful MINWR volunteers, as well as a small retail footprint for MIWA's Nature's

Donor Recognition

Special thanks to the following for their generous donations in support of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge for the 4th Quarter of 2024:

Gift (\$43,056) Barbara Wilson Estate Manatee (\$5,000) Laurilee Thompson **Bobcat** (\$250)

> Paula Dayton, David Hartgrove, Rebecca McGinnis, Beverly Merrilees, **Kelley Merritt**

Gopher Tortoise (\$100)

Loretta Jones, Tim Kozusko, Shawn Quinn, Christine Shireman, Bonnie Staiger, **George Thomas, Melanie Winters**

Be sure to visit MIWA at the upcoming Space Bray and I am honored to Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival, January 22-26, have been elected by the 2025. We will have a booth with a great selection of retail items from our Gift Shop. Several guided field trips on the Refuge are scheduled during the Festival also. See details at https://scbwa.net.

> I hope you had an enjoyable holiday season and get a chance to take in the winter migration. If you haven't been to Black Point Wildlife Drive lately, be sure to visit this winter to observe the amazing wildlife who call it home. Hope to see you on the Refuge! .

Nature's Treasures Gift Shop

is moving temporarily...

Reminder: Our gift shop has moved to the visitor contact station

(trailer) at the west entrance to the MINWR.



Temporary Visitor Contact Station hours are 8:00 am to 4:00 pm **Tuesday through Saturday** (west entrance to Refuge on SR 402, at end of the A. Max Brewer Memorial Parkway bridge)



Black Point Wildlife Drive Bus Tours Thur/Fri/Saturdays at 10:00 am - 12:00 pm Tickets are \$10, or \$5 with a federal lands pass

Bus pickup at Parrish Park Boat Ramp MIWA members receive a 50% discount on tickets (\$5 instead of \$10)

Call (321) 861-0669 for reservations Space is limited • Reservations required

Site Preparation Begins For The MINWR Community Conservation Education Center

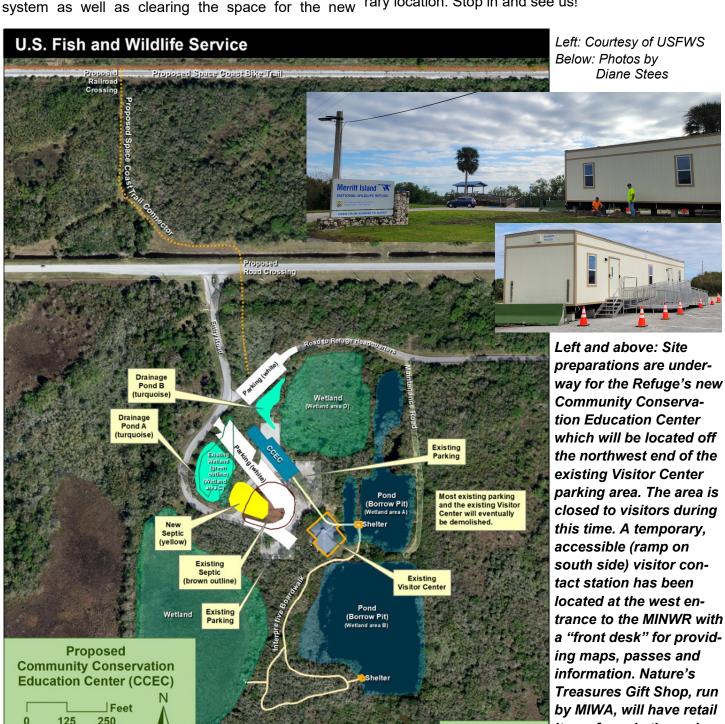
by Kim King-Wrenn,

MINWR Visitor Services Manager

Site preparations for the new Community Conservation Education Center (CCEC) will begin in January. The current Visitor Center will be closed during this first phase of construction which will include building a new entrance road, new parking lot, and new septic system as well as clearing the space for the new

building. A temporary visitor contact station will be set up through the end of August 2025 at the west entrance to the Refuge, adjacent to Parrish Park. The contact station will be open Tuesday through Saturday from 8:00 am until 4:00 pm. Refuge maps, passes, and information will be available there. The Nature's Treasures Gift Shop will also be open in the temporary location. Stop in and see us!

items for sale there also.



How MIWA Supports The Merritt Island NWR Complex

The Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA), a nonprofit "friends" organization formed in 1994, continues to the support the Merritt Island National Wildlife Complex in a variety of ways, **thanks to your support**, as listed below:

- Funding indoor exhibits for the new Community Conservation and Education Center (CCEC)
- Funding the outdoor playscape for the CCEC
- Funding facility improvements (e.g. Sendler Education Outpost renovation/upgrades)
- Funding an accessible kayak launch
- Managing Nature's Treasures Gift Shop, using money raised from retail sales to benefit the Refuge
- Funding two summer Interns to support the Sea Turtle Walks (for biology and public education)
- Funding a spring education Intern (partially paid for by Winter Solstice Luminaria Walk sales)
- Providing Internet for the bunkhouse and Visitor Center
- Facilitating the use of a credit card method of payment for guests to buy daily and annual MINWR passes
- Supporting Lake Woodruff NWR programs
- Providing supplies for Scouting programs
- Donating native plants for an Eagle Scout project to update the pollinator garden at the Visitor Center
- Donating funds for an Eagle Scout project to replace fishing line recycle tubes on the Refuge
- Providing Winter Solstice Luminaria Walk supplies (candles, luminaria bags)
- Providing large format laminated MINWR maps for outreach events
- Supporting community outreach events
- Promoting MINWR Complex events
- Supporting Lunch-n-Learn Education and the Welcome Back Luncheon for Volunteers
- Providing snacks and supplies for the Junior Duck Stamp award ceremony
- Providing 2024 Bullywug Bash prizes
- Providing supplies and/or snacks for Volunteers and multiple Refuge events/programs

Lake Woodruff NWR: MIWA Programs Include Raptors and Butterfly Walk

MIWA hosted a Raptor Factor program at the Lake Woodruff NWR, part of the MINWR Complex, on 12/13. David and Dee Simpson presented tips on raptor identification and led a guided field trip. On 12/19, Ed Perry shared a butterfly program. The



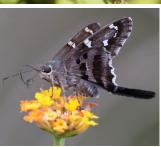
group toured the native plant garden to observe butterflies and their host plants.

Left: Photo by Jon Trout









Raptor Factor group photos by Rochelle Hood

Butterfly* and bird photos by James Jackson *Gulf Fritillary and

*Gulf Fritillary and Long-tailed Skipper





Overwintering Wildlife At The MINWR

Text and photo by Dee and David Simpson

Winter is a great time to visit the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Waterfowl numbers swell. Larger wading birds like Roseate Spoonbills and Great Blue Herons begin breeding. Painted Buntings are frequenting the bird feeders and brushy fields.

A drive through Black Point Wildlife Drive can be well worth the time. Variable water levels provide habitat for shorebirds, wading birds, and waterfowl. A dozen or more species of waterfowl can be seen, sometimes including a few geese. If you are lucky, you may see the Tundra Swans that have made a very rare appearance on the refuge this winter.

ing flocks of wading birds sometimes numbering in the hundreds. Some years, dainty little Bonaparte's Gulls will even join in with the wading birds standing shoul- Birding with David Simpson der to shoulder, somehow managing to avoid injuring each other with their stabby bills.

Great Blue Herons begin nesting early and will often be in full breeding regalia as early as December. January is the peak time to see Roseate Spoonbills. In addition to their famous red and pink colors, they have a golden-colored tail and shoulders, along with a brightly colored face.

> After Black Point, you may want to visit the Haulover Canal Kayak Launch where you can obtain views of pelicans (white and brown) terns, gulls, shorebirds, and wading birds nesting. For a closer view, you can also kayak around Bird Island, a Refuge-protected

sanctuary. Bring your own kayak or book a trip with one of the Refuge-permitted tour companies. Since Hurricane Idalia, American Flamingos have been Black Point is one of the best places to see Red- making an appearance on the island. Across the dish Egrets dancing around in search of prey. As wa- Haulover Canal drawbridge you can check the Manater levels gradually recede, deeper pools attract feed- tee Observation area for overhead views of manatees.

We hope to see you out there.

https://birdingwithdavidsimpson.com

Hands-On Horseshoe Crab Conservation **Project Restores Shoreline Habitat**

Below: MIWA members and friends, led by MIWA Vice President Laurilee Thompson, gave horseshoe crabs a helping hand on December 12, 2024, by removing rocks that had piled up onto the horseshoe crab beach along the A. Max Brewer Memorial Parkway when West Gator Creek Road washed out during Hurricane Milton in October. The rocks took away the sandy shoreline that horseshoe crabs need to come ashore to spawn.

Right: Laurilee Thompson checks on horseshoe crabs during a major spawning event that occurred on

December 29 in the area where the rocks had been removed from the shoreline.

> Kudos to those who helped restore this critical shoreline habitat.







2024 MIWA Annual Meeting Highlights





MIWA board members Diane Stees, Bert Alm, Nancy Bray, Charlie Venuto, Bob Musser, Laurilee Thompson, Shawn Quinn, Tim Kozusko Becky Bolt, Paul Leader and

by Diane Stees

MIWA held their 2024 Annual Meeting under a large pavilion at the lovely Field Manor in Merritt Island on Saturday, October 19th. MIWA members and their guests enjoyed a delicious buffet with desserts catered by Hayes Meats in Merritt Island. A Silent Auction with various gift baskets and other goodies was held to help raise funds for the MINWR.

Election of board members was held. Incoming board members include Jim Benedict, Cheryl Ford, Tim Kozusko and Lori Weller. Departing board members Bert Alm and Marcia Gaedcke were thanked for their service. Bylaws amendments were also voted on. In addition, albums with photos, Habi-Chat newsletters, newspaper clippings and flyers dating back to

> 1994 were on hand for MIWA's 30th anniversary.

> After MIWA and MINWR updates from Charlie Venuto, Rochelle Hood, Tom Penn and Kim King-Wrenn, keynote speaker Kirsten Hines presented slides on Florida wildlife, and shared stories about her adventures in getting photographs for her books. She is a Florida-based writer, photographer and conservationist.

> Many thanks to MIWA Executive Director Rochelle Hood and her team for providing this memorable event.

Photos by Diane Stees









Indian River Lagoon Day A Celebration Of Stewardship



Text and photo by Remy (young adult volunteer)

This year's Indian River Lagoon (IRL) Day, on November 9th, was a great get-together for all lovers of the IRL. Many friends of MINWR, MIWA and One Lagoon were there to share their environmental knowledge and inspire people to become stewards of our lagoon, including the creatures that call it home. Volunteers guided visitors through a hands-on horseshoe crab exhibit and gave helpful tips about how to make the lagoon more friendly for the local horseshoe crab population. Both kids and adults learned about the effects of algal blooms, nitrogen fixation, and other plagues to the lagoon as well as

ways to prevent them. Many visitors shared their stories about living in and around the lagoon. In the end, it was all for the fun of learning new things and engaging with our local community.

Eagle Scout Replaces Fishing Line Recycle Tubes



Above: Eagle Scout Hayden Bell and his team install fishing line recycle tubes on the MINWR.

Below Left: Eagle Scout Hayden Bell

Below Right: Installed fishing line recycle tube





by Diane Stees

The US Fish and Wildlife Service appreciates Boy Scout Hayden Bell for choosing the MINWR as the site for his Eagle Scout project. Hayden is a member of Troop 304 in Rockledge. Hayden approached MI-WA for funding back in September, and MIWA voted to help fund the Eagle Scout's project to replace 10 fishing line recycling tubes located around the Refuge.

Fishing line is a major threat to marine life around the world. When left in the wild animals can get tangled in it, or can ingest it which can be fatal. Fishing line recycle tubes provide a place for people to properly dispose of their used fishing line, and allows it to be recycled.

All of the previously installed tubes were found to be sun-rotted. Most of the wooden posts were falling apart due to age, and all of the stickers were falling off. Four of the tubes were adjacent to overgrown plants which made access to them difficult.

To complete the project, Hayden needed to estimate all materials, gather the right tools, and lead a team in cutting up the PVC pipe and wooden posts, assembling, transporting then installing them at the various Refuge locations.

Kudos to Eagle Scout Hayden Bell and his team on a job well done. The new fishing line recycle tubes will continue to help keep used fishing line from harming wildlife on the Merritt Island NWR for years to come.

2nd Annual Bullywug Bash Sunday, January 26th, 2025 9:00 am - 4:00 pm

Stop by the visitor contact station to begin your quest. Pick up your map and first clue. Then head out on to the Refuge to find the other clues. Solve the puzzles and follow the clues in this scavenger hunt-style challenge for tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) fans. This is a self-guided adventure



that will take you to different locations all over the Refuge. A vehicle is required. The difficulty of the quest is designed for adults, but additional hints are available for young adventurers. When you've completed the challenge, return to the outpost for a small souvenir and a chance to enter to win one of the larger prize drawings.

Gopher Tortoise Council Grant and 46th Annual Meeting in St. Pete

by Becky Bolt

Rochelle Hood, MIWA Executive Director, successfully applied for and was awarded a \$950 education grant from the Gopher Tortoise Council. The pri- proudly displayed at the Florida Space Coast Office of mary purpose of the grant was to provide educational Tourism Visitor Information Center. The educational materials and to promote the Annual Gopher Tortoise interpretive signs and brochures will continue to pay Day on April 10th. Rochelle, Jessica Larned (graphic dividends in raising awareness of the importance of artist with Digital Ink) and I designed two 24" x 36" this wonderful species at many future events. Huge posters and a tri-fold brochure detailing important as- thanks to the Gopher Tortoise Council for the grant pects of gopher tortoise ecology and habitat. Volun- and to MIWA for sponsoring us to attend the meeting. teer Christine Witkowski, a retired professor, leveraged her technical documentation expertise to provide proofreading support.

In November, Rochelle and I were invited to the 46th Annual Gopher Tortoise Council Meeting at Eckerd College and the Boyd Hill Nature Preserve in St. Petersburg. There were 160 college students, professors, and wildlife professionals attending the meeting. During the poster presentation session, people were particularly impressed with our poster's strategy of using beautiful pictures and graphics to draw them in, and once "captured," they were exposed to intricate subjects such as commensals, habitat management, and fire ecology.

The applicability of the posters and brochure to a wide range of ages and expertise was also a common observation. Our presentation during the poster session drew a steady stream of people who asked questions and resulted in quite a bit of positive attention for the MINWR and MIWA.

The posters and brochures have been used at a variety of outreach events since their creation, including our MINWR & MIWA Gopher Tortoise Education

Day that drew 51 attendees, and the monthly Dine to Donate welcome table at the Village Inn in Titusville.

Our All About Gopher Tortoises brochures are now

MIWA Executive Director Rochelle Hood also contributed to this report.



MIWA Executive Director Rochelle Hood, MIWA Board member Becky Bolt, and MIWA Volunteer Christine Witkowski at the 46th Annual Gopher Tortoise Council Meeting in St. Petersburg.

26th Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival January 22-26, 2025 • Radisson at the Port

Visit https://scbwa.net for information on speakers, field trips, classes, registration and more.

24 afternoon presentations are at this link.

Refuge Christmas Bird Count Completed

The MINWR Christmas Bird Count was conducted on Monday, December 16, 2024. Right: MINWR Visitor Services Manager Kim King-Wrenn relays instructions to count participants in the Visitor Center. A detailed summary of the count will be included in the spring issue of the Habi-Chat.



Volunteer Spotlight: Maggie Laska

by Maggie Laska

Since childhood, I have always enjoyed nature and found peace outdoors. I grew up in a very economically challenged family who had little money for extras. Our parents' idea of a family outing was a walk in the woods at the nearby Greenwich Audubon Center. It was free. Or it could be a trip to my uncle's house which abutted an open field and came equipped with a pair of binoculars. I would sit in a chair watch-

ing the birds fly across the field for hours.

We put a small feeder on our fire escape, and I remember getting so excited

whenever a blue jay landed.

These great early birding memories carried through early adulthood when I enrolled in a bird watching adult education course. I bought an introductory pair of binoculars, and the adventures began. I never stopped birding, going on many local outings when I lived on Long Island, whenever I went on vacations nationally and international-

ly, and when attending birding festivals throughout the country.

After retiring from my career as a school psychologist and school district administrator, my husband and I began to travel south for parts of the winter. We first decided to try the West Coast and Panhandle of Florida. One of the rental homes was in Carabelle on the Panhandle and we made an outing to St. Marks NWR. It was spectacular and I shared my admiration at the visitor's center with one of the volunteers. She asked if I had ever been to Merritt Island NWR as it was really spectacular.

The next winter we stayed on the East Coast to check it out. We rented in Sanford and made several trips to the MINWR as we loved it so much. The next winter we decided to stay even closer to the Refuge and rented in Rockledge and Cocoa, again, making many trips to the MINWR. We then decided to buy a house in Titusville so that we could remain close to the Refuge. I'm embarrassed to say we didn't even give the space industry a thought in making the decision, but it turned out to be a nice bonus.

The Refuge was a great place for us to frequently dent, I feel I have come to visit, especially since Black Point Wildlife Drive didn't ing to be one with nature.

require much walking which was problematic for my husband, Ryder, who passed away last year. I suddenly had a lot more time on my hands. I eventually resumed my almost weekly trips to the Refuge. Every visit is a new experience as you never know what you will see. After a conversation with a ranger, he suggested I volunteer.

Then someone told me about MIWA and a pie and puzzle event they were hosting. I never heard of MIWA and checked it out. Not only was the

event fun, but the pies were delicious, and I won two puzzles! I also learned about an incredible organization that I wanted to be a part of. The Refuge has become my sanctuary where I find peace, incredible birds, beautiful landscapes, can recall fond memories, and am able to witness the product of God's extraordinary creation. I felt I had to give back to a place I truly loved so I decided to volun-

teer.

My love of gardening inspired me to become a member of the Garden Crew at the Refuge. I work with a great team to help maintain the grounds around the Visitor Center and throughout the Refuge. I have learned a great deal about native plants through my work there and have put that knowledge to use in renovating my own gardens to include more native plants. My home gardens have been set up to encourage the visitation of as many birds and pollinators as possible. I have been a part of the Project Feeder Watch count for Cornell Lab of Ornithology for my five years in Florida. I've sighted 55 different bird species during the 6-month counts at my feeders.

In addition to my volunteer work with the Garden Crew, I assist with Refuge and MIWA public education offerings, MIWA fundraising events, and Adopt-An-Area cleanups on Black Point Wildlife Drive. I attend as many MIWA/Refuge workshops and field trips as I can to increase my understanding of the conservation efforts related to maintaining the Indian River Lagoon and surrounding lands, as well as expand my knowledge of the flora and fauna of Florida. As a transplanted New Yorker, now a full-time Florida resident, I feel I have come to a place that fulfills my longing to be one with nature.

The Joy Of Watching A Family Of Ospreys

Text and photos by Paul Leader

The Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is a large bird of prey that hovers over water and dives feet first for its meal which is composed mostly of fish. The Osprey is commonly known as the "fish hawk". It is the only species in the family and is found over salt water coastal marshes, lakes and rivers on all continents except Antarctica. It measures about 23 inches in length with a wingspan of 63 inches.

The species is enjoying a rebound from its major decline during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s due to the effects of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) and other pesticides and is now commonly seen at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR) where they are year-round residents.

Ospreys start to nest in early spring. I was very happy to find a nest that was easy to see and photograph. There is a "Manatee Slow" marker about ten feet above the water on the northwest corner of the Haulover Canal in the MINWR. It is the perfect spot for an Osprey nest. As I watched, the pair brought in branch after branch, moss and grasses until a large nest was built. Usually, three eggs are laid in late March and the incubation period lasts between 32 and 42 days.

The chicks are totally dependent on the parents for food and protection from predators. The male brought fish to the nest for the female to feed the little ones and then flew to a nearby sentry tree to keep watch and get ready for the next fishing expedition. The female tore off small pieces of fish and gently delivered them to the gaping mouths of her brood. She generally stayed in the nest with the little ones.

I visited the nest often and watched as the young ones grew beautiful immature plumage and their eyes went from red to yellow. The flapping of wings came more often and lasted longer as the days went by and gradually they began to lift off of the nest. After about 45 days all three were gone from the nest, hopefully following their parents and learning to fend for themselves.

Observing and photographing the process of nest building, egg hatching, and raising of the next generation of Ospreys was rewarding and educational. I'm happy to be able to share this experience and these wonderful birds with our readers.











Signature: _

Calendar of Events

01/22-01/26	Space Coast Birding and Wild	llife Festival
(Wed-Sun)	n) Radisson at the Port • MINWR Field Trips	
	https://scbwa.net	Day

01/26 (Sun) 2nd Annual Bullywug Bash
Check in at W. Gator Creek Visitor Contact Station

02/01 (Sat) Try Archery • 10:00 am - 12:00 pm

Sendler Education Outpost (321-861-0669 to reserve)

02/02 (Sun) I've Got An App For That Bird**
Dixie Crossroads Seafood Restaurant, Titusville

02/08 (Sat) 13th Annual Pioneer Day • 10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Sams House, Merritt Island
02/09 (Sun) Freshwater Mussels Program** • 1:00 pm

02/09 (Sun) Freshwater Mussels Program** • 1:00 pm
Lake Woodruff NWR

02/20 (Thur) Waterfowl ID** • 11:00 am
Dixie Crossroads Seafood Restaurant, Titusville

02/22 (Sat) Titusville Chamber Ride it Down 6 • 8:00 am -

3:00 pm Downtown Titusville

02/22 (Sat) Lyonia Environmental Center Wildlife Festival Deltona

02/22 (Sat) David Sibley Talk*

Museum of Arts & Sciences, Daytona Beach

02/23 (Sun) Garden Club by the Sea 2025 Pollinator Fair

Nance Park, Indialantic

02/28 (Fri) Gopher Tortoise Education Day

Lake Woodruff NWR

*Early Access for MIWA Members **Advanced Registration Required

Village Inn Dine To Donate: 1/14 (Tues), 3/15 (Sat) - Titusville (4-9 pm)

MIWA MEMBERSHIP

The Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA) depends on membership support to assist us in providing the much needed additional funding for Merritt Island NWR programs. Joining is simple, just fill out this form and mail it to: MIWA P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781. You may also join online at www.miwarefuge.org. Thank you for supporting the Refuge and MIWA!

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	_New	_Renewal
16	Student	\$10
	Senior	\$20
	_ Individual	\$25
Mala	Family	\$50
1/	Tortoise	\$100
	Bobcat	\$250
~ P	atron Levels	Below ~
	Sea Turtle	\$500
	Otter	\$1,000
	Alligator	\$2,500
	Manatee	\$5,000
\$	Donation	
\$	Total	