



Summer 2026 Merritt Island Wildlife Association, Friends of the Merritt Island NWR Complex

Dilapidated to Durable: Lake Woodruff NWR Tick Island Dock Replaced by USFWS/ Union Sportsmen's Alliance Collaboration

by Sterling Valentine, Lake Woodruff NWR Manager

The dock on Tick Island, part of Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge, had reached a critical state after years of weathering and repeated piecemeal repairs. Key structural components including the X-bracing, ledger boards, beams, decking, and roof were extensively rotted, rendering the structure unsafe for staff, volunteers, researchers, and law enforcement officers. As the only reliable access point to Tick Island, the deteriorated dock had become a major barrier to refuge operations and public-use activities.

The estimated cost to fully repair the dock was \$320,000. Through innovation, strategic planning, and strong partnerships, the project was completed for under \$12,000, demonstrating efficiency and collaboration. With Lake Woodruff NWR staffed by only Refuge Manager Sterling Valentine and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Wildland Fire Engineering Equipment Operator Wes Allie, completing a project of this magnitude required substantial external support.

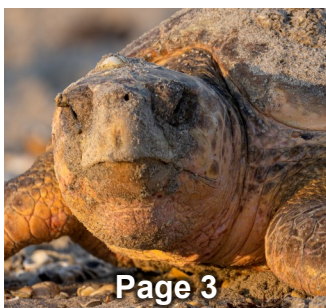
Valentine submitted the project in response to the FWS Infrastructure and Management Division's call for Union Sportsmen's Alliance (USA) project proposals, emphasizing both the urgent infrastructure need and

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Photos courtesy of USFWS

Lake Woodruff NWR Manager Sterling Valentine and Hontoon Island State Park Ranger Lauren Houghteling stand next to remnants of the old dock to be hauled offsite. Houghteling captained the barge which was integral to the project. The old dilapidated dock is shown below.



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MIWA President's Message



Have You Explored Lake Woodruff NWR?

While Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge is the gem of the Space Coast, did you know Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge is one of Central Florida's most important wildlife conservation areas? Established in 1964

Nancy Bray to protect migratory birds and wetland habitats, the Refuge lies along the St. Johns River near DeLeon Springs, about 25 miles west of Daytona Beach.

The Refuge encompasses approximately 21,574 acres of protected land and water. It was established primarily to offset the loss of wetlands in Central Florida and remains a crucial stopover and wintering area for migratory birds traveling the Atlantic Flyway, which makes it one of Florida's premier inland birding destinations. It also supports several federal and state-listed threatened and endangered species. More than 1,000 acres within the Refuge are designated wilderness areas, providing highly protected habitat with minimal human disturbance.

Lake Woodruff NWR contains a remarkable variety of habitats, including freshwater marshes; cypress and hardwood swamps; lakes, streams, and canals; pine flatwoods and uplands; river floodplain habitats; hammocks and forested wetlands. These diverse ecosystems create a critical link within a 70-mile conservation corridor along the St. Johns River. Lake Woodruff NWR's biodiversity supports an extraordinary concentration of wildlife while also providing opportunities for hiking, paddling, fishing, photography, and environmental education. While at Lake Woodruff you

might observe bald eagles, osprey, limpkins, alligators, manatees, black bear, river otters and numerous species of ducks, herons, egrets, ibis, and migratory songbirds. For residents of Central Florida, Lake Woodruff NWR represents one of the most significant protected wetland ecosystems in the St. Johns River basin and an important complement to Merritt Island NWR.

Beyond the natural beauty of both refuges lies a growing challenge: a shortage of resources needed to



effectively manage and protect these remarkable landscapes. Nationwide, the Refuge System has lost more than 800 permanent positions since 2011, reducing its workforce by nearly 30% while continuing to manage expanding conservation responsibilities.

These challenges can affect everything from habitat restoration and invasive species control to visitor services, environmental education, law enforcement, and infrastructure maintenance. As visitation increases and conservation needs become more complex, Refuge staff must do more with fewer resources. Deferred maintenance across the National Wildlife Refuge System has grown into the billions of dollars, creating backlogs for roads, trails, visitor facilities, water management infrastructure, and other essential assets.

Despite these challenges, Merritt Island NWR and Lake Woodruff NWR dedicated employees, volunteers, partners, and supporters continue to make a tremendous impact. The Merritt Island Wildlife Association (MIWA) is proud to support both refuges with advocacy, conservation, outreach and community programs. Volunteers contribute thousands of hours each year, helping maintain trails, assist visitors, and support conservation programs.

Volunteer efforts, however, cannot fully replace the trained professionals needed to manage some of the

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Donor Recognition

Special thanks to the following for their generous donations in support of the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex for the 3rd Quarter of 2026:

Alligator (\$2,500) Charlie Venuto

Bobcat (\$250) Space Coast Audubon Society
Lori Parsons

Gopher Tortoise (\$100) Bert & Val Alm
Tob Trickey

It's Turtle Time! Sea Turtle Program and Beach Walk

by Kim King-Wrenn
Merritt Island NWR Visitor Services Manager

We still have availability for our summer sea turtle programs in July. Join us to learn about the endangered sea turtles that nest on the Refuge. We'll begin with a program about sea turtle conservation followed by a trip to the beach for a chance to see a turtle lay her eggs. Programs are at 8:00 pm on Wednesday and Thursday nights in July. Tickets are \$25 for adults and \$10 for children (ages 8 and older). Space is limited. Use this link to reserve your spot:

<https://bit.ly/2026turtlewalks>



Photo by Shawn Quinn

Kids in Care Fishing Day Reels in the Smiles

by Rochelle Hood and Anna Harding

On May 2, 2026, the Merritt Island Wildlife Association and Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge welcomed children in foster care and their caregivers for a special Kids in Care Fishing Day. Through our ongoing partnership with Family Partnerships of Central Florida, families were invited to spend a morning outdoors learning the fundamentals of fishing while creating lasting memories together. Volunteers from Salt Strong and the Florida Fly Fishing Association joined Refuge staff and MIWA volunteers to teach fishing basics, help participants cast their lines, and share their passion for the outdoors. Participants also had the opportunity to observe fish up close in a fish identification tank, providing a hands-on introduction to aquatic wildlife found in Florida waters.

The excitement throughout the morning was contagious. You could see the joy in each child's eyes as they watched their bobbers dance across the water and reeled in their very first fish. As Ranger Anna Harding reflected, "I think the expression and the smiles on the kids and families' faces spoke volumes. I no-

ticed how many of the parents' shoulders were able to drop as volunteers assisted in teaching their kids." Allowing a safe space where kids are able to do something different that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to experience or learn is an important part of this program.

So many children were thrilled to catch their first fish, and that excitement never diminished as they landed their second, third, and sometimes even sixth fish of the day. The event was a powerful reminder of how outdoor experiences can build confidence, strengthen family connections, and create moments of pure joy that will be remembered long after the fishing lines were reeled in.



MIWA President's Message

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country's most important wildlife refuges. This [in-formative document](#) from the National Wildlife Refuge Association provides more details about the resource challenges. As a supporter of your Refuges, you can help by reaching out to your [elected officials](#) and urging them to restore funding

As our community enjoys the Refuges' wildlife and natural beauty, it is important to recognize the growing resource pressures facing these national treasures. Sustained investment in staffing, infrastructure, and conservation programs will be essential to ensure that Merritt Island NWR and Lake Woodruff NWR continue to protect wildlife and inspire future generations for decades to come.



Playalinda Brewing Co. Hosts Manatees, Mocktails & Music

Above: Current/retired Kennedy Space Center biologists Tim Kozusko and Becky Bolt educate patrons about the West Indian Manatee.

Left: There was a nice crowd on the patio of Playalinda Brewing Co. in Titusville for the Manatees, Mocktails and Music event. String Daddy played (guitar and violin).



Check out the new merchandise at
Nature's Treasures Gift Shop

Tuesday-Saturday • 9:00 am - 4:00 pm

*We have animal backpacks,
puppets, and ECO hats!
Don't forget to use your
MIWA member discount.*



Merritt Island NWR Visitor Center Hours

1987 Scrub Jay Way, Titusville
8:30 am - 4:00 pm • Tuesday through Saturday

(321) 861-0669



Lake Woodruff NWR Visitor Center Hours

Nature Center:
2045 Mud Lake Rd., DeLeon Springs
8:00 am - 4:00 pm Saturday and Sunday
Classroom: 4490 Grand Ave. DeLeon Springs

Tick Island Dock

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the refuge's opportunity to expand public engagement. Originally submitted in January 2026, the proposal highlighted Tick Island's potential to connect people with nature. Replacing the failed dock would not only restore safe access but also enable expanded public programs. Replacing the failed dock would not only restore safe access but also enable expanded public programs, educational opportunities, and youth engagement.

By February, USA had identified a crew of skilled volunteers from the International Brotherhood of Elec-

trical Workers 756 and 606, the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local Union 295, the International Union of Operating Engineers 673, and the Teamsters Local Union No. 385 who were ready to take on the work. In March, crew leads conducted a site visit to finalize logistics for the teardown and material transport, as the island is accessible only by boat. Just one month later, the project was completed. Their work exemplified the core principles of USA's mission and vision.

These volunteers brought professional trade skills, dedication to public lands, and a passion for conservation. Their efforts allowed the Tick Island dock replacement to be completed safely, efficiently, and at a fraction of the projected cost. In addition to replacing the dock, the crew also repaired the entrance fence and restored the steps to the cabin, accomplishing all of it within a weekend.

Critical on-the-ground support came from Blue Springs State Park and Hontoon Island State Park, whose staff transported materials 14 nautical miles one way aboard a barge. They delivered supplies, provided a stable working platform on the water, and hauled debris off the island. These contributions were essential to the project's success.

When Valentine reached out to Blue Springs State Park, Park Manager Dustin Allen and his staff immediately stepped in, offering planning and logistical support. They also provided hands-on assistance through Park Ranger Lauren Houghteling and volunteer Maximilian Yakelewicz. Their efforts, combined with support from De Leon Springs State Park, were crucial in keeping the project moving efficiently and safely.

This project is far more than an infrastructure upgrade; it stands as a powerful demonstration of what dedicated partners can achieve together. The collaboration harnessed the expertise of skilled volunteers, strengthened public support for conservation, and reinforced stewardship, all while advancing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's mission to connect people with nature.

Photos courtesy of USFWS



Above: Crew replaced the old Tick Island dock with a new floating dock.

Below/Right: Crews replaced the boards and restabilized the fence at the entrance to Tick Island.



Daisy Girl Scouts Earn Animal Observer Badge



Brandi Trantham, Merritt Island NWR Park Ranger - Visitor Services Specialist, led a US Fish and Wildlife Service workshop to support Daisy Girl Scouts earning their Animal Observer Badge. Girl Scouts explored the refuge, observed local wildlife, and learned how to respectfully watch animals in their natural habitats. This hands-on experience inspired a love of nature and animals. The Scouts enjoyed guided observations and an outdoor adventure with fellow Daisies.



Girl Scout Installs Monofilament Recycling Tubes at Lake Woodruff NWR

Brynn Rust recently installed monofilament recycling tubes at Lake Woodruff NWR for her Silver Award project. The Silver Award, for Girl Scouts in grades 6-8, cultivates leadership in girls and addresses important community issues. Monofilament recycling tubes provide places to recycle excess fishing line. They can be found at beaches, lakes, piers and other locations frequented by anglers. If there's nowhere for the fishing line to be recycled, it can end up polluting our waterways and harming wildlife. The Merritt Island Wildlife Association gladly supported this worthwhile project.



Behind the Burrow: Gopher Tortoise Day at Archbold

by Nick Mauck and Rochelle Hood

For Gopher Tortoise Appreciation Day, MIWA had the privilege to tour and go into the field at Archbold Biological Station in Highlands County. Upon arrival, Rachel Fedders, a research assistant at Archbold gave a presentation on Archbold's conservation history. Archbold performs prescribed burns every 2-5 years on their sandhill ecosystems. Seminole tribes have done patchy burn patterns for centuries to allow a refuge for animals and have seen higher success in organism populations across the burn locations.

Burns provide critical nutrient cycling and keep sandhill ecosystems free from woody plants. Gopher tortoises need well drained, sandy soil, with herbaceous plants, scattered shrub cover, and a sparse open canopy to successfully burrow. Prescribed burns help with natural maintenance and keep spaces clear for gopher tortoises to burrow.



Male and female tortoises will create individual burrows, creating up to four different burrows a year. Burrows are approximately 10 feet deep and 40 feet long for a fully grown adult. Gopher tortoise size and burrows have been found to be correlated; the width of a burrow entrance is almost identical to the length of the tortoise.

After our presentation we visited Archbold's research site 'The Red Hills,' where they have been documenting, tracking, and recording gopher tortoise data since 1967. Dr. Betsie Rothermel has been researching gopher tortoises at Archbold since 2008 and is the current program director of herpetology.

Dr. Rothermel engaged MIWA members on a very

detailed and educational tour of her research locations. The group learned about species identification techniques, tracking protocols, and current research monitoring Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD).

One of the unique skills that Dr. Rothermel showed was being able to age tortoises while they were alive. Similar to counting tree rings, gopher tortoises will show growth rings on their ventrum scoots. Until the age of 10 this is an effective way to age a gopher tortoise. After 10 years old, the now adult will have worn down the scoots so that the rings cannot be identified with enough accuracy.

After meeting with Dr. Rothermel, MIWA sat down with Education Program Director Dustin Angell, who shared insights into Archbold's history, conservation priorities, and long-term vision. Dustin shared insights into future research plans at Archbold, the station's connections to local Indigenous communities, and the expansion of its educational programs.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Gopher Tortoise Council, program participants reinforced their learning along the journey by playing Gopher Tortoise Bingo – Habitat Edition, Gopher Tortoise Myth or Fact, and the Burrow Buddies Memory Game.

Gopher Tortoise Appreciation Day celebrates one of Florida's most important wildlife species and highlights the need to protect the habitats on which it depends. As a keystone species, the gopher tortoise supports an entire community of wildlife, making its conservation critical to the health of Florida's natural ecosystems. We thank Archbold Biological Station and the Gopher Tortoise Council for their partnership and support in making this memorable learning experience possible.





Meet The Interns!

MIWA provides funding for refuge interns.

Baylie Reisch Merritt Island NWR Sea Turtle Intern

My name is Baylie Reisch, and I was born and raised in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I recently graduated summa cum laude from the University of Florida, where I earned a B.S. in Zoology with minors in Religion as well as Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. During my time at UF, I conducted environmental toxicology research with an emphasis on microplastics. Last year, I had the opportunity to conduct sea turtle nesting surveys with Clearwater Marine Aquarium, an experience that prepared me well for my current internship with the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with the refuge and appreciate MIWA's support as I continue to grow in my conservation career.



Laken Holcomb-Kreiner Lake Woodruff NWR Conservation and Education Intern



Hello there everyone! My name is Laken Holcomb-Kreiner and I am the summer 2026 intern at Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge. I'm here all the way from Louisville Kentucky, so I'm excited to get to be in a new environment with new faces as I learn and work. I've always loved going for hikes, particularly through mountains and valleys where you can see the land rise and fall all around you like a breathing giant. I've spent a good portion of my life in West Virginia surrounded by the Appalachian Mountains.

I'm currently a junior at Hanover College in Southern Indiana where I'm a dual major in Biology and German. As this is my first job related to biology, I look forward to seeing many different possible careers I could go into in the future and learning what makes people love them. I'm also looking forward to a great summer here in Florida, I'll be here at Lake Woodruff NWR and am always happy to chat with anyone. See you around!

Lauren Lombardi, Merritt Island NWR Sea Turtle Intern

Hi! I'm Lauren Lombardi, born and raised in South Florida. I'm a senior at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) studying Environmental Studies with a concentration in Ecology and Environmental Assessment. In addition to school, I have been a member of the FGCU Women's Lacrosse Club for the past 3 years. I'm passionate about conservation and protecting threatened species. Besides working with sea turtles, I also work with juvenile sharks in Naples, Florida. I'm so excited to be working with the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge this summer!



Casting for Fun at 2nd Annual Community Fishing Day

by Laken Holcomb-Kreiner, Jan Saczawa,
and Rochelle Hood

On Saturday, June 13th, more than 100 guests from Volusia County and beyond gathered at Lake Woodruff NWR for our 2nd Annual Community Fishing Day, coinciding with FWC's freshwater fishing license-free weekend. It was a chance for visitors of all ages and abilities, from first-time casters to veteran anglers, to pick up a rod and have some fun.

Due to gracious donations, the refuge was able to provide all the fishing gear, tackle, and bait at no cost. We were also blessed to have donations of port-a-potty and hand-washing stations (an important part of fun and safe outdoor experience!), Root Pouches (sustainable bags that can be used as biodegradable plant pots) filled with goodies from local businesses, and nature themed door prizes.

Refuge volunteers provided ethical angler education and guided guests on how to bait hooks and cast. Youngsters, and those young at heart, enjoying a land based casting game where the fish are always biting. Thanks to the generous donation from Aqua-Mart Aquariums in Port St. John anglers were able to view fish up close and personal to practice their identification skills.

Nestled in the shade of trees bordering the pond, a

wonderful array of exhibitors added to the day, providing information on local recreational activities and hands-on conservation learning. Community Partners included Mighty River Recovery, *Southern States Fishin' and Huntin' Magazine*, River of Lakes Heritage Corridor, Save the Manatee Club, Mid-Coast Fly Fishers, and Volusia County, along with volunteer-staffed Fishing Basics, Animal Pelts and Skulls, Arts and Crafts, and Sustainability tents. Participants who visited the education stations were able to stamp their event passport for a chance to win a door prize. Special thanks to Mighty River Recovery and VyStar Credit Union for sharing dedicated community service volunteers who helped make the day such a success.

The excitement began well before the first line was cast, with 180 people registering to attend Community Fishing Day. On event day, 80 guests enjoyed hands-on fishing and conservation activities, supported by 39 enthusiastic volunteers. Together, they helped create an experience that introduced new anglers to fishing, strengthened connections to Florida's public lands, and inspired participants to become lifelong stewards of the waters they enjoy.

**Save the Date for next year's 3rd Annual
Community Fishing Day on June 12th 2027.**



321-507-4428

7135 N Highway 1
Port Saint John, FL 32927



Summer Is For Babies

Text and photos by Paul Leader

The human snowbirds have gone north. The White Pelicans and almost all of the ducks have gone north. The wildlife drive at Black Point in the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, which is usually crowded with birders and photographers at sunrise, is empty except for a few die hard locals. Mosquitoes, no-see-ums, deer flies and 85 degree weather at 8 o'clock in the morning greet the few of us brave enough to visit the refuge. Why would we torture ourselves? We do it for the babies!

While sea turtle babies emerge under the cover of darkness, and alligator babies are guarded by their mother, many species of birds hatch quickly. The challenge first is to find a nest with eggs in it. With any luck you will be treated to baby birds to watch and photograph.

Black-necked Stilt babies, little grey puff balls with long legs, start to feed the first day after hatching. Clapper Rails, camouflaged in black fuzz, run in and out of the mangroves just like their parents. Other precocious species such as Killdeer, Purple and Common Gallinules also learn to feed themselves and survive in the wild.

Anhinga babies are waiting in the nest for their parents to return with food. They fight with their siblings for the opportunity to eat. The lucky one puts their bill down the throat of their parent which triggers the adult to regurgitate the meal. Roseate Spoonbills get fed in a similar fashion. Both Anhinga and Spoonbill parents feed their broods of two to four babies for approximately four weeks when the young ones leave the nest. They follow their parents around after that and even though they are able to feed themselves, they continue to beg from their parents. Usually the parents give in and feed them.

At around the same time Osprey babies are beginning to flap their wings and tentatively lift slightly off the nest, until eventually they lift completely from the nest on their first flight.

They will continue to come back to the nest for a while and then be gone for good.

We once had a great time with a Black-necked Stilt nest at Black Point Wildlife Drive. We found the nest when the adults were building it so we knew when the eggs were laid and when incubation started (we could see the eggs from the road). It was April, so the temperature and bugs were not at their peak.

We checked the nest periodically. Finally one of the four eggs hatched. Eventually all four had hatched and gone together into the mangroves. We missed what would have been a great parting photo. It was still a wonderful experience.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service recommends using your car as a blind if you see a nest visible from the road, being quiet and not playing bird calls. All of these actions serve to keep the nest safe from predators and not disrupt the busy parents that are working hard to raise the next generation.

Come to the refuge in late spring and summer. Bring sunscreen, insect repellent, lots of water, your camera and/or binoculars and lots of patience. Have fun with the babies!



Out & About With MIWA

MIWA stays busy with community outreach and education events, fundraisers and members-only field trips. We need you to help us help the Merritt Island NWR Complex.

Consider joining our family!

1), 7) & 8) Kids in Care Fishing Day; 2) & 15) Manatees, Mocktails & Music at Playalinda Brewing Co.; 3) & 16) MIWA Members Only Archbold Biological Station - Gopher Tortoise Day Field Trip; 4) & 6) The Art of Wildlife in Watercolor workshop; 5), 9) & 12) Culver's Fundraiser in Titusville; 10) Discover Archery Day at Lake Woodruff NWR; 11) & 13) May Day for Pollinators: Butterflies & Nature in Bloom; 14) 2nd Annual Community Fishing Day at Lake Woodruff NWR



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Calendar of Events



- 07/25 (Sat)** **Commemorating America 250 with Crochet**
 Merritt Island NWR Visitor Center Auditorium
- 07/31 (Fri)** **Leap Into Discovery: Florida Frogs After Dark**
 Lake Woodruff NWR **FULL**
- 08/14 (Fri)** **Arrr You Ready to Bingo**
 Port Orange Adult Activity Center (55+ only)
- 08/15 (Sat)** **8th Annual North Central Florida Outdoor Expo**
 World Equestrian Center, Ocala
- 09/22 (Tues)** **Village Inn Dine To Donate**
 Titusville • 4-8 pm
- 09/28 (Mon)** **Culver's Fundraiser**
 Titusville



Sea Turtle Program and Beach Walk at Playalinda Beach*
Wednesdays & Thursdays in July
 Merritt Island NWR Visitor Center Auditorium • 8:00 pm
 *Reservations required <https://bit.ly/2026turtlewalks>

Tickets from the Sea Turtle Walks fund our Sea Turtle Interns
Thank You for Your Support!



MIWA: Celebrating Our Supporters
Saturday, November 14, 2026
Brevard Veterans Memorial Center

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 Complex programs. Joining is simple, just fill out this form and mail to: MIWA P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781. You may also join online at www.miwarefuge.org or fill out an application at Nature's Treasures Gift Shop in the Merritt Island NWR Visitor Center. Thank you for supporting our NWRs and MIWA!

Name (s): _____

Address: _____

City: _____ **State:** _____ **Zip:** _____

Phone: _____ **E-mail:** _____

I want to pay my membership via:

___ Check ___ Money Order ___ Visa ___ MC ___ Discover ___ AMX

Please make checks and money orders payable to "MIWA"

CC #: _____

Exp. Date: ____/____/____ **CVV:** _____ **Billing Zip:** _____

Signature: _____ ☐

___ New ___ Renewal

___ Student	\$10
___ Senior	\$20
___ Individual	\$25
___ Family	\$50
___ Tortoise	\$100
___ Bobcat	\$250
~ Patron Levels Below ~	
___ Sea Turtle	\$500
___ Otter	\$1,000
___ Alligator	\$2,500
___ Manatee	\$5,000

\$ _____ Donation

\$ _____ Total