

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption for BNS: Black-necked stilts last year at Bailey Tract, photo courtesy of Terry Baldwin

Caption for WELCOMESIGN: The main entrance to Bailey Tract trails

‘Ding’ Darling biologist speaks on benefits of Bailey Tract restoration

Due to the high level of public interest, the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge held three additional public meetings on April 20 and 23 about the hydrologic restoration project at the Bailey Tract. The meetings went into more detail about the restoration than one held previously in February.

Plans for the Bailey Tract restoration involve filling the Ani Pond, reconnecting wetland habitat, and other hydrologic enhancements for the benefit of secretive marsh birds, turtles, alligators, the endemic and state-threatened Sanibel Island rice rat, and other species dependent on spartina, aka cordgrass, marsh habitats.

At the three meetings, refuge biologist Jeremy Conrad explained the history of Sanibel, its marshes, and the impact of development on cordgrass habitat. He described Bailey Tract as a “microcosm for the greater Everglades system” that has lost nearly half of its marshlands, meaning that hardwood trees have moved in. Upland hardwood forest means owls; owls mean the decimation of native rat species, which spend their entire life in the marsh.

“But it’s not that we’re filling in a pond for a rat,” Conrad said. “We don’t manage for a single species. The Sanibel Island rice rat is just the face of this restoration.”

“The restoration will benefit a number of the wading and migratory birds and other species that call the Bailey Tract home,” said Wildlife Refuge Manager Paul Tritaik. “It has been on the refuge’s priority list since 2010. When the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) presented a grant funding opportunity for restoration based on the needs of state-listed species, the Sanibel Island rice rat,

also a federal candidate under review for listing under the Endangered Species Act, was the perfect cause.”

Most of the habitat in the Bailey Tract has been highly altered by human activities, and the restoration is intended to help fix a small portion of that. It will lower artificially constructed berms and use the fill to restore the surface elevation and habitat in and around Ani Pond to that of the surrounding marsh. Currently the artificially dug pond is robbing the marshlands of their water at a rate of up to 10,000 gallons a day, said Conrad.

“Managers of public conservation lands such as Bailey Tract always need to do more than just maintain the ecological integrity and functions of lands that are already in healthy, natural states,” commented Dr. Kenneth Meyer, executive director at Avian Research and Conservation Institute in Gainesville, Fla. “They also must identify, design, fund, and successfully recover sites that need restoration, usually because natural conditions have been altered, disturbed, or destroyed by human activities.

The refuge tract has seen black-necked stilt nesting activity last year and this spring at Ani Pond, where the restoration efforts will be concentrated. Island birders have expressed concern that the restoration would disrupt the pattern.

“That nesting activity has been the result of severe droughts over the last two winters that unusually dried up the pond and made the habitat conditions more conducive to stilt nesting,” said Tritaik. “Fortunately, black-necked stilts can commonly be seen nesting in other ponds in the Bailey Tract that will remain in their current condition.”

The refuge originally had planned to close Bailey Tract to begin restoration work by mid-April, but has postponed the project because of the black-necked stilt nesting activity. Work will begin once the chicks have fledged and refuge biologists and FWS deem it safe to do so for the welfare of the birds.

“First and foremost, we don’t have any intention to disturb the birds when they’re nesting,” Deputy Refuge Manager Nate Caswell assured those gathered at the first public meeting on April 20. “That would be pretty contradictory to what we do here.”

“The purpose of this restoration is to enhance habitat for multiple trust species, and the Ani Pond provides the most feasible opportunity to do that,” said Tritaik. “Fortunately, we have multiple ponds in the Bailey Tract that are more attractive to wildlife and generally offer better viewing opportunities. For that reason, we are keeping one portion of the Ani Pond Trail that looks out over the Mangrove Head Pond.”

For any questions about the Bailey Tract restoration, contact Caswell at 239-472-1100 ext 225.

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