

## **How Florida's National Wildlife Refuges Impact Everglades Restoration**

by Sarah Ashton & Jim Metzler, DDWS Advocacy Committee Co-Chairs

The Everglades Coalition (EVCO) is an alliance of more than 60 local, state, and national organizations dedicated to the full restoration of the greater Everglades ecosystem. In a recent [article](#) we discussed some of the reasons why Everglades restoration is of particular importance to both the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge and to all of us who live in Southwest Florida.

In January, EVCO hosted its 35th Annual Everglades Coalition Conference at the South Seas Island Resort in Captiva, Florida. At the conference, Jim Metzler, co-chair of the Society's advocacy committee, moderated a panel that discussed the ways that the 17 National Wildlife Refuges that are within the Everglades restoration footprint impact Everglades restoration. This article will summarize what was said about five of those refuges

### **Background**

While there are many similarities amongst Florida's national wildlife refuges, there are also many differences. As highlighted below, they differ on purpose, size, number of annual visitors, and common management actions.

#### [The "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge](#)

The purpose of the "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, which was established in 1945, is to be a sanctuary for migratory birds. It contains 6,406 acres and gets almost one million visitors a year. Because of the volume of visitors, a major impact of the Refuge is environmental education. For example, on an annual basis, more than 5,000 school children are bussed to the Refuge for a day of education. Visitors to the Refuge also enjoy fishing and biking, as well as observing and taking pictures of the wildlife.

Common management actions include:

- Removal of invasive plants;
- Restoration of hydrology;
- Management of migratory birds;
- Restoration of native habitat.

#### [The National Key Deer Refuge](#)

As the name implies, the primary purpose of this refuge, which was established in 1957, is to protect Key Deer. The Refuge consists of 9,000 acres of land and 76,000 acres of water. It gets 80,000 visitors a year who fish, observe and photograph wildlife, and partake in environmental education.

Common management actions include:

- Prescribed burns;
- Removal of exotics;

- Biological monitoring.

### [Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area](#)

This Refuge, which was established in 2012, is the 556th and, until recently, the newest member of the U.S. National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge began with the donation of 10 acres, currently consists of almost 4,000 acres, and is targeted to grow to be as large as 50,000 acres. The conservation area that is associated with the refuge, currently consisting of more than 5,000 acres, is targeted to grow to be as large as 100,000 acres. The conservation area consists of easements on working ranches in the Everglades system that are funded by programs such as Florida's [Rural and Family Lands Protection Program](#).

One of the purposes of this refuge and conservation area is to develop partnerships to assist in conserving important pieces of land in the Kissimmee Prairie region. Other purposes include protecting the [Everglades headwaters](#), providing corridors and habitats for wildlife, offering environmental education, and providing opportunities for fishing and hunting. To meet these purposes, one of its management actions is to provide hunting and fishing programs that are administered in conjunction with Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

### [Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge](#)

Called the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge when it was established in 1951, this refuge is comprised of 145,000 acres. The purpose of the refuge is to provide a sanctuary and varying forms of support for migratory birds. It hosts more than 400,000 visitors a year who enjoy fishing, hunting, bike riding, hiking, environmental education, photography, guided tours, and boating. On an annual basis, more than 5,000 school children come by bus to the refuge for a day of education.

Common management actions include:

- Prescribed burns;
- Exotic plant control;
- Water quality monitoring;
- Research.

### [Florida Panther Wildlife Refuge](#)

This Refuge was established in 1989 and is comprised of 26,000 acres. As the name implies, its purpose is to enable the recovery of the Florida Panther. The refuge hosts 5,000 visitors a year who enjoy hiking, wildlife observation, and photography. The Refuge served as a research site for [the South Florida Deer Study](#), which culminated its fieldwork in January 2019.

Common management activities include:

- Prescribed burns;
- Invasive plant control;
- Restoration of pine flatwoods.

### **Conclusion**

As pointed out by Jim Metzler when he introduced the panel, the National Wildlife Refuge System is the [Rodney Dangerfield](#) of conservation. By that he meant that similar to Dangerfield, the National Wildlife

Refuge System does not get enough respect for its contribution to conservation in general and restoring the Everglades in particular.

As highlighted by the previously mentioned panel discussion at the EVCO conference, and summarized in this article, national wildlife refuges perform a number of key conservation tasks including controlling the growth of invasive plants, conducting prescribed burns, enabling the recovery of endangered species, and providing a sanctuary for a wide range of wildlife. They also perform the critical task of educating the public on the opportunities and challenges associated with conserving our environment.

You can view the EVCO panel discussion [here](#).

**In Case You Missed It:** Sanibel resident Chauncey Goss shares his perspective as the Chair of the South Florida Water Management District on where we stand on some key water-related issues. See [here](#).