

Voices for Nature

News from the Friends of the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges



Photo: Claudine Bartels

Spring-Summer 2026 • vol 7 • issue 1

Crocodile Lake • National Key Deer • Great White Heron • Key West

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PHOTO SPOTLIGHT

GALAXY GUMBO

By Claudine Bartels

This gumbo limbo tree was still recovering from Hurricane Irma, and looked like a bonsai with its scraggly branches reaching for the stars. Clouds moved across the horizon, and the wind was blowing, which created a blurred, ghostly effect on the leaves and branches. Lights from a luckily timed golf cart lit up the bark beautifully. In addition, nearby light pollution provided just enough glow to highlight the foreground. I only had time to take this one image — it was the last shot of the night. Settings: Nikon z8, f/2.8, 20 seconds, ISO 4000, 14mm, tripod, exposure delay mode. **For more about dark skies of the Keys, see page 6.**

A WORD FROM THE BIG BIRD

Now that “the season” has wound down and things are a little quieter after the busy winter months, I sat down to write a simple thank you to the people who help make the Florida Keys Wildlife Society what it is. But as I started thinking about everyone who contributes, I quickly realized there are just too many to name without risking leaving someone out. So, I hope you all know who you are!

Our volunteers support the Refuges and FKWS in countless ways. They staff the Nature Store and the Nature Center, care for our members, manage our website and publicity, contribute to our newsletter, and work on projects around the Refuges. They coordinate and guide kayak tours, organize and staff the Run With Deer 5K, and help with educational events throughout the Keys. They apply for grants, keep an eye

on our financials, thank donors, and organize (and bake for!) our lecture series. They purchase materials for Refuge projects and the Nature Center, coordinate and staff Native Plant Day—which we fervently hope will return in 2026— and perhaps most importantly, coordinate other volunteers. Our volunteers are passionate ambassadors for FKWS, the Refuges, and the flora and fauna of the Keys.

As you can see, it truly takes a village. And I truly love my village, because they—like me, and like you—love the wild spaces that make the Florida Keys so unique.

— Kathy Rhodes,

Florida Keys Wildlife Society Chair



FLORIDA KEYS WILDLIFE SOCIETY

We are the official friends group of the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to support the Keys’ four NWRs — Crocodile Lake, National Key Deer, Great White Heron, and Key West — through education, non-adversarial advocacy, volunteerism, and fundraising.

The National Wildlife Refuge System, within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, protects wildlife and habitat on more than 150 million acres of land and water from the Caribbean to the Pacific, Maine to Alaska. Refuges improve human health, provide outdoor recreation, and support local economies. For more on NWRs, see www.fws.gov/refuges.

The mission of the USFWS is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. They are known for scientific excellence and stewardship of lands. For more, see www.fws.gov.

Florida Keys Wildlife Society:

Nature Store: 30587 Overseas Hwy., Big Pine Key, FL 33043. Mailing: P.O. Box 431840, Big Pine Key, 33043; 305-872-0645; www.FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org, info@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org

Nature Center:

30587 Overseas Hwy., Big Pine Key, FL 33043

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 Vice Chair: Susie Shimamoto
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 Newsletter: Karuna Eberl

We encourage all nature lovers to get involved. For volunteering info, scan the QR code; also see page 16 for membership/volunteer ops. © May 2026, Florida Keys Wildlife Society.



GOOD NEWS FROM THE REFUGES

2025: A TRASHY YEAR, IN A GOOD WAY

REFUGES CLEANUPS ABOUNDED

In a little over a year, with the help of numerous organizations and 282 volunteers, more than 30,806 pounds of marine debris — including 190 derelict traps, 36,208 feet of commercial trapline, and more than 300 light bulbs — have been removed from National Key Deer Refuge and the Great White Heron and Key West National Wildlife Refuges.

Events included the Annual Reef Relief Refuge Rodeo at Key West NWR, Long Beach cleanups led by Coastlove and Reef Relief, mangrove cleanups on Saddlebunch Trail led by Reef Relief, mangrove cleanups at Great White Heron NWR led by the Conch Republic Marine Army, two week-long events sponsored by the FWC Marine Debris Program, NOAA Marine Debris Program surveys at Key West NWR, and even our first interagency marine debris workday with support from FWC Division of Habitat & Species Conservation, FWC FWRI, NOAA Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, FDEP, state and federal law enforcement, and extra assistance from CRMA.

March 9, 2026 marked the Second Annual Reef Relief Refuge Rodeo. Participation jumped from 22 volunteers in 2025 to 37 this year, and trash removed rocketed from 2,860 pounds to 4,890 pounds. This cleanup is particularly important for sea turtles.

“Each year we lose critical sea turtle nesting habitat to beach erosion and rising sea levels,” says Refuges biologist Heather Stewart. “When the remaining shoreline is covered in marine debris, such as abandoned lobster traps and commercial trapline, it can block female turtles from nesting and even cause dangerous entanglements. Debris also creates obstacles for hatchlings, increasing the time it takes to reach the ocean, which increases the probability of predation. We are grateful to have a community that cares about our wilderness areas and helps us protect the Keys and the wildlife our islands support.”

In addition to amazing partners like Reef Relief, Conch Republic Marine Army, and Coastlove, cleanup events have been made possible thanks to Big Pine Key RV Park, multiple local charter operators, Key West Harbor Services, Tow Boat US Key West, Waste Management, and the City of Key West. Derelict trap removal is being conducted under permitting with FWC.

Photos: Second Annual Reef Relief Refuge Rodeo. Credit: Heather Stewart.



CONGRATS, CLARK!

The Community Foundation of the Florida Keys honored FKWS board member Clark Boggs with their Unsung Hero award. Clark is one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet, and one of the most quietly impactful.

He volunteered with Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge for many years, supporting the Refuge’s work by removing invasive plants, building woodrat nesting areas, enhancing crocodile nesting areas, and stepping in wherever help was needed. As the physical demands of fieldwork became more challenging, Clark simply found another way to serve. In 2015, he joined the Board of

Directors of the Florida Keys Wildlife Society, where he has truly found his calling as one of our most dedicated ambassadors and most effective fundraisers. In his characteristically understated way, Clark represents FKWS and the Keys’ wildlife with warmth, integrity, and unwavering commitment.

Clark even coined our byline: “Making the Keys a little better place to live.” Few phrases better reflect both our mission and Clark himself.

Here’s just one small example of the kind of person he is: when Shirley Gun received our Unsung Hero Award, Clark drove all the way from Key Largo to Key West, simply to be there in support of his fellow board member.

In his understated way, Clark is always there—always willing, always supportive, and always ready to do whatever is needed, whenever it is needed.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF THE FLORIDA KEYS

26 YEARS UNSUNG HEROES

WANT TO HELP OUR KEYS COMMUNITY? FIND OUT HOW AT

CFFK.ORG

VOLUNTEER OF THE WEEK

CLARK BOGGS
FLORIDA KEYS WILDLIFE SOCIETY



FULL MOON KAYAK SCHEDULE

- October 24, 2026, Saturday, 5:15 to 7:15 p.m.
- November 22, Sunday, 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.
- December 22, Tuesday, 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.
- January 20, 2027, Wednesday, 4:15 to 6:15 p.m.
- February 21, Sunday, 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.
- March 20, Saturday, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.
- April 19, Monday, 6:15 to 8:15 p.m.

Photo: Brewster Rhoads.

BEHIND THE CURTAINS: WHY WE USE SPECIAL USE PERMITS & HOW MUCH THEY HELP

By Ranger Katy

Special Use Permits allow people and organizations — such as the Conch Republic Marine Army, and many others — to work in partnership with the Refuges to conduct cleanup events. This permit program is awesome because it benefits the Refuge, while also easing the planning and hosting burden on our already limited staff.

Of course, setting up the permits takes time and careful coordination to ensure the Refuges' mission is upheld. That's where Heather Stewart comes in. As the biologist for National Key Deer

Refuge, she reviews each application, taking ecological impacts into consideration. For example, we do not allow folks to dig under the sand during sea turtle nesting season — while washed-in rope and other debris is important to clean up, it's more important not to disturb the turtle nests!

Heather often joins in on some of the clean ups, too, to ensure that sensitive areas are being protected. Great job, Heather! We appreciate all that you do, and our special use partners, too!



WELCOME TO OUR NEW BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEMBERS

BREWSTER RHOADS

You might know Brewster from his many years of volunteering at FKWS events, including the Full Moon Kayak and Run with Deer 5K. "They are great ways to introduce residents and visitors alike to the beauty and biodiversity of the Keys," he says.

Before buying his home on Big Pine Key in 1999, Brewster had visited the Keys every year since 1971. "I am an avid kayaker, cyclist and angler, and I love being able to do these activities throughout the winter," he says.

Brewster comes to the board with a lifetime of experience as an environmental advocate, campaign manager, and non-profit executive. We particularly got a smile from the tagline on his resume: "Doing my best to make the world a little more just, peaceful, healthy, equitable and sustainable."

As for this next role, he says "I am excited to join the board of the FKWS. I look forward to helping with marketing, fundraising, and whatever else I can do to be helpful."



PHIL DODDERIDGE

Most Saturdays you can find Phil at the Blue Hole in National Key Deer Refuge, welcoming Keys' residents and tourists alike. He also organizes the photo club's annual calendar (look for the 2027 edition in early autumn).

"I am a wildlife photographer and, as President of the FKWS Photo Club, a staunch supporter of both the Florida Keys Wildlife Refuges and the FKWS," he says. "I am thrilled to be joining the Florida Keys Wildlife Society board."

Phil moved to the Keys from Northern Virginia 15 years ago, and firmly believes in supporting local environmental and civic organizations. He's a current board member and past president of the Big Pine Bocce League. He also served as the Vice Chair of the Florida Keys Democrats from 2017 through 2024.



VOLUNTEER WITH THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

We're always looking for passionate nature enthusiasts to join our team of volunteers. If you love the idea of supporting your local National Wildlife Refuge and meeting people from all over the world, consider volunteering with us. Whether it's helping out at events like Native Plant Day or assisting in our store, there are plenty of ways to get involved. For more information, stop by the Nature Store or message: info@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org.



THE RETURN OF THE INDIGO: FIRST SIGHTING OF RARE SNAKE IN KEY LARGO SINCE 1998

By Isabella Collamati, Biologist, Crocodile Lake

On February 7, Crocodile Lake volunteer Isaac Lord was searching for invasive Burmese pythons in a private yard when a large snake stopped him in his tracks. Unlike the giraffe-patterned pythons he was looking for, the six-and-a-half-foot snake basking in the sun before him was a sleek jet black, with blue hues reflecting off the iridescent scales and a faint patch of red under the chin. An avid herpetologist, he knew immediately he was looking at an Eastern indigo snake, yet still could not believe his eyes.

This was the first sighting of an indigo snake in Key Largo since one was found hit by a car in 1998. Indigos throughout their range have been facing population decline due to habitat loss, and, nearly 30 years later, this individual was a prime example of the challenges they face, nestled in a busy neighborhood with construction projects on either side of the property.

While we were concerned for the safety of this individual, being a federally threatened species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), extra consideration had to be given before taking any steps to relocate. The ESA is an extremely important law that protects species at risk of extinction, designating critical habitat, planning recovery, and prohibiting any "take" or harm of listed species.

To gather more information, we deployed trail cameras and began communication with the USFWS species lead for Eastern indigo snakes. As an added bonus for Isaac (and the environment), about 20 minutes after this historic discovery, he finished the day by capturing an eight-and-a-half-foot Burmese python on the same property.

Fast forward a week, after repeated sightings of the snake on cameras, and assessing the threat of a highly urban setting, the decision was made to capture and relocate this unique individual. On February 13, those efforts were a success!

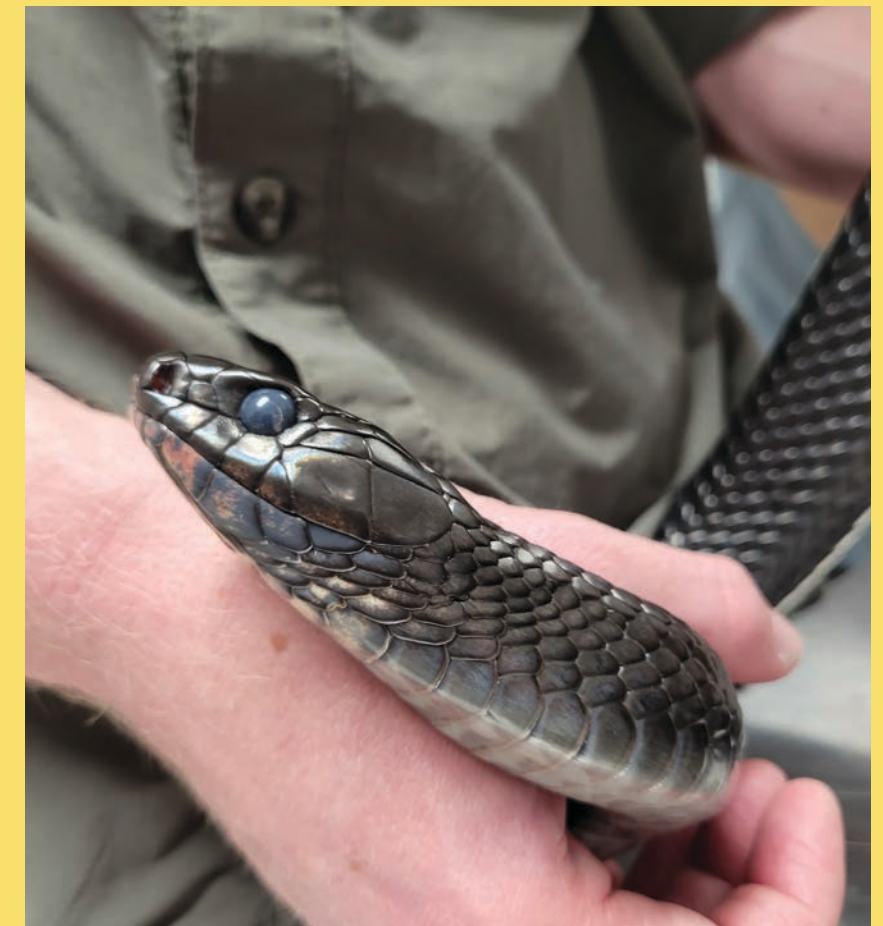
CLNWR staff transported the snake back to Refuge headquarters to do a wellness assessment, take measurements, and note any unique markings that could help identify the individual in the future. When all of the appropriate data was collected, the indigo (determined to be male) was moved to his new home on CLNWR, far from the road, and in a suitable habitat with trail cameras that will help us with long-term monitoring of the individual.

Photo: Eastern indigo snake, held by technician Isaac Lord. Credit: Isabella Collamati.

The sight of yet another snake in the Keys may not seem like a good thing amidst all of the bad press pythons have brought to Florida, but the return of the indigo is actually a glimmer of hope for the ecosystem. First and foremost, Eastern indigos are native and have lived in the Keys for thousands of years. They are nonvenomous and, while they grow to large sizes (around eight feet, making it the longest native snake in North America), indigos are known for their calm demeanor, meaning they are of no threat to humans.

Most interestingly, while indigos eat small rodents and reptiles, like many other snakes, a significant portion of their diet also consists of other snakes, including juvenile Burmese pythons. One individual is not going to clean out the python population, nor will it be able to restore the Keys' indigo population, but it does spark the hope that maybe he is one of many that have been hiding in places we didn't think to look, or maybe the first in a while to swim across from the mainland. Regardless of how he got here, we're glad he made it to Croc Lake.

Also, a re-survey of the area a week later resulted in finding an indigo shed! That shed has since been sent to a lab for genetic testing and to see what else we can find out.



THE FLORIDA KEYS NIGHT SKY, A COSMIC WILDERNESS

By Kristie Killam, Retired Refuges Park Ranger

A little over a year ago, I had the pleasure of sailing with friends (we call ourselves the Scallywags) to the Marquesas Keys, a beautiful mangrove atoll within Key West National Wildlife Refuge. We spent the weekend exploring, fishing, and simply enjoying nature. As we sailed home, cloudy skies cleared, and as the sun went down, we waited in anticipation for the evening show.

A cosmic wilderness of planets, stars, and galaxies became visible. These same stars have helped sailors navigate for thousands of years. An hour into the darkness, we witnessed an amazing meteor that held our gaze for at least seven seconds, crossing the entire sky and spouting a multi-colored light show in its wake. We were left in awe and appreciation of the Florida Keys night sky.

The low light-pollution vistas in the Florida Keys are some of the last remaining dark sky locations in the U.S. We are home to winter star parties, evening star programs, and night sky photography events, yet many of us take it for granted. We shouldn't. Science has shown that dark skies are essential for the health and welfare of people, wildlife, and natural ecosystems.

In much of our country, urban and suburban areas are flooded with artificial lights, robbing people of magnificent views of the night sky and the health benefits associated with them. Studies have shown dark skies help you get restful sleep, and help regulate your body's circadian rhythm, affecting both your mental and physical health.

Dark night skies are also important for healthy ecosystems, both on land and in the water. Baby sea turtles hatch on beaches at night and must quickly reach the relative safety of the ocean to avoid being eaten by predators. Bright lights disorient these youngsters, often sending them in the wrong direction, putting their lives in jeopardy. This is just one example of many.

On land, impacts of light pollution on wildlife, especially birds, are well documented. According to USFWS, billions of birds undergo seasonal migrations. Eighty percent migrate at night, using the stars and the moon

Photo: The Milky Way as seen from No Name Key. Credit: Kristie Killam.



to navigate. Artificial lights on buildings are extremely disorienting, and it's estimated that over 350 million die annually because of building collisions or the ensuing exhaustion that kills them or makes them more prone to predation.

So how can we help? While nighttime lighting serves many purposes, it is important for us to use light in ways that minimize harm to humans, wildlife, and the environment. Make a concerted effort to turn out outdoor lights that aren't necessary. Put others on sensors, plus affix shields to direct their illumination downward, which reduces light pollution. Organize a party to help friends appreciate the beauty and importance of the night sky. Work with your community to make it a night sky friendly one.

Together, we can make the world a better place! In the meantime, get yourself outside, look up, and marvel at the amazing beauty of your night skies; you'll be guaranteed to smile!

CREATURE SPOTLIGHT

OUR CLEANUP CREW: A BIT ABOUT VULTURES IN THE FLORIDA KEYS

By Phil Dodderidge, FKWS Board Member

This winter, we have seen lots and lots of turkey vultures. At times, they seem to be the most prevalent bird species. We have both winter migrants and a year-round resident population. The migrants tend to arrive in late August or early September and leave in April or early May. Local Big Pine Key lore says, "There will be no hurricanes after the vultures arrive." While I cannot verify the accuracy of that local wisdom, I do enjoy seeing them soaring in their "kettles" as they ride on the thermals and use their powerful sense of smell to find fresh carcasses to feed on.

Turkey vultures are very large birds, bigger than other raptors except eagles and condors. They can be identified by their red head, long "finger" feathers on their wing tips, and long tails. When they are riding the thermals, they hold their wings in a slight "V" shape.

They appear black from a distance, but up close and

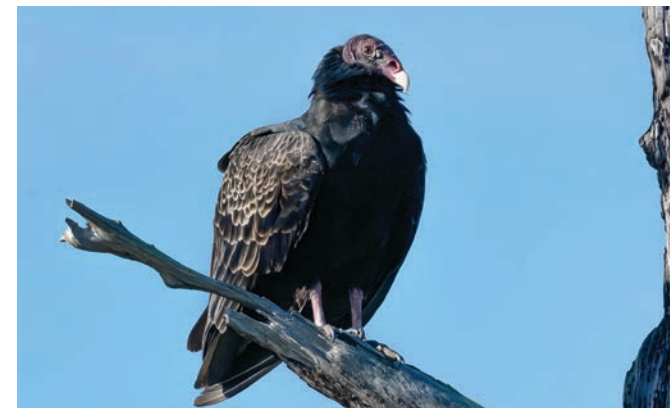


personal, they have brown feathers, a red head, and an almost white, pale bill. Their flight feathers are paler, which gives them that two-tone look.

Juveniles have a gray or dark-gray head color, which makes them prone to misidentification as a black vulture. Black vultures are smaller, and less prevalent in the Keys, because they do not like to fly over open water.

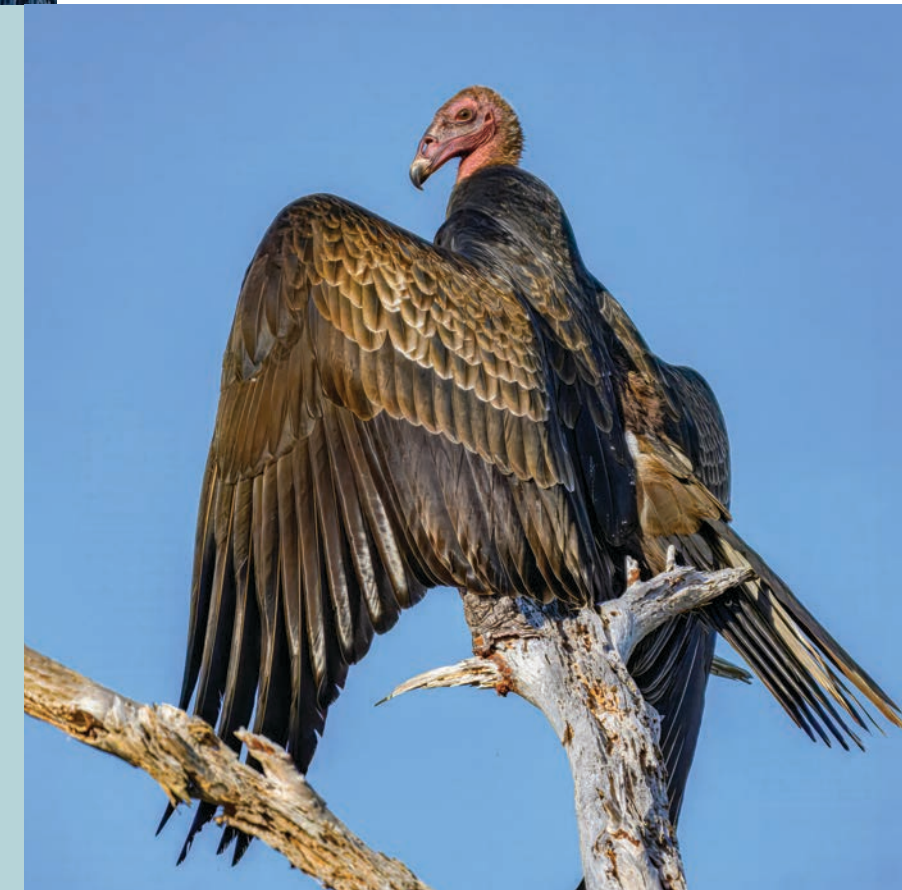
In the early morning, one can find turkey vultures on their roosts near dependable food sources such as landfills and trash heaps. On Big Pine, they can regularly be seen at the north end of Key Deer Boulevard. Once the sun is up, and thermals form, they are away to soar in the sky.

Left: juvenile turkey vulture. Above and below: turkey vultures in the Keys. Credit: Phil Dodderidge.



COOL FACTS (FROM CORNELL & AUDUBON)

- The word vulture likely comes from the Latin *vellere*, which means to pluck or tear. Its scientific name, *Cathartes aura*, is far more pleasant. It means either "golden purifier" or "purifying breeze."
- As a defense mechanism, turkey vultures may vomit on birds, animals, or humans who get too close. Considering what they eat, this can be a powerful weapon.
- The turkey vulture's stomach acid is extremely acidic, so turkey vultures can digest just about anything. This also allows them to eat carcasses tainted with anthrax, tuberculosis, and rabies without getting sick. By taking care of the carrion, vultures provide an essential service for the health of our ecosystems.
- The oldest recorded turkey vulture was at least 23 years, 4 months old when it was seen in California in 2019, the same state where it was banded in 1997.



By Heather Stewart, Biologist for FKNWR Complex

In May of 2025, we hosted a Florida Keys Invasive Exotics Task Force Workday at National Key Deer Refuge, which targeted Kalanchoe growing in imperiled cactus barren. These efforts directly help the endangered Key tree-cactus (*Pilosocereus robinii*), jumping cactus (*Opuntia abjecta*), and *O. ochrocentra*, which grow in small openings in the hammock.

Both species of *Opuntia* are extremely rare, with only a few small known populations in the world. *O. abjecta* is ranked as critically imperiled by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. *O. ochrocentra* was not formally evaluated, but it is even more rare.

Our invasive species removal team included members of FWC, Monroe County, The Nature Conservancy, and Refuge staff and volunteers (including FKWS). In 2025 we removed 32 contractor bags filled with invasive Kalanchoe plants. On a followup day in January, 2026, we removed another 34 bags.

After 15 years of fighting this invasive plant, we have almost eradicated it from the cactus barren. If you would like to volunteer on this project, please email heather_stewart@fws.gov with the subject line “invasive plant volunteer.”



Above: After the removal of invasive Kalanchoe. Right: Kalanchoe. Bottom left: the largest Key tree-cactus in the Keys (roughly 11.5 feet). Bottom right: surveying smaller Key tree-cactus Credit: Heather Stewart.



THE KEY TREE-CACTUS

Populations of endangered Key tree-cactus have decreased over the last 200 years, and especially since 1994, due to habitat loss and degradation from human development. It's also vulnerable to unlawful exploitation and collection, saltwater intrusion, and sea-level rise, which threatens to first modify and then eliminate its habitat over the next 100 years.

In response to its decline and these threats, the Refuge has partnered with the Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden to assess current habitat, identify strategies to improve it, and propagate and plant new cactus specimens to support species recovery.



Meet a Scientist

HEATHER STEWART, PH.D. REFUGES BIOLOGIST

Dr. Heather Stewart is the biologist for Great White Heron and Key West National Wildlife Refuges, and the National Key Deer Refuge — and that is no small task. In this issue, we've highlighted her work with Key tree-cactus habitat restoration and invasive plant removal, as well as her role in coordinating with outside groups for debris cleanups.

Some other tasks she has her hands on include mangrove island assessments, Key deer disease monitoring, wetland restoration, sea-level rise studies, and trail camera studies. She also monitors numerous species, from Florida Keys mole skinks to reddish egrets. You might have also seen her talk in January at the FKWS Lecture Series, where she shared information about changes in freshwater sources on Big Pine Key and their impact on Key deer and other wildlife.

Heather has always been passionate about helping others and making this world a better place. She was born with a love of science, nature, and wildlife, and grew up volunteering with her community-run conservation program, as well as at a soup kitchen and a local shelter for abused women and children. Despite growing up in the Midwest, Heather and her family visited Florida annually, and the Everglades became her favorite place in the world. That's saying a lot, since she has lived in the Galapagos, New Zealand, Panama, the Virgin Islands, Canada, and every region of the United States.

Heather enjoys traveling and witnessing nature's stunning beauty, and her journeys have taken her around the world on many adventures. One of her most mesmerizing moments came deep inside New Zealand's Waitomo Glowworm Caves. There, thousands of endemic fungus gnats transform the darkness into a starlit galaxy, dangling mucus-coated silk

threads that shimmer with an eerie blue-green light. The glow—powered by a luciferase enzyme—is a lure meant to draw curious insects into the sticky traps.

Before joining the Refuges complex, she worked for Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). She obtained her Ph.D. in Biodiversity, Ecosystem Services, and Sustainability from McGill University. Her Master of Science degree is in Fisheries, Wildlife, and Aquaculture, and her Bachelor of Science is in Zoology and Marine Biology. She has more than 30 scientific publications, has a new book chapter coming out in the Coral Reefs of the World series, has given over 50 professional presentations in five countries, and is a reviewer for eight scientific journals.

Heather is actively involved in several committees and working groups, including the Florida's Coral Reef Coordination

Team, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) Advisory Council, FKNMS Water Quality Protection Program Steering Committee, and FKNMS Adaptive Management Working Group. She also serves on the Global Mangrove Alliance's Science Working Group assisting in the development of global science priorities and best practice guidelines for mangrove restoration and conservation actions. Heather also established the Florida Keys Community-Based Ecological Mangrove Restoration program, fostering collaboration with community partners, NGOs, universities, and government agencies to assess and restore mangrove islands. This program started assessments of mangrove islands in Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge this spring.

We're excited to share more updates from Heather's work in future newsletter issues.



CROC LAKE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT: THE USUAL SUSPECTS, PLUS A FEW RARITIES

On December 20 last year, 39 people showed up to participate in the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count at Croc Lake. Collectively, they documented 81 species and a total of 2,267 individual birds.

“The bird numbers were fairly similar to last year, but we did have 12 more participants, which was very exciting for outreach and interest!” says Croc Lake biologist Isabella Collamati.

A few rare sightings for the Keys included a Carolina wren, hermit thrush, and glossy ibis. The top regulars included American white pelicans, great egrets, and white ibis. There were also snowy egrets, roseate spoonbills,

wood storks, great blue herons, tricolored herons, little blue herons, reddish egrets, herring gulls, common ground doves, pied-billed grebes, a sharp-shinned hawk, semipalmated plover, yellow-bellied sapsucker, brown thrasher, northern harrier, red-tailed hawk, Peregrine falcon, killdeer, monk parakeet, yellow-throated vireo, yellow-rumped warbler, northern waterthrush, yellow-throated warbler, blue-headed vireo and western kingbird.

Many thanks to Suzy Roebing for organizing the event and compiling the data — and especially to all of the volunteers who showed up bright and early. We couldn't do this without you!

EVENTS RECAP: LAST SEASON'S RUNS, KAYAKS, & MORE!

LECTURE SERIES: WILD, WONDERFUL FLORIDA KEYS

The 2025-2026 Florida Keys Wildlife Society Lecture Series ended on April 9th, with a talk on Refuge restoration projects by Kevin Kalasz, the USFWS Coastal Program Coordinator for South Florida. This completes FKWS' fourth year of providing educational talks on topics of interest to our local community, with a focus on enhancing awareness of the natural world around us.

"The lectures are both informative and have become a notable community event," says FKWS board member Ed Rhodes. "Having home-baked cookies, brownies, and other snacks during the talks may contribute to their popularity!"

This year the series featured six evening lectures on topics that included python hunting in the Everglades, mosquito control, native moths, life in the Keys in the 1500s, and the importance of fire to Refuge ecosystems. Speakers included: python hunter Kym Clark, wildlife biologist Erin Myers, the Keys Mosquito Control District, historian Brad Bertelli, Keys moths expert David Fine, and wildlife biologist Kevin Kalasz.

FULL MOON KAYAKS: A PERENNIAL HIT!

Every year, from October through April or May, FKWS organizes moonrise kayak paddles, which wind through enticing mangrove tunnels and across the wildlife-rich flats of Big Pine and No Name Keys.

"Our excursion in October, 2025, was the best one ever," says organizer and volunteer Marianne Shepperd. "The water was incredibly clear, the temperature was amazing and the light breeze kept away the bugs. We saw various crabs, barracuda, permit, tarpon, turtles, mullet, snapper, and a manatee. There were also fabulous clouds in the sky for great sunset and moonrise photos."



Lectures are held at the Nature Center on Big Pine Key, and most often all 50 seats are filled. By request, we have also started to Zoom broadcast the presentations. As always, all are free and open to the public. The lecture series is in part possible due to the support of the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys.

More locals than visitors showed up last season, though some locals also brought their out-of-town guests. What a wonderful way to show off our home without damaging or polluting it.

The excursions take place on the full moon, and are sponsored by Captain Bill Keogh and his company, Big Pine Kayak Adventures. They're also made possible thanks to a dozen volunteer guides. We appreciate their enthusiasm.

Join us when we start back up again in the fall! In the meantime, to see more of what we've been doing, visit our Facebook page: "Full Moon Kayak Excursion - Florida Keys."

REFUGE WEEK BACK ON FOR 2026!

Unfortunately, Refuge Week, which should have taken place last October, was canceled due to a government shutdown; much to the dismay (and irritation) of the dedicated and passionate volunteers who worked so hard on planning the event. We plan on having it again in October, 2026, though, complete with the Native Plant Giveaway, nature walk and Nature Center open house. It's always a fun community event, with a focus on highlighting the vital role our native plants play in supporting biodiversity and providing food and shelter for insects, birds, reptiles, mammals, and other wildlife. See you in October!

Top: David Fine talks about moths. Credit Ed Rhodes. Left: Full Moon kayakers. Credit Brewster Rhoads.



Run with Deer 5K

Thank You to our Sponsors!

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2026 RUN WITH DEER 5K SEES RECORD ATTENDANCE - AGAIN!

Once again, we broke all previous attendance records for the run, which was held on February 14, 2026. More than 300 people entered, collectively raising \$11,147 for the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges. More than a third came from out of state, and even a few from overseas.

"A huge contribution to the success of the event was our loyal volunteers," says race organizer and volunteer Jody Krieger.

In total, 55 volunteers showed up on Valentine's Day,

including the road crew, who monitored the course and cheered the on runners, and the setup crew, who arrived before sunrise to put out tables, tents, chairs, and banners. Other volunteers ran the registration booth, distributed T-shirts, sold raffle tickets, staffed the Nature Store, emceed the event, and oversaw the food table.

We're looking forward to hosting the run again on February 13, 2027, and we'd love to have you join us, for the run or as a volunteer.

Photos: Brewster Rhoads.



Refuges Artists — Photo Challenge



The Florida Keys Wildlife Society Photo Club meets monthly at the Nature Center on Big Pine Key. Join us in person, or email for more info: info@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org. Please put "photo club" in the subject line. If you would like to submit images for consideration for elsewhere in this newsletter, email newsletter editor Karuna Eberl, karuna@WanderingDogCreations.com.



Great egret, Ann Haack; Key deer, Colleen Fuller; spotted eagle rays (canvas wrapped with water color paper, water color painting), Sherri Krilly.



Cape May warbler, Joe Natale; golden hour wonder, Claudine Bartels; snorkeling selfie, Kristie Killam; green herons nesting at Blue Hole, Susan Natale; roseate spoonbill, Phil Dodderidge; sunrise dolphins, Dr. Doug Mader.



Nature Store Highlights

TREAT YOURSELF, OR A FRIEND, TO NATURE STORE GIFT!

SUPPORT WILDLIFE & LOCAL ARTISTS, GET COOL ECO-GEAR, AND COME HANG OUT

We have a huge assortment of nature and local books, field guides, T-shirts, stuffed animals, hats, cards, postcards, games, puzzles, and more. All proceeds benefit your four Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges. Come on in and pick up some goodies for your nature-loving friends and family, all for a good cause.

Highlights include SPF moisture-wicking shirts, so you can stay sun-safe while exploring the great outdoors and gardening; plus canvas shopping bags with images from local artists.



We're also proud to offer a large selection of local books for every reader, which focus on nature, conservation, native plants, and the history of the Florida Keys — the perfect gifts for curious minds and passionate readers.



We're excited to help you find original gifts — and maybe even get involved with our volunteer opportunities this season!

“GOT YOUR BAGS?” DONATES REUSABLE BAGS TO NATURE STORE

GET YOURS FOR \$10, PLUS HELP PROTECT THE KEYS CREATURES FROM PLASTIC

You might have noticed reusable tote bags with artwork representing the four Keys Refuges for sale in the Nature Store, or in the hands of Run With Deer 5K participants. The “Got Your Bags?” organization recently donated 450 of them, thanks to Shirley Gun and former FKWS chair Robert Keeley.

“Plastic bags that end up discarded as trash can cause harm to wildlife and marine life, and pollute the Refuges on land and in the water,” says Gun. “We hope this message

is passed on whenever people see our bags.”

We all know the harms of plastic bags, which kill millions of fish, birds, and mammals annually. Yet, most people in Florida still use them without a second thought — and overall,

Americans average 365 per person per year (compare that to Denmark, where that number is just four). While single-use plastic bags are banned and/or taxed in a number of states, Florida passed legislation in 2008 that prohibits local municipalities from enacting restrictions.

Luckily, we can still all do our part to ditch our dependence on single-use plastics by choosing reusable bags, spreading the message, and supporting organizations and legislation that promote reducing bag usage.

Note: “Got Your Bags?” is not an active organization, so Gun requests that anyone who wants to donate to the cause do so to FKWS.



THE NATURE STORE

30587 OVERSEAS HIGHWAY
BIG PINE KEY, FL 33043

OPEN WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY
10:00 AM TO 3:00 PM.

STOP IN TO SAY HELLO
AND SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL
WILDLIFE REFUGE.

FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge on Key Largo protects the habitat of the American crocodile. It is also home to the endangered Key Largo woodrat and hundreds of other species. The butterfly garden is open to the public. The rest of the refuge is closed to the public, but there are volunteer opportunities and special events for those wanting to experience it. 10750 County Road 905, Key Largo, FL 33037.

Great White Heron and Key West National Wildlife Refuges are accessed only by boat, and encompass the shallow-water habitats of the Keys backcountry. Kayak past mangrove islands, tidal sandbars, and of course great white herons, found only in south Florida. For information, visit the Nature Center on Big Pine, 30587 Overseas Highway.



Follow us on Facebook & Instagram.
Tag your Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges photos
@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety



MEMBER UP: WILDLIFE NEEDS YOUR VOICE, WE NEED YOUR \$\$

THESE ARE UNUSUAL TIMES. PLEASE, BECOME A MEMBER OR DONATE TO THE FLORIDA KEYS WILDLIFE SOCIETY. THERE IS SO MUCH TO DO TO HELP PROTECT THE KEYS WILDLIFE AND ECOLOGY.

These are uncertain times, in which we could certainly use your help. This would be a great time to donate, become a member, or make a contribution to our endowment. There is mounting work to be done in the four Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges. There are invasive species to chase down, habitats to restore, and woods and beaches to clean up. There are scientists trying to understand how to protect our iconic Keys' species, visitors and locals to educate, and kids whom we can help fall in love with nature. Much of this work is only possible because of the financial contributions of our community.

We are a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, so donations are tax deductible. The Florida Keys Wildlife Society works as a “friends” group to the refuges, which means all of our fundraising goes directly to supporting the work being done there. And we mean all of it, since we are volunteers.



You can participate by becoming an individual member, or a business sponsor. Donations can be made at www.FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org (there's a button on the homepage). The FKWS (formerly known as FAVOR) has been supporting the refuges through education, non-adversarial advocacy, volunteerism, and direct funding of various refuge projects since 1997.

Chances are if you are taking a hike, or boating in the backcountry, you are enjoying the natural marvels of the Keys that the Refuges are helping to protect.

Join Team Wildlife. Be our change. Thanks!

DONATE TODAY!



WILDLIFE SOCIETY ENDOWMENT FUND

The Florida Keys Wildlife Society opened an endowment with the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys. The permanent fund will help ensure support to the four Keys' National Wildlife Refuges for decades to come. If you would like to be a supporter and make a tax-deductible donation to the fund, mail checks to CFFK, 300 Southard Street, Suite. 201, Key West, FL 33040, with “Florida Keys Wildlife Society” in the memo or attachment. Gifts of stock, real

estate, and retirement accounts are also welcome. For more information, contact Elizabeth Brown at 305-809-4995 or Elizabeth@cffk.org.



WOODRATS AND PYTHON STUDIES GET THE SPOTLIGHT

A 2025 episode of the nature television series *Wildlife Nation with Jeff Corwin: Expedition Florida* spotlighted Key Largo woodrats and python prey studies at Crocodile Lake NWR.

We're thrilled to see these important research and conservation efforts get some national coverage. Big thanks to all of the scientists and volunteers who have been championing these efforts, and especially researcher and Keys wildlife advocate Dr. Michael Cove, who is featured in the video!

Watch it on Wildlife Nation's YouTube Channel. The title is "River of Grass - Full Episode | S2," or type in youtube.com/watch?v=vgbwXrgcpbg.



BE A VOICE FOR NATURE & TEAM WILDLIFE

MEMBERSHIPS TO THE FLORIDA KEYS WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Not a card-carrying Friends member? Join or renew today.

Annual memberships are available for Individuals (\$25) or Family (\$50). Fill out the form online at FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org, or just mail us with your name, email, phone, address, and check to Florida Keys Wildlife Society, P.O. Box 431840, Big Pine Key, FL 33043, or stop by the Nature Store, at 30587 Overseas Highway on Big Pine Key.

Your membership benefits include: discounts at the Nature Store, advance registration for events held by FKWS, newsletters, and a warm fuzzy feeling. To contribute to our endowment, contact Elizabeth Brown at 305-809-4995 or Elizabeth@cffk.org.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP SUPPORTS

- Scientific projects
- Citizen science
- Educational programs
- Research activities
- Community outreach
- Intern study programs
- Nature center exhibits
- Healthy wildlife and ecosystems



JOIN TODAY!



Volunteer, Please!

SUPPORT WILDLIFE

Volunteers are the lifeblood of the four Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges and the Florida Keys Wildlife Society, contributing over 7,000 hours per year, and ensuring the protection of many native and endangered species, such as Key deer, Key Largo woodrats, and Schaus' swallowtail butterflies, and their habitats. Our activities are split between running the organization behind the scenes and being in the public eye, so there's an opening for just about every taste, skill, and schedule. You can help:

- In the Nature Center, store, or Blue Hole on Big Pine Key.
- With native plants.
- On a clean-up, outdoor festival, or other event.
- Plan events for public outreach and education.
- Get the word out on our social media sites.

- Write articles about nature and the Refuges.
- Increase membership and pledge campaigns.
- Maintain our member database and emails.
- Plan fundraising events and PR efforts.
- Help find and write grants.
- Join a committee, like Nature Store, fundraising, or communication.
- Or make up your own job.

VOLUNTEER NOW!

For info on how to be part of Team Wildlife, email or visit:

VOLUNTEER@FLORIDAKEYSWILDLIFESOCIETY.ORG
FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org/Get-Involved/Volunteer/