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Annual meeting focuses on national wildlife refuges



Seen here are (from left) Deputy Manager of the whole North Florida Refuge Complex, which includes the Cedar Keys, Lower Suwannee, St. Marks, and St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuges Larry Woodward, National Wildlife System 2019 Employee of The Year Vic Doig, and Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge Manager Andrew Gude. They are among the people who help maintain and preserve the Refuges.

Story and Photos

By Blaine M. Vitallo

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CHIEFLAND — During the Saturday (Feb. 29) annual meeting of the Friends of the Lower Suwannee and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges, the focus was on the story of the Swallow-Tailed Kite and the year of accomplishments since the group's last annual meeting.

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Friends President John McPherson opens the annual meeting.



Andrew Gude makes his presentation regarding an update of progress at the Refuge.

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Friends President John McPherson shows the Friends the budget summary



Larry Woodward provides his presentation regarding Vic Doig earning the title of Employee of the Year

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Vic Doig stands near the screen as he is shown to the Friends to be the Employee of the Year.



Ken Meyer speaks about one of the many photos shared with the group regarding the Swallow-Tailed Kites.

The message of the morning was that a community of dedicated volunteers and a small, yet passionate staff can create an effective and nationally recognized conservation

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effort for local wildlife.

“Conservation brings everyone together,” guest speaker Ken Meyer told the members and guests at the Friends of the Lower Suwannee and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges meeting as he gave a presentation titled “Year of the Kite.” The presentation detailed the critical data on the Swallow-Tailed Kite that the organization has gathered over the last seven years.

Meyer and the Refuge have been tracking a male Swallow-Tailed Kite named “Suwannee” for more than a year now. Using a cellphone tracking device paid for by the Friends, Meyer and his team have been keeping tabs on Suwannee during the bird’s annual migration from Florida to Brazil.

Suwannee was recently featured in the international online publications National Audubon and bioGraphic, which sent a photographer to document the catching of the Kites. According to Meyer, Suwannee has recently gone quiet—not showing any tracking updates—for more than a month. It’s nothing to worry about, he said. Sometimes researchers don’t hear from the birds for up to three months.

Typically Kites that vanish from tracking reappear as soon as they land near a cellphone tower, Meyer noted.

In one slide, a map of the Gulf of Mexico showed the migration routes of Kites across the Southeast United States, Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula. These routes cross thousands of miles, in many cases directly over the Gulf of Mexico. The Kites are only able to make this journey because they are efficient flyers. They ride warm air currents and soar as high as 2,000 feet so they can fly up to four days without needing to rest.

The presentation featured photographs of Kite breeding pairs perched on high branches, and aerial shots of trees on commercial timberland spotted with white specks, each one an individual Kite. Clusters of trees where groups of Kites land are known as roosts. Each roost can contain thousands of individuals. Social behaviors like roosting are unusual for raptors, according to Meyers.

The Kites have “complex and beautiful stories,” Meyers said. They cause him to question whether he should be a biologist or a poet, he said.

There are many challenges facing this species. Climate change has caused headwinds that impact migration routes, forcing Kites to fly over the ocean for extended distances. This has caused the deaths of three out of 11 tagged birds, he said. These deaths may be indicative of many others that are not tagged.

In the winter, Kites travel to cattle ranchland in Brazil, where conditions are favorable for them. Much of this land is being taken up by industrial soybean and sugarcane farms now, Meyer said. The insecticides these farms use required researchers to wear hazmat suits to investigate missing Kites whose trackers were followed to the fields, he said.

Due to the conservation efforts of the National Wildlife Refuges, the population numbers of Kites have been increasing, up from around 5,000 in 1988 to as many as 25,000 now. Even so, their range, which once stretched far into the northern United States, still only covers the Southeast, he said.

“All this work has been done without this bird being listed as an endangered species,” Meyer said.

This means that the Refuges did not receive any additional funding for efforts to study and protect the birds.

Meyer encourages responsible management of timberland, because Kites are “site

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faithful,” meaning they return to the same nests each year. If a roost is cut down then Kites will not return to the area, reducing their range.

“The best management practices for clear-cut sites work perfectly well for Swallow-Tailed Kites if landowners adhere to them,” Meyer added.

These practices are better for the birds and can make timberland owners more money.

The study and protection of Kites is just one of the projects the Refuges completed last year. According to Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge Manager Andrew Gude, the Refuges comprise the “single largest conservation entity in the world dedicated to a wildlife-first mission.”

This means that the Refuges work to protect healthy fish, plants, and habitats, as well as wildlife-dependent recreation.

Dan Frisk is the manager of the whole North Florida Refuge Complex—which includes the Cedar Keys, Lower Suwannee, St. Marks, and St. Vincent refuges. He said that their budget has been very tight, so it’s important for the refuges to consolidate their efforts.

During the meeting, Deputy Manager Larry Woodward praised Fire Management Officer Vic Doig, who received the 2019 Employee of the Year award. Doig is a member of many safety and wildlife committees, and he is a nationally recognized instructor of fire safety.

The Refuges have undertaken many projects over the last year with the help of their dedicated staff, directors, and volunteers. These projects include a controlled burn program, which saw the burning of 900 acres of land, which is a difficult task for a small crew.

“We are in a fire-dependent ecosystem,” Gude said. “Wherever you see the pines, that area is meant to burn at least every two to five years.”

The challenge, Gude added, is to manage mid-story growth. Controlled burns, careful insecticide use, and clear-cutting are used by the refuge to promote the growth of grasses, bushes, and other desirable ground cover rather than palmettos and other plants that, while native, are not natural in a proper forest.

Other completed projects mentioned in the meeting were the reactivation of the Cedar Keys Light Station, which occurred on July 5; the construction of floating nesting platforms for birds; and an elevated trail for Cedar Keys’ Shell Mound.

Friends President John McPherson said that although these projects have cost a great deal of money, the Refuges still have plenty of money saved.

“We are not here to store money. We’re here to do good things,” McPherson said.

As noted on the website for the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, “The Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge is unlike other Refuges in that it was not established for the protection of a specific species, but in order to protect the high water quality of the historic Suwannee River. The flow of the Suwannee feeds the estuarine waters of the Gulf of Mexico, habitat for the Gulf sturgeon and feeding grounds for resident and migratory shorebirds, wading birds and waterfowl.”

Updates to the bylaws and new members of the board of directors were unanimously voted in by the Friends, and once business was concluded everyone shared a free lunch. Then people rode out for an afternoon visit at the Vista.