

**Myakka Wild and Scenic River Program
2018 Annual Report**



A. Permitting & Regulatory issues

1. The bridge replacement at C.R. 780: A permit, MRP030314 was issued to Sarasota County on March 19th, 2014 for the replacement of the bridge over the Myakka River and physical construction was completed in late 2017. Planting on the western bridge approach and in the bridge adjacent floodplain occurred in 2018 and will be monitored for success.
2. MRP112514 was issued to Sarasota County on December 22nd, 2014 for several improvements at Snook Haven Park. Phase one included the concession dock area and canoe launch area which were completed in early 2017. Phase two, started in late 2017 with the revamping on the Decker Property boat ramp and associated parking. The new boat ramp and associated regulatory signage were installed in 2018. Sarasota County officially opened this area June 15th 2018.
3. Discussion continues with Sarasota County staff related to the future development and potential recreation activities at Senator Bob Johnson's Landing near U.S. 41.
4. The FPS District IV continues to seek funding to conduct a feasibility study related to restoration of the Upper Myakka Lake (UML) Bypass/Weir Area as directed in the adopted MWSR Management Plan, under Action 2.4. In October 2017 an application was submitted to request funding through the SWFWMD Cooperative Funding Initiative (CFI) to conduct modeling to identify the best solution to this long-standing issue. In October 2018 SWFWMD approved matching funding for the project and in late 2018 a contractor was secured. In October 2018 an application was submitted to request funding through the SWFWMD Cooperative Funding Initiative (CFI) to conduct modeling and explore options at Downs' Down. The FPS and SWFWMD, and FWC's Aquatic Habitat Restoration/Enhancement (AHRE) Program continue to explore options for the Weir/Bypass Area; as well as, Park Drive culverts, and Downs' Dam for potential improvement projects.



B. Incidents

1. Blatant non-compliance with posted MWSR and manatee speed limits remains a serious issue with residents, paddlers, fisherman, and tour operators reporting observations to this office and Law Enforcement (LE). All these activities have an impact to the wild and scenic values in the river area and are a potential hazard to other recreational users.
 - In early 2018 new buffer signage as posted at the Myakka Rookery, a FWC Critical Wildlife Area.
 - Discussions are underway to improve signage at most public access points including Marina Park, Snook Haven park, Senator Bob Johnson's Landing, and in MRSP.
2. Continued unpermitted camping and fires, and the illegal removal of vegetation including listed species remains an issue impacting wild and scenic values on private and public conservation properties.

C. Nuisance and Exotic Plants and Animals

1. Island apple snail (IAS), *Pomacea maculata*, egg masses began showing up on the UML in September 2011. In August 2013 one egg mass from the IAS was observed south of the S.R. 72 Bridge which appears to be the first report in this section. Increasing numbers of IAS masses began appearing in the river section below the Lower Myakka Lake (LML) in 2015. In late 2015 the first observation of egg casings occurred below Downs' Dam. In 2016, the IAS range extended down river to Border Road.
 - MRSP staff and the MWSR Program use volunteers to locate and remove these snails and egg masses but less efforts are focused on this issue at the present time.
 - For the fourth consecutive year no native apple snail eggs were seen during surveys.
2. Invasive fish and their impact on native aquatic vegetation and other river resources is a concern. This issue is complex, and solutions will be difficult to implement. Large die-offs of tropical species, like sailfin catfish and tilapia have been apparent in recent years associated with low water levels coupled with cold temperatures.
3. Major efforts continue to reduce paragrass (*Urochloa mutica*) in Big Flats Marsh (BFM) which began in 2015. At that time paragrass dominated the area. The second area of BFM was aerial treated with herbicides in November 2016 for paragrass, through FWC's AHRE Program. Later, 225 acres of that area was burned by MRSP Staff on February 21st, 2017. In 2018 contractor buggy and other in-house spot treatments occurred and an attempt began to remove paragrass from the hammock line. After the flood season, a notable increase in native vegetation was observed and fall surveys indicated that paragrass was under 5%. Continued monitoring and vegetation management will be required to maintain this ambiguous effort and to expand this effort above to the UML and below to the LML.



Looking south from park drive. Much of coreopsis area was dominated by paragrass in 2017.

4. Continued efforts are being made to manage invasive plants in the natural communities along the MWSR. The top priority remains the monitoring and removal of infestations of cogongrass, paragrass, West Indian marsh grass and Old World climbing fern.

D. Wildlife and Plant Monitoring

1. River Inspection data from 1990 through 2018 has been entered into the MWSR Wildlife Database.
2. Over the past year, an effort to document interactions during the wildlife survey that indicate flushing of wildlife, especially alligators at Deep Hole occurred due to perceived decline the presence of alligators at this special feature.
3. Throughout the year, several interesting wildlife sightings took place during regular monthly surveys. A sampling of these sightings includes:
 - During the January survey, 406 alligators were observed including 128 at Deep Hole.
 - During the February survey, 303 alligators were observed including 86 at Deep Hole. Seven water snakes were seen. (1 Florida green water snake, 2 brown water snakes, and 3 Florida water snakes).
 - On the March survey, 250 alligators were observed including 69 at Deep Hole. Also seen were 15 avocet, 6 spotted sandpiper, a black skimmer, and numerous other birds.



- In the April Survey, there were at least 311 birds present. Many wood stork and great egrets were sitting on eggs in the nest or feeding immature birds. From photographs, it was determined that there were at least 191 wood stork* (88 adults, 41 juveniles, and 62 chicks, at least 79 stork nest were counted), 70 great egret*, 44 anhinga*, 3 great blue heron, 1 snowy egret, 1 black-crowned night heron, and 1 yellow-crowned night heron, (*including juveniles. The uppermost parts in the center of the island are not visible and may contain some nesting therefore this number is likely slightly conservative.)



- During the May survey, about 30 minutes above Downs Dam we encountered an anhinga with plastic batting material entangled on its bill. She was perched in an in-water snag and we attempted to remove the material with a paddle, but it was too tightly wrapped on the

bird's bill. Using a knife, the material was careful cut away and allowing the anhinga to be able to open her bill again.



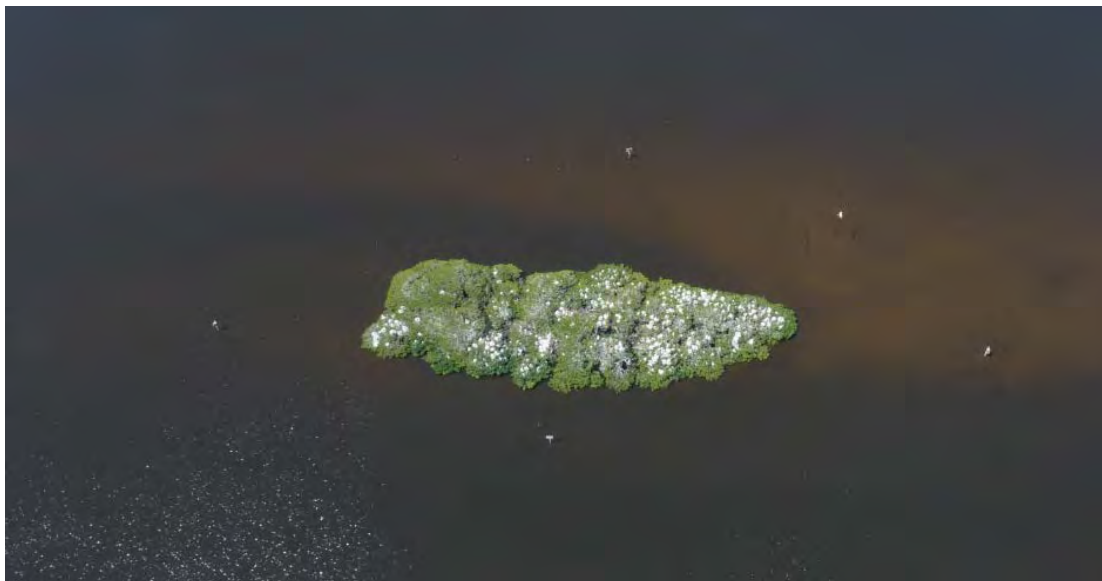
- On the November survey, 229 alligators were observed including 65 at Deep Hole. Five hikers were at Deep Hole when we arrived. While 65 alligators were present at Deep Hole only 22 were out on the water sunning on the banks. Many flushed in to the water when a group of seven kayakers arrived. Leaving ten alligators remaining out of the water. The group landed on the southwest rim and got out to explore the area as we left.
- On the December survey, 348 alligators were observed during this survey of which 125 of the above were located at Deep Hole. (No human activity observed during count.) Twenty water snakes were seen in the early afternoon. This included 15 brown water snakes, 4 Florida green water snakes, and 1 Florida water snake.

4. For the seventh consecutive season, numerous documented Florida manatee sightings above the tidal Myakka River indicate that manatees are using areas within MRSP and upriver into Manatee County for many months when water levels and temperature are favorable. Observations have documented that manatees utilize a large area that extends at least 15 miles above the areas those are currently labelled as Manatee Habitat in the Sarasota County Manatee Protection Plan (2011).
- With help from staff, and volunteers, the MWSR Program documented at least 29 recorded observations from May 23rd to the October 17th. Manatees appear to be present a minimum of 148 days in MRSP aquatic habitats. Based on previous data and water level data manatees had the potential to utilize MRSP for more than 5 months.
 - For the fourth consecutive year manatees were observed above MRSP near the C.R.780 Bridge. In late August, a group of 3 manatees was observed just south of C.R.780.

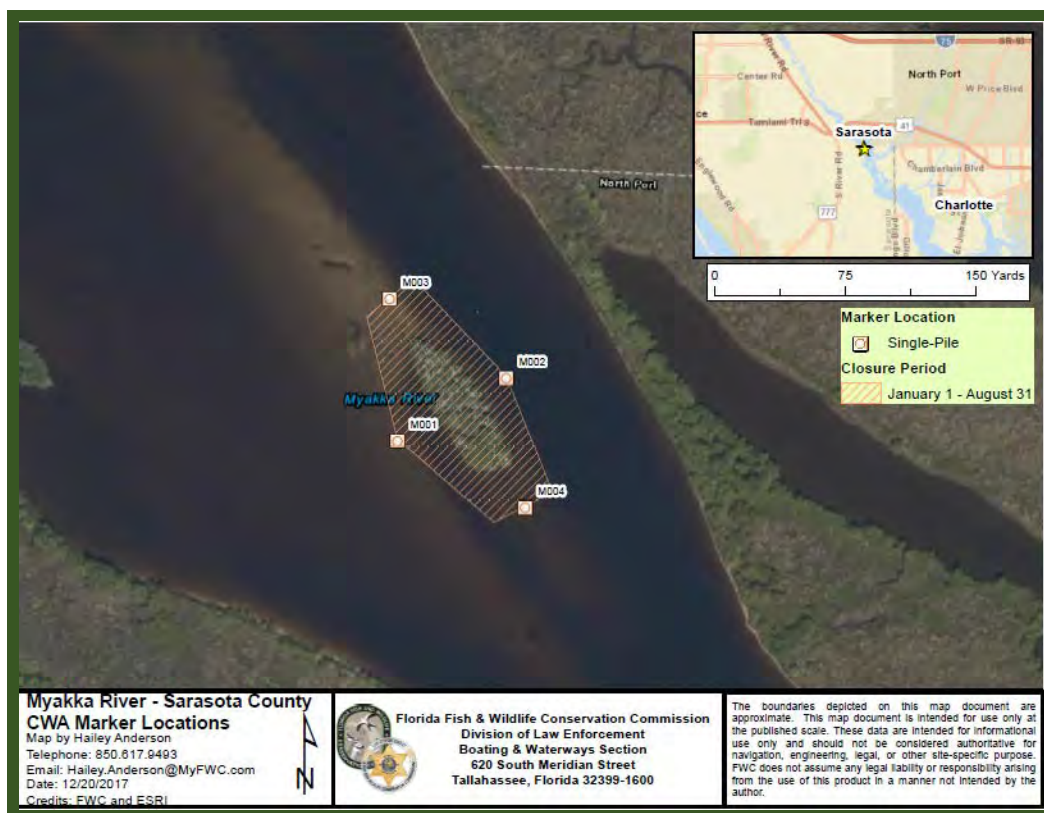


Group of manatees in above UML in August 2018

5. The Myakka Rookery was designated as a Critical Wildlife Area (CWA) in 1987. The FWC Commissioners met in November 2016 and approved a buffer zone around the CWA. The new protection area is 75 feet on the north, west and south sides and 50 feet on the east side. The commission took this action to reduce the potential impacts to nesting birds from any disturbance from recreational activities. The protected season is January 1 through August 31, during which most of the nesting season occurs. Signage was installed in late January 2018. (See aerial photo and map on the following page.)



From FWC aerial survey April 2018



As in previous years, the CWA (Myakka Rookery) was monitored during monthly wildlife surveys.
(See graph of estimated nesting by MWSR Program on the following page.)

Nest #'s from Myakka River Rookery

