

Friends Of Istokpoga

NewsWire

Friends Of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc.
PO Box 578, Lake Placid, FL 33862-0578
Phone: 863-219-0082 FAX: 863-465-2982
friendsofistokpoga@hotmail.com

The Present Status of Lake Istokpoga's Water Birds

By Dr. Paul Gray, National Audubon

Society

Several people have expressed concern about low numbers of water birds on Lake Istokpoga this year, and about low numbers of wading bird nests the past several years. Whether bird numbers are lower than before is a rather hard thing to "prove," partly because we don't have many detailed bird surveys. Keeping track of bird numbers might sound like something of importance only for bird watchers, but birds are an important indicator of the health of the Lake itself.

Like the proverbial canary in a coal mine, when birds disappear, it often is one of our first clues that things are not well in the ecosystem. When I first visited Everglades National Park, I read their brochures about how the Everglades needed to be "restored." Yet, I drove down the road through the Park and the Everglades "were there"... water, sawgrass, tree islands... what needed to be restored? As I learned more, it turns out that I should have seen a million wading birds out there (somewhere), but now there are one-tenth that number. Research into why much of the Everglades are "still there" but the birds aren't, has revealed that the water cycles aren't normal (too dry, or too wet, too much of the time). Unnatural water cycles means that many of the plants and bugs can't grow or establish normally, which in turn means many of the fish can't get food (or die from frequent dry-outs), and wading birds are not able to find enough fish (or frogs, crawfish, grass shrimp, or other foods) to feed nestlings. This description is simplified, but you can get the idea that subtle changes in the ecosystem affected many things. Is something like this happening with Lake Istokpoga?

Scientist Mike McMillian of Archbold Biological Station has been doing studies on Ospreys around the Lake

for years. He reports that autumn populations usually drop to about 50 birds, and around January, depending on the weather, the Ospreys start returning from their migratory wanderings (often in Central America) to start nesting. Last year's total of about 250 nests around Istokpoga was very high and Mike expects a fairly good return this spring. Dr. Glen Woolfendon, also from Archbold, reports that they recorded about 14,000 lesser scaup (the white-backed diving ducks out in the middle of the Lake) on this year's Christmas bird count. During the drawdown, FWC biologists report endangered Snail Kites nested on Lake Istokpoga in what appear to be the highest numbers on record. These numbers sound pretty good.

But many people note that there seem to be fewer coots, moorhens, inshore (dabbling) ducks, and wading birds than normal. Unfortunately, we don't have a scientist following each of these birds and it is hard to tell what's going on. My guess is that most of the changes probably are short-term effects related to the drawdown and hydrilla control. Plants help create habitat.

Wetland plants drop seeds that wait until conditions are just right, sometimes waiting for decades, before they germinate. If you watch a shallow water area in consecutive years, this

remarkable ability to wait allows "drier"

condition plants to grow during drought years, and "wetter" condition plants to grow during wet years; the same spot will grow completely different plants in different years. During the drawdown and tussock removal project, heavy equipment removed material to help restore the natural sandy bottom. Along with the tussocks, seeds were removed as well. Rather than a diverse plant community, the first plant to grow in many areas was pickerelweed ("flag"). FWC subsequently sprayed this "weedy" species to allow time for more desirable plants to return. Hydrilla was controlled as well, and as vexing as hydrilla is for boating, many ducks and other birds like it. When more plants return, birds should too. Aquatic plant seeds are good at floating around and re-colonizing areas. My guess is by the end of 2002, many of our old friends: coots,

Unnatural water cycles means that many of the plants and bugs can't grow or establish normally, which means ...

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moorhens, purple gallinules, ducks, wading birds, and others should be back in normal numbers.

As spring approaches, we wonder how wading bird nesting will be. Big Island and Bumblebee Islands have had large wading bird nesting colonies for years, and have made Lake Istokpoga one of the "Top 100 Wading Bird Colony" sites in

Florida. When looking at the numbers of wading birds over the years, you will notice they are quite variable. Part of the variability arises because these breeding estimates are the records of only 1 to 3 counts per year. If the nesting season is earlier or later than average, the count day may not catch the rookery at its peak. Probably the largest source of variability is the climate itself. During extreme drought or flood years (El Nino winters can be very wet), wading birds may not find suitable conditions and either will forego nesting entirely, or move to another region to nest.

As mentioned above, wading birds were one of the most dramatic indicators of Everglade's problems. Similarly, wading bird declines were one of the important parameters that motivated Kissimmee River restoration, and their return is one of the restoration's criterion for success. This group of

birds are good environmental indicators because they tend to feed at the "top of the food chain." A proper chain of events is required to make fish abundant, or to make healthy snail, crawfish, worm, tadpole, worm, or shrimp populations, and if that chain is not working, then wading bird populations often show the effects long before some biologist sifting through the mud will detect it.

Another thing you can see from Table 1 is the counts have been sporadic over the years, which hurts our chance

to determine trends. Our agencies have not placed a high priority on funding counting activity. To obtain more counts, Audubon has a program called Project ColonyWatch where we recruit volunteers to monitor wading bird rookeries. We have a booklet that helps train people how and when to count birds, lists of species, and data sheets. People report their counts annually and we compile and publish all the numbers. Over time, these numbers give

scientists data to analyze birds across Florida, and give people numbers to study trends on their own lake. I would like to start a ColonyWatch program on Lake Istokpoga. If anyone is interested in participating, please contact me at 863-467-8497. ColonyWatch is new to me, so we'll learn how to do it together, but I think it will be fun, and we will obtain information valuable to protecting this wonderful Lake that we (the birds and us) call ours. All you'll need is access to a boat, binoculars, a bird book, and a few days a year.

My conclusion about birds on Lake Istokpoga right now is that they are doing fine. Of course we can't be sure "how fine" they are, without long-term data sets. By next year we will be able to see in general if plants and most birds come back. For one set of "indicator" birds, wading birds, we can start a project to monitor their numbers. In the future, we can know their trends. Please call me if you are interested.

Year	Bumblebee Island	Big Island
1970's	200-300 (Great Egrets)	1000 (White Ibis)
1988	Vacant (one count)	250 - 500 (Large Waders)
1993	132 (Great Egrets)	200 (Mixed Species)
1996	222 (Great Egrets, Anhinga)	705 (White Ibis)
1997	21 (Great Egrets)	Vacant (one count)
1998	152	5000

**Be Sure to Come Out to Our
Annual Meeting - February
21, 2002, 7:00 PM at the
Lorida Community Center

Come at 6:45 PM and enjoy
the refreshments**

Table 1. *Approximate number of nesting pairs of wading birds in Lake Istokpoga (not including Cattle Egrets) a determined by 1-3 annual counts. Most abundant species are in parentheses.*

New Director Appointed

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On December 3, 2001, President Bill Dwinell appointed Mr. Tom Watson of Lorida to fill one of the open director positions.

Tom and his wife, Sandy, have lived in Lorida for the past two and a half years and have resided in Florida for 25 years. He has two children and three grandchildren.

He is retired from the corporate financial industry.

Please join us in welcoming Tom next time you see him.

Our Annual Corporate Meeting

Our next meeting will be held on **Thursday, February 21, 2002, at 7:00 PM.** This will be our Annual Corporate meeting for the election of Directors. As of the writing of this article all of our current directors have indicated they are willing to serve for another year. Also note that we only currently have six directors. Our by-laws call for seven so we will be accepting nominations from the floor to fill the last spot.

Our guest speaker will be Dr. Jennifer Brunty, Natural Resources Specialist for the Highlands County Soil and Water Conservation District. Dr. Brunty will discuss "Phosphorus issues on Arbuckle Creek and Lake Istokpoga".

Refreshments will be served prior to the meeting, beginning at 6:45 PM. We hope you will join us for this meeting. The public is welcome at all of our meetings.

If you haven't paid your Dues

Membership is annual from January 1 through December 31 of each year. If you haven't already paid your dues for 2002 then you are delinquent and this will

be your last issue of the *Istokpoga Newswire* unless you do renew. Renewal notices were mailed in mid November and about half of our members did renew before the first of January. **Our Special Thanks to those of you who have already paid your dues.**

For those that have not yet renewed, it isn't too late to renew and not miss a single issue of the *Istokpoga Newswire*. Simply mail your check for \$7.00 for an Individual, \$12.00 for a Family, or \$25.00 for an Associate to:

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In Remembrance

In our last issue of the *Istokpoga Newswire* we reported that Debbie Galloway, our Secretary/Treasurer, had to resign for personal reasons. It is our sad duty to now report that Debbie passed away on December 26, 2001 at the age of 47.

Debbie was a real asset to Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc. from the very beginning. She was helping us from our first formation meeting back in early 1998, and continued until her health declined to the point she had to focus all her attention on her health and family. Debbie will be missed by all of us.

Contacting Friends of Istokpoga - Changes

If you have tried to call us on the phone recently you may have had some problems. We apologize if this is the case. We have discontinued the pager service we were using because of a problem with the phone number. When

our area code changed the pager service did not change. For a time the 941 number could be dialed in Highlands County toll-free. Recent changes by Sprint made this a long-distance phone call, which we do not find acceptable.

You can now reach Friends of Istokpoga by calling 863-219-0082, sending e-mail to

friendsofistokpoga@hotmail.com or

friends@istokpoga.org, or by visiting our web site at www.istokpoga.org.

We have also changed our mailing address to:

Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc.

P. O. Box 578

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NOTICE
If you haven't paid your 2002 dues, and you don't pay them before our next issue of this newsletter,