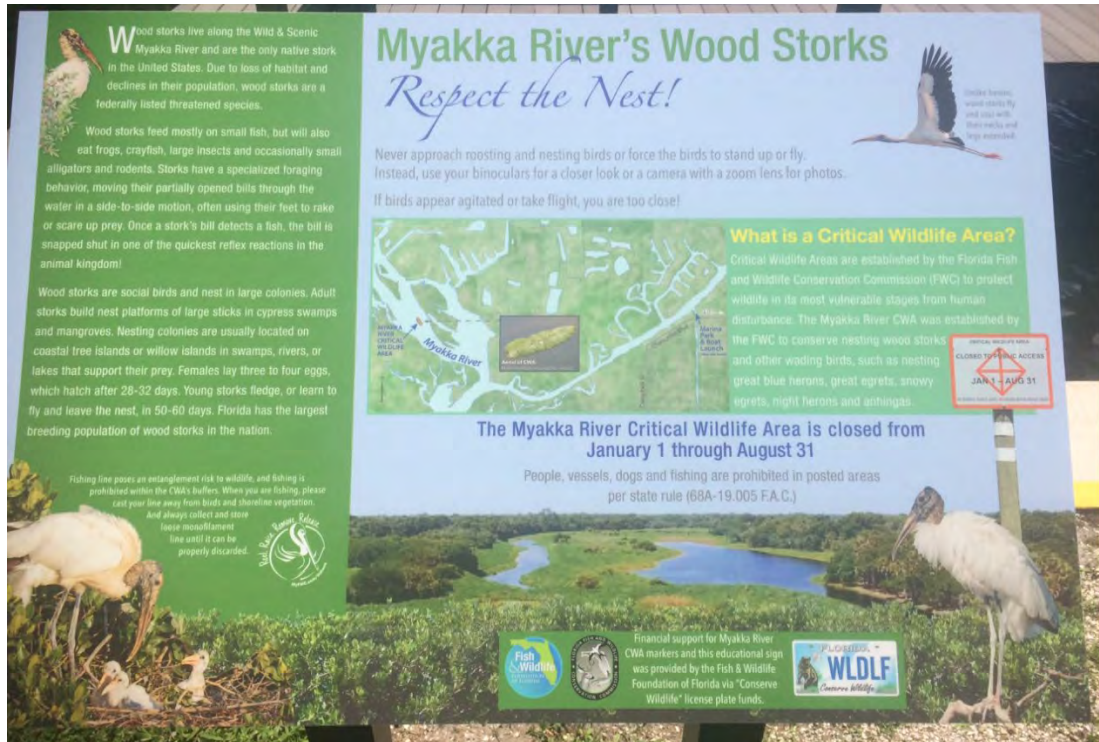


Myakka Wild and Scenic River Program 2019 Annual Report



A. Permitting & Regulatory issues

1. Senator Bob Johnson’s Landing near U.S. 41 opened officially opened January 24th, 2019. Sarasota County have worked to improve the viewshed along the Myakka with exotic removal and native plantings. New signage highlighting the Critical Wildlife Area (CWA) was installed in early June 2019.



2. Permitting issues arose related to a proposed “shoreline” protection structure adjacent to a residence constructed near the river off North Jackson Road. The project was initially submitted as exempt and fully in uplands (i.e. not the river area). Conversations and site visits occurred to address regulatory issues with some disagreement about location of river area, the limit of surface waters determined by the present Ordinary High Water Mark (OHWM) and the use of a Safe Upland Line (SUL). On this project the SUL was established without site visit. After a formal survey by the South District Regulatory (SD) office found that the entire project was below the OHWM and thus in the river area. On October 31st, 2019 SD issued a permit (ERP#0375276001) stating, “the permittee is authorized to stabilize an eroding shoreline through the installation of a 117-linear foot retaining wall and vegetative plantings within the landward extent of the Myakka River, a Wild and Scenic River, Class III Outstanding Florida Waters. Those activities include the restoration of an eroding shoreline through the installation of vegetative plantings on state-owned sovereignty submerged lands.” (The physical wall was installed just before February 20th, 2020, but the plant installation has not been conducted.)



Pre-construction project area.

3. A new modified structure was installed in late 2019 at the Venetian Golf and River Club (VGRC) Overlook after a fire. According to the application to the WMD a “portion of the boardwalk within the Venetian community was vandalized and burned. The boardwalk is located within an upland preserve area”. The WMD determined the project was exempt for the WMD ERP process. (WMD file reference # 788203.) The existing Myakka River Permit (MR060704) under 62D-15 was not considered.



Original 2005 constructed structure



After Fire in mid-March 2019



Post re-build

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 identifying 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. An automated gage was installed in the UML, surveys were conducted related to sediments and bathymetry and modelling water levels began. On a similar project, in October 2018 an application was submitted to request funding through the SWFWMD CFI to conduct modeling and explore options at Downs' Dam and discussions began with consultants for early 2019 kick-off of this project. The FPS and SWFWMD, and FWC's Aquatic Habitat Restoration/Enhancement Section (AHRES) continue to explore options for the Weir/Bypass Area; as well as, Park Drive culverts, and Downs' Dam for potential improvement projects.



January 2019

East side of Down's Dam -wash out area looking north with aerial of the same.

Erosion and loss of adjacent marsh and hydric hammock continues as the washout areas expand both the UML Bypass area and the eastern blowout area associated with Downs’ Dam. Due to this fact, each year more area is eroded into river adding to impairments of water quality and increasing the overall cost of any future restoration.

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). A large portion of boaters fail to comply with regulatory signs. 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. Educational signage was placed at Marina Park and SBJL the two closest public access points to the CWA.
 - Discussion are underway to improve signage at most public access points including, Snook Haven park and those in MRSP.
 - Some regulatory signage on the lower Myakka River is old and failing. Effort to locate funds including via West Coast Navigation Authority is being examined.

2. Continued unpermitted camping and fires, unpermitted fossiling and the illegal removal of vegetation including listed species remains an issue impacting wild and scenic values on private and public conservation properties.



Unpermitted site near Rocky Ford, frequently used for multiple days at a time.

3. Fire on the VGRC overlook, boardwalk and conservation area, see above in permitting.
4. Continued unpermitted motorized launches at unauthorized locations.
5. Continued monitoring of Deep Hole wildlife for concerns related to recreation impacts.

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 coordinate efforts are presently in use.
 - IAS egg masses are now seen near I-75 and along the tidal area of Big Slough, but in relatively low numbers.
 - For the fifth consecutive year no native apple snail eggs were seen during surveys or other visits to the river area.

2. Invasive fish species remain a major issue in the entire watershed. Invasive fish dominate the overall fish population in many sections of the river which has large negative effects on other fishes and aquatic vegetation and may increase factors such as erosion and turbidity.
 - FWC threat assessment for Myakka River is underway and will consider these elements.
 - FPS is in discussion with FWC about monitoring of invasive fish and possible control efforts.

3. Major efforts continue to reduce large monoculture areas of paragrass (*Urochloa mutica*) in Big Flats Marsh (BFM) which began in 2015. The second area of BFM was aerial treated with herbicides in November 2016 for paragrass that formed a dense monoculture, through FWC's AHRES Program. Later, 225 acres of that area was burned by MRSP Staff on February 21st, 2017. In 2018 Buggy and other spot treatments to re-treat areas and an attempted to remove paragrass from the hammock line occurred. After the flood season, a notable increase in native vegetation was observed and as of the last survey paragrass. Continued monitoring and vegetation management will be required to maintain this level of control. If coordination, funding, or active management reduces in the floodplain then invasive grasses will quickly return. MRSP aims to expand this effort above to the UML and below to the Lower Myakka Lake. Maidencane and other species were planted in April 9th and 10th of 2019 with AHRES funding but FWC's herbicide control efforts (aerial and boat based) were paused in the spring and summer. West Indian Marsh Grass was increasing in late summer. The Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast's contractor treated areas of paragrass above MRSP in 2019 for the first time.



Tickseed blooming over many acres of BFM

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 2019 has been entered into the MWSR Wildlife Database.
2. Throughout the year, several interesting wildlife sightings took place during regular monthly surveys. A sampling of these observations includes:
 - During the January survey, 251 alligators were observed 27 of the above were located at Deep Hole. Six people were present at the rim of Deep Hole when we arrived. Very few alligators were present there, only three were partially out of the water and with the slightly elevated water levels most of the alligators were concentrated in the north/northeastern edge of Deep Hole which is the most difficult for pedestrian access. As we counted alligators, a low flying helicopter passed over the Lower Myakka Lake and banked over Deep Hole at about 120 feet.
 - During the February survey, 211 alligators were observed with 35 at Deep Hole.

- During the March survey, 161 alligators were observed with 29 at Deep Hole. We also encountered seven people at Deep Hole. The 29 alligators present were all already in the water and concentrated along the central northern area which is the most difficult for hikers to access because of dense willows.



Old relic dam (at south boundary of MRSP) from April low water survey

- In December, 194 alligators were observed during this survey. Of these 73 were located at Deep Hole. Regarding observations at Deep Hole, as we gained visibility of the area, we noted the group of two hikers on the water's edge on the southwest side. Of the seventy-three alligators counted, 25 were fully out of the water, basking. These were the largest alligators of the group and were mostly concentrated on the north bank. Another 18 alligators were partially out of the water, most were just off the bank in the shallow rim areas before the drop off to the deep water. The remainder, 30 alligators, were in the deeper center with only the heads exposed. During the count, another two hikers and 2 kayakers arrived. The kayakers entered Deep Hole directly and some alligators flushed. They paddled to the southwest rim and pulled out their kayaks and joined the other people at the rim. As we exited the area, only five alligators remained out of the water completely and 6 were partially out. These observations occurred between 10:40 to 11:00 am.
3. For the eighth 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 suggest 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, visitors, and volunteers, the MWSR Program documented at least 18 recorded observations including a surprise observation in February and several from late June to the end of September. Manatees appear to be present a minimum of 76 days in MRSP aquatic habitats. Based on previous data and water level data manatees had the potential to utilize MRSP for more than 170 days.
- For the fifth consecutive year manatees were observed above MRSP near the C.R.780 Bridge.



Manatee eating river vegetation in February as water levels were dropping.

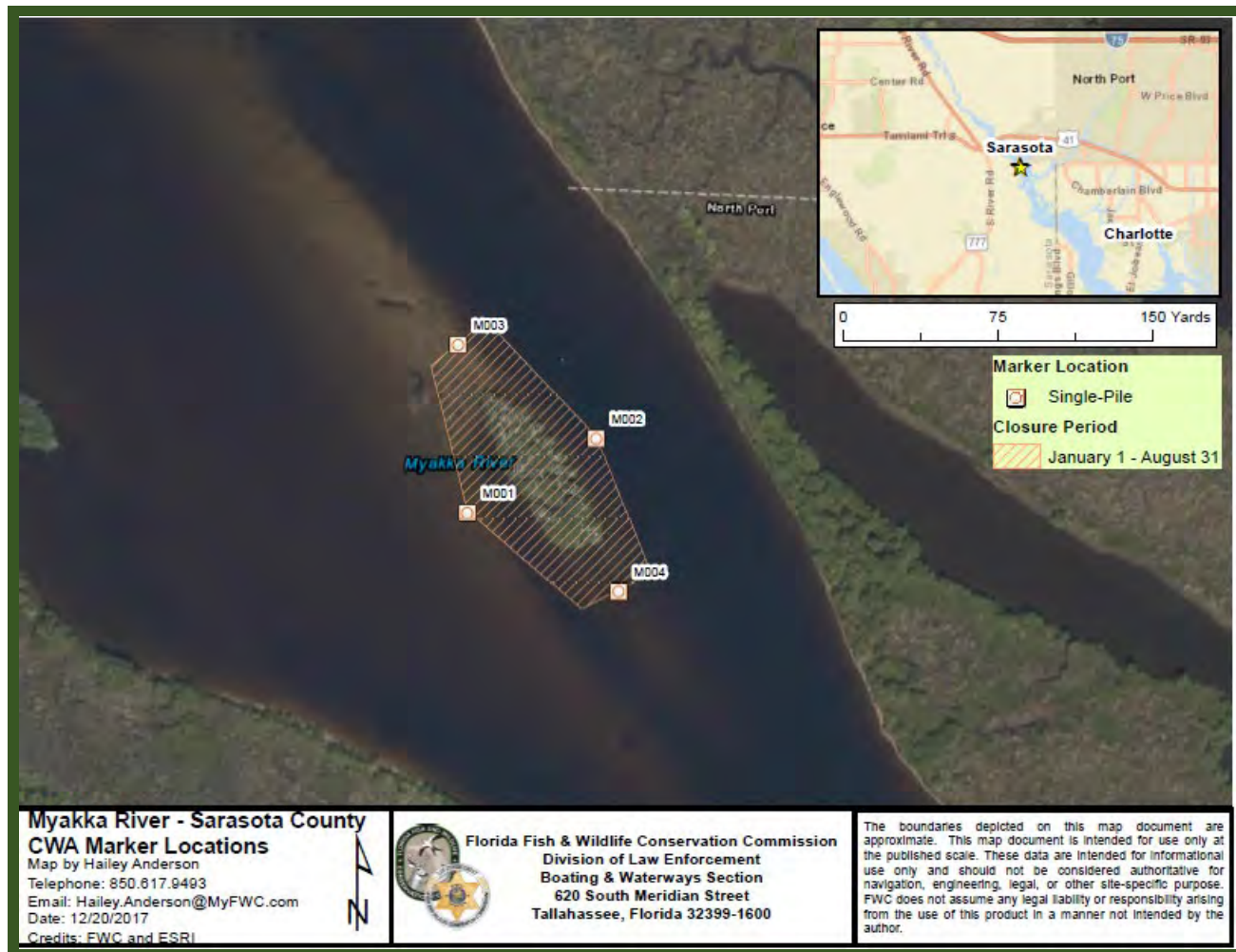
4. Snail kite observations are becoming increasingly common in MRSP especially in the large floodplain marsh areas. Likely drivers include an abundance of invasive island snails and the AHRES effort to eliminate large monocultured areas of invasive grasses. The reduction in dry season hydroperiod and continued invasive grass control efforts are complimentary efforts to keep a more open mosaic marsh community that is more usable to the snail kite. (Before 2015, the FPS wildlife database only has two snail kite observations in MRSP, once in 1969 and again in 1984. After October 2015 some were documented, and observations have increased yearly. Many of the observations have been confirmed by photographs and many of these images from MRSP can be seen on ebird:

<https://ebird.org/species/snakit/L299291>.)



Photo taken by kayak during survey in BFM just below UML weir.

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 map on the following page.)



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

