Merritt Island
National Wildlife Refuge

Photo: USFWS

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Refuge Facts
- Established: 1963.

- Ownership: NASA and FWS.

- Acres: 140,000-acre overlay of the John F. Kennedy Space Center, Florida. The refuge provides a buffer zone for NASA in the quest for space exploration.

- Headquarters location: five miles east of Titusville on State Road 402.

- Administers Lake Wales Ridge NWR and St. Johns NWR as part of complex.

Natural History
- Approximately one-half of the refuge's 140,000 acres consists of brackish estuaries and marshes. The remaining lands consist of coastal dunes, scrub oaks, pine forests and flatwoods, and palm and oak hammocks.

- The coastal location of MINWR, seven distinct habitat types, and position between the subtropic and temperate climatic zones, contribute to the refuge's importance as a major wintering area for migratory birds. Over 500 species of wildlife inhabit the refuge with 10 being listed as federally threatened or endangered. Several wading bird rookeries, 11 active bald eagle nests, numerous osprey nests, up to 400 manatees during spring months, and an estimated 2,500 Florida scrub jays can be found on the refuge.

Financial Impact of the Refuge
- 27-person staff.

- 500,000 visitors annually, excluding visits to the FWS exhibit at NASA's VIC.

Refuge Objectives
- Provide habitat for migratory birds.

- Provide habitat and protection for endangered and threatened species.

- Provide habitat for natural wildlife diversity.

- Provide opportunities for environmental education and interpretation, and wildlife-oriented recreation.

Management Tools
- Management of water levels within the refuge's 76 impoundments for migratory birds, wading birds, shorebirds, and other native species of plants and wildlife.

- The use of prescribed fire to maintain fire dependent/fire influenced communities.

- Chemical and mechanical control of exotic plants.

- Thinning of pine stands to improve bald eagle nesting habitat.

- Public education and outreach to help instill conservation ethics.

- Active law enforcement patrols to protect wildlife, habitat and the visiting public.

- Productive partnerships with NASA, state agencies, other Federal and local agencies to further refuge goals and objectives.

Public Use Opportunities
- Visitor Information Center.

- Five hiking trails ranging from 1/4-mile to 5 miles in length.

- Manatee observation deck.

- 7-mile auto tour route (Black Point Wildlife Drive).

- Observation towers.

- Wildlife observation and photography.

- Guided tours scheduled November-March.

- Fishing.

- Waterfowl hunting.

- Boating and canoeing.

- Environmental education.

Calendar of Events

January: Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival.

May: Migratory Bird Day, Annual Beach Clean-up.

June: National Fishing Week event.

June-July: turtle watches.

September: early waterfowl (teal/wood duck) season.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.

November-January: waterfowl hunting, per state regulations.

December: Christmas Bird Count.

Questions and Answers

What is there to see/do at the refuge?
The refuge has a visitor's center with a 20-minute video about the refuge, a short hiking trail, wildlife and habitat exhibits, and a staffed information desk. Four additional hiking trails, a seven-mile wildlife drive, a manatee viewing area, several boat launch areas, boating, fishing, canoeing, and wildlife observation opportunities also exist.

Where is the best place to see wildlife?
The best place to see wildlife on the refuge is Black Point Wildlife Drive. The 7-mile, one-way loop traverses several shallow marsh impoundments and is an excellent place to see waterfowl (in season), wading birds, shorebirds and raptors. Alligators, river otters, bobcats, various species of snakes, and other wildlife may be visible as well. A self-guiding brochure, available near the entrance to the drive, will provide information on things to look for while on the drive. An audio tape or CD may also be purchased at the Visitor Center for a narrated tour of the drive. One to two hours after sunrise and one to two hours before sunset are typically the best times to view wildlife actively feeding in the impoundments.

Where can we go to see an alligator?
Alligators are often visible in many areas of the refuge. There are usually alligators that inhabit the freshwater ponds behind the Visitor Center. They can often be seen basking in the warm sunshine (especially on cool days), on dikes or banks throughout the refuge including Black Point Wildlife Drive.

The road that leads to Playalinda Beach is also a popular spot from which to view alligators.

Where can we go to see a manatee?
A manatee viewing platform located at the northeast side of Haulover Canal is the best spot on the refuge to possibly see a manatee. From this location, as many as 60 have been seen at once. Interpretive panels are available at the platform to provide information about these endangered species.

How is it possible for wildlife to peacefully coexist with space operations and what effects do shuttle launches have on wildlife?
More than 130,000 of the 140,000 acres that make up the refuge are undeveloped. This means there are a lot of wide open spaces where wildlife can exist and not be disturbed or have encroaching development surround them. More importantly, by being purchased to function as a buffer zone for NASA, these wildlands have been protected from commercial development as can be seen all along the Atlantic Coast of Florida. NASA operational areas actually have minimal effects on refuge wildlife. During shuttle launches, short term disturbance occurs in nearby areas including some impoundments. The disturbance is short-lived and the only common wildlife fatalities are small minnows that inhabit the shallow bodies of water adjacent to the launch pads.