

THE FIRST, THE ONLY

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Pelican Island: America's first wildlife refuge
Our National Treasure

IN THE SERVICE
OF OTHERS



BY ANN TAYLOR

Following in the footsteps of pioneer Paul Kroegel, the Pelican Island Preservation Society is dedicated to saving Florida's wildlife.

STRICTLY FOR THE BIRDS



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Sebastian resident Paul Kroegel, his son Rodney, and a family friend visit with pelican chicks on Pelican Island. It was Kroegel's passion for protecting the island's feathered inhabitants that led President Theodore Roosevelt to sign an executive order on March 14, 1903, establishing Pelican Island as the first federal bird reservation.

Steve Massey never knew Paul Kroegel, but tales of the German immigrant's passion for protecting the wildlife on Pelican Island passed down by his great-grandfather was one of the things that prompted Steve to become a member of the Pelican Island Preservation Society. Today he serves as president of the non-profit organization formed in 1993 to support and promote the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge and National Wildlife Refuge System with their efforts to conserve habitat and wildlife.

"The refuge was a haven for birds and Mr. Kroegel was the first game warden appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to protect them from being slaughtered for their feathers," says Steve, who grew up in Wabasso and, coming from a family of avid fishermen, knows the island and the waters around it well. "The fact that in 1903 Pelican Island was established as the very first Wildlife Refuge in the United States is remarkable because it has become such a major part of our history. Pelican Island still exists because of the PIPS friends' group and the Fish & Wildlife Service's continued efforts to educate the public about the island's existence and to provide educational wildlife information."

The acronym for the Pelican Island Preservation Society, PIPS, is symbolic. A "pip" is defined as the initial break, or crack, in an eggshell made by a pelican hatchling. PIPS is also symbolic of a new concept dating from 1903 when lands were set aside as habitats where wildlife could breed and thrive. The Pelican Island Refuge, located on north Jungle Trail midway between the



Pelican Island has the honor of being America's first National Wildlife Refuge; today there are more than 550 refuges throughout the United States and its territories. In order to preserve Pelican Island's legacy, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has partnered with Indian River County to restore the island to as close to its original state as possible.



In the late 19th century, tens of thousands of pelicans were slaughtered for their feathers, which adorned women's fashions of the time, particularly hats.



Debbie Devore, USFWS employee and Refuge volunteer, and Josh Schultz show off a fish used to help last year's Wildlife Festivalgoers create fish print tee-shirts and canvas shopping bags.



Volunteers Suzanne Valencia and Carol Peterson take a camera break while working in Pelican Island's butterfly garden last year.

Wabasso Bridge and Sebastian Inlet Bridge on Highway A1A, includes the island's original 5.5 acres plus additional land acquired over the years; today there are 5,413 acres.

Tim Glover didn't set out to join PIPS when he moved to the area 20 years ago. In fact, the commercial airline pilot knew nothing about the organization. "I've always been interested in environmental things and a friend of mine kind of shanghaied me into getting involved," says Tim, who has served

on the board of directors for several years. "Essentially, our overall mission is to advocate for the refuge and funding for the entire refuge system. As a government entity the refuge can't accept donations, so we are the vehicle that makes it happen. Our primary fundraiser is the annual Wildlife Festival (see page 161), but because the refuge itself has specific projects that need financial support we have to find other ways to raise money."

PIPS board member Walt Stieglitz agrees. Now retired after being with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for 34 years, he is quick to point out that "the entire refuge system suffers from a chronic problem of under-funding, and that means staff. I'm a biologist and one of my early assignments was to oversee a complex of 13 refuges in South Florida.

"Pelican Island was one of them so I've had a long relationship with the refuge. My wife Lynn knew about PIPS and she said, hey, there's a friends' group out there, and that piqued my interest, so I decided to get involved," explains Walt, who emphasizes the positive power of advocacy, especially when tough economic conditions translate into budget cuts.

"What the public can do to help is show their interest and support. Call and send letters to our congressional delegation letting them know just how important the refuge is. Believe me, these kinds of efforts can make a big difference."

Joanna Webb, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Refuge ranger, is one of those who has witnessed the difference that advocacy efforts can make. "There are now well over 250 friends'



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Refuge Ranger Joanna Webb helps a young visitor take a visual tour of Pelican Island by describing points of interest.

THE PELICAN ISLAND PRESERVATION SOCIETY (PIPS) STRIVES TO:

- Heighten awareness of the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge and the more than 500 wildlife refuges that exist nationwide
- Present six public environmental educational meetings a year
- Promote national recognition for the natural heritage of the Sebastian area
- Sponsor an annual event celebrating the anniversary of Pelican Island
- Provide volunteers to assist refuge staff with projects at the refuge, such as invasive plant control, re-vegetation, wildlife inventories and monitoring, refuge tours and more.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

- From its beginnings, the National Wildlife Refuge System has relied on citizens, not the government, for support. Volunteer opportunities include:
 - Helping maintain the Butterfly Garden
 - Monthly Jungle Trail Trash Patrols
 - Becoming a weekly Rover Interpreter
 - Assisting with Marketing and Public Relations
 - Grant writing
 - Join PIPS
 - Help at this year's Wildlife Festival by contacting Joanna Webb at 562-3909, ext 258.

groups in the system and they're usually set up as a non-profit to help a particular refuge with its mission," she explains. "There are things like advocacy work that the friends' groups can do and we can't. Back in 2007, when we had budget cuts throughout the system, they went to the Hill and PIPS emerged as the strongest voice in the Southeast. I think the agency heard what they were saying. The great thing about the friends' group and people on the board is that these are folk who value and care about the resource we have here, and it's all grass-roots which is wonderful."

Joanna knew at the age of 8 that she wanted to work with animals. "Working with wildlife is a real



Paul Kroegel, appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt as the nation's first federal Refuge Manager, had a passion for protecting the pelicans on Pelican Island.

Over a century ago a man named Paul Kroegel had a mission. Upset over the killing of countless pelicans, herons, egrets and others by plume hunters, he determined to do what he could to stop the senseless slaughter. Without state or federal laws to protect the birds, Kroegel would sail out to Pelican Island with his gun and stand guard, though he knew something more had to be done.

Enter Frank Chapman, a well-known ornithologist and curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. When he discovered that Pelican Island was the last rookery for brown pelicans on the east coast of Florida, he pledged to protect the birds. Chapman, along with fellow bird protection advocate William Dutcher, met with President Theodore Roosevelt and appealed to his strong conservation ethic. On March 14, 1903, without fanfare, Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing Pelican Island as the first federal bird reservation. From this small beginning the National Wildlife Refuge System has grown to more than 500 refuges encompassing over 93 million acres administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

passion with me," she says. "I have a great connection with animals and I try to share that with others."

Those who attended last year's Wildlife Festival felt that same connection when a park ranger released a rehabilitated brown pelican back into the wild. Cheers and applause sent the bird winging skyward. There were also exhibits featuring birds of prey and reptiles. All of the funds collected at the event were donated to PIPS in order to construct the "Joe Michael Trail and Overlook," a new wildlife observation facility at the refuge in memory of a man who was instrumental in its expansion.

"The Wildlife Festival is probably the largest activity PIPS does, and it simply would not happen without them," says Joanna. "It's a huge task. It's not a big money-maker but the awareness and community support it creates is invaluable. You just can't measure it, though you can measure the fact that the festival brings in between 7,000 and 10,000 people, which is a great economic benefit to our area. A lot of people don't realize it but visitors come from all over the country and elsewhere to the festival because of the fact that Pelican Island is the first national refuge."

This year the Wildlife Festival will take place on Satur-

day, March 13, and as Joanna says, "On that day we need about 200 volunteers."

In Sebastian's Riverview Park stands a life-size bronze statue of the state's first wildlife officer, Paul Kroegel, with brown pelicans at his feet. The expression on the sculpted face is pensive as it looks out over the Indian River toward Pelican Island. Steve Massey often thinks of the man that the statue represents. "The Pelican Island Refuge exists because of people like Mr. Kroegel," he says. "Because of him what we have here is a national treasure." ❀

On Saturday, March 13, the Pelican Island Preservation Society, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the City of Sebastian will host the 18th annual Pelican Island Wildlife Festival at Riverview Park in Sebastian from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. There will be over 80 environmental exhibitors, ongoing live wildlife shows featuring birds of prey and reptiles, live music, environmental activities for children, kayak tours to Pelican Island, and refreshments. The festival is free to the public and focuses on inspiring families to better understand nature through environmental education. For more information go to www.pelicanislandfriends.org.