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► Sports - August 25, 2005

Bird Patrol maintains vigilance with counts

Lee County group provides data

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Binoculars. Check.

Field guide. Check.

Notebook and pencil. Check.

The only thing needed next is a place to patrol for birds. Yes, "patrol."

In rapidly growing Lee County, volunteer bird-watchers in a group called the Bird Patrol visit more than 30 parks and conservation areas to tally species and populations on a regular basis.

The group of 32 has a Web site, a calendar of monthly counting dates and a training session set for Saturday, Sept. 17, to recruit and educate people who want to help their feathered friends.

"Wildlife can't speak to us, but they can speak to us in data," said Anita Marshall, 53, a Fort Myers wildlife lover and gardener who didn't become a bird-watcher until a visit to Lakes Regional Park four years ago.

She walked by part of the park where hundreds of showy wading birds nest — a rookery — and was smitten by the creatures.

"When the mother or father bird is taking care of chicks, it warms my heart," she said, describing how adult ibis swooshed in with tiny critters in their curved beaks that they fed to squawking youngsters.

Marshall paired up with bird lover and park visitor Sue Moore to form the Bird Patrol. Their data are passed on to parks and land managers to help with land-use decisions.

"It's the only birding experience where I feel I can make a difference," said Moore, 66, of Iona.

She didn't start bird-watching until 13 years ago when her husband took her to a nature photography workshop.

Now her earlobes dangle with ruby-throated hummingbird earrings and she wears a robin-egg blue T-shirt with the parks and recreation volunteer logo on it.

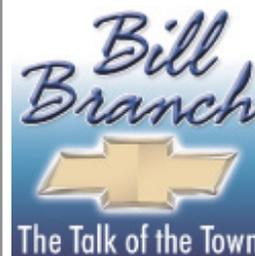


• A juvenile white ibis, right, searches for food in its parent's mouth at Lakes Regional Park recently. Bird Patrol volunteers count ibis at the park. Andrew West/news-press.com

IF YOU GO

- Sunday: Counting event for already-trained Bird Patrol volunteers. Need to reconnect with the group? Call 267-7872. Next count date: Sunday, Sept. 11
- Saturday, Sept. 17: Meeting for anyone interested in becoming a Bird Patrol member. 9 a.m. at Lakes Regional Park (at the shelter by the playground). 90-minute training session. Free. Sign-up requested. Call 707-0876.
- Saturday, March 4, 2006: Bird Fest at Lakes Regional Park, courtesy of Bird Patrol and Lee County Parks and Recreation.
- Anytime: If you already know your birds and want to help, call Bird Patrol volunteer Anita Marshall at 267-7872.

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She's beyond devoted to the birds. She and three others at Lakes Park earlier this month tallied 900 ibis during a two-hour canoe trip.

She figures Bird Patrol is a way to guarantee she'll dust off the binoculars and field guide regularly — and paddle into the natural world of nests and eggs, fledglings and adults, leggy wading birds and chipper perching birds.

"I had no idea there'd be so many birds," she said recalling her first year counting.

Now, tallying nearly 1,000 birds is all in a short day's work. And it's still rewarding, still getting her to places she might not otherwise explore in Southwest Florida. Like the backwaters of Lakes Park.

"This is a jewel of a place," she said.

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- Watch for birds during your commute or neighborhood walks.
- Get a field guide specific to this part of the United States.
- Become familiar with commonly seen birds to help you master using a field guide, practice using your binoculars and quickly determine what to rule out when you discover a less common bird.
- Learn to identify birds using comparisons. For example, if the bird you see is shaped like a great blue heron, is smaller than a great blue heron and is white with bluish-gray splotches along its back, you can use this information to get to the pages in your field guide for herons and bitterns. Scanning through, you'll find that you are looking at an immature little blue heron.
- Go on a guided hike. Nature centers, parks and preserves offer them. Find them in The News-Press outdoors calendar.
- Keep a distance from nesting birds and rookeries, especially if you are in a kayak or canoe.



Helped form Bird Patrol *moore*

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- Not ready to volunteer for Bird Patrol? Do something instead to improve bird habitat:
- Plant your yard with native vegetation — such as cabbage palms and berry-producing plants.
- Avoid pesticide use. Adult birds risk bringing back contaminated food to nesting chicks.
- Give donations to nonprofit groups and government programs that preserve habitat such as Lee County's Conservation 20/20 lands.

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• Juvenile cattle egrets perch on a limb at Lakes Regional Park. *andrew west/the news-press*

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