

## Wildlife returns

The removal of exotic plants has cleared the way for watchers

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Eight years ago, the only way a visitor to Little Pine Island could traverse the countryside was with a machete in hand.

The dense forest of exotics prevented people and animals from navigating easily through the vegetation. Exotics like the tall Australian pines, melaleuca and Brazilian pepper trees even kept the light from hitting the forest floor.

Plants were strangled and not much other than tree frogs and a few birds called the island home.

Now, eight years later, visitors can hike the trails and see firsthand the restoration done by The Little Pine Island Wetland Restoration and Mitigation Bank.

Pineland resident and avid wildlife watcher Sheilana Massey, 71, has always wanted to hike the trails on Little Pine Island.

Last Saturday, Massey and two family members came to an open house sponsored by the mitigation bank, Mariner Properties Development Inc., the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Friends of Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserves.

"I have always wanted to see what was going on here," Massey said. "I drive by it all the time. They really have removed so many of the pines and melaleuca. It's a big difference from what it looked like in 1999 when I first moved here."

In 1996, Mariner Properties entered into a private/public partnership with the State of Florida to restore approximately 1,600 acres of the 4,700-acre island. About 3,100 acres are protected mangroves.

"We are a little more than halfway through the project," Richard C. Anderson of Mariner Properties said. "It has been very successful so far. We have about three to five more years to go and it will be completed."

The mitigation bank works to restore an area back to its native habitat. In the case of Little Pine Island, about 1,600 acres were damaged in the 1960s when mosquito ditching was put in. The water drained out and the exotics moved in. The native wetland animal life all but disappeared.

Little Pine Island's mitigation bank is working to remove 99 percent of all the exotics, fill in the mosquito ditching and maintain the area forever. About 40 to 60 tons of dense exotics are removed per acre.

The continuing maintenance is very important to the restoration process, Anderson said.

"When you remove the melaleuca, there is 30 years of seed source imbedded in the soil. It looks good for about six months, then it starts to come back," Anderson said.



Volunteer Bill Plechaty leads visitors, including Sheilana Massey, left, through sweeping grasses on a tour of the Little Pine Island Restoration Project Saturday, April 17, 2004. The grasses are found on the portion of the preserve which was the first stage of wetland restoration. *STEPHEN HAYFORD/news-press.com*

An herbicide is put down as soon as crews cut to halt the prolific melaleuca's growth.

The entire project is estimated to cost anywhere from \$12 to \$14 million. A trust will be set up to cover the perpetual maintenance costs.

When the project is completed, three organizations must sign off on it: Florida's Department of Environmental Protection, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Florida's Park Service.

"So far everyone has been very pleased with our progress," Anderson said.

## **SAVING THE WETLANDS**

When a developer, building somewhere in Lee County, finds it is going to unavoidably impact a wetland or destroy it, it can buy credits at Little Pine Island's mitigation bank.

Credits cost anywhere from \$35,000 to \$40,000. Anderson said about 200 credits have already been bought with the county's Department of Transportation being one of the best customers. About 10 percent of each sale goes into the trust to help with perpetual maintenance.

Anderson said there is a big misconception about exactly what mitigation banking is.

He said when a developer is putting in a new shopping center or the state needs to widen a road, many times a wetland will be impacted. Anderson said people believe mitigation banking allows a developer to willy-nilly destroy a wetland in the building process because it can always buy credits from one of the mitigation projects.

"The misconception comes from people who are not familiar with the permitting process," Anderson said. "I always get frustrated when I hear people saying that it makes it easier for developers. That's impossible."

Anderson added, "In order to get a permit to impact wetlands you must go through a three-part sequence. First there is avoidance. If it is determined you can avoid the wetlands, you are made to avoid them. There's minimization. Minimize your impact to the wetlands and then the third and the last process is mitigation as a last recourse."

## **A NEW ISLAND**

Visitors will see a variety of wildlife if they walk along the nature trail on the north side of the island.

Anderson said they have recorded over 100 wetland dependent wildlife species since the restoration has begun, up from the 20 species first recorded in 1996.

"We have apex predators like bald eagles moving in, red-shouldered hawks, ospreys, and even peregrine falcons."

Anderson said sightings of storks and white pelicans also have been recorded.

Now with a grassy plain, huge populations of rabbits have moved in, giving the raptors and bobcats an essential food source.

One unwanted creature has moved in as well — the wild hog. The pesky beasts are very fond of rooting in the new grasses. DEP has resorted to trapping them.

Kitty Baker, 45, of Pineland, took to the nature trail for the first time on Saturday.

"It was great to see it the way it's supposed to look," Baker said. The trail is pretty easy and people can find it by themselves."

DEP nature guide Bill Plechaty said it is an easy hike, but people should take the guided walking tour the first time. Maps can be found in a box at the head of the trail.

For more information or a guided tour, call Florida DEP at (941) 575-5861.