

## Little Estero Island Critical Wildlife Area Gets Ready for Guests

As our snowbird visitors start packing and heading north, millions of other birds are heading toward Florida scouting for a place to nest or rest. On the south end of Estero Island is a special "resort" for them. Little Estero Island Critical Wildlife Area is one of 15 functioning Critical Wildlife Areas in the state. From April 1st to August 31st the area is staked off and protected for migratory bird nesting and roosting. This posting is necessary because accidentally approaching a nest or bird could lead to an adult bird leaving a nest and in only a few minutes the temperature of the nest could rise to a level that would be fatal to a young chick.

Critical Wildlife Areas (CWAs) are established by the Florida Wildlife Commission. These areas are formed to protect important and threatened wildlife from disturbance during critical periods of their life cycles. Between 1972 and 1993, twenty-two CWAs were formed around the state. There are 18 still in existence and fifteen CWAs currently provide protected habitat for birds. Little Estero Island is the only CWA in Lee County. All CWAs are posted for all or part of the year. Posting may involve signs and/or fencing that establishes buffer zones that identify for people and pets when they are getting too close to nests, roosts, or foraging areas.

Keith Laakkonen, Environmental Sciences Coordinator for The Town of Ft Myers Beach, told the Island Sand Paper that several critical nesting areas were posted last Monday, March 31st, in the Little Estero Island CWA by the Florida Wildlife Commission. The areas are smaller than last year because of erosion and are close to the very southern part of the lagoon in Little Estero Island CWA. Keith urged people to keep a safe distance from all beach-nesting birds. Any disturbance is a threat to the birds' existence as the chicks are put at grave risk from exposure to heat and predators when the adult flees the nest.

The Little Estero Island CWA (often referred to as Little Estero Island Lagoon) is a state owned parcel of 50 acres on the Gulf at the very southern end of Estero Island. The area includes a mangrove and seagrape-surrounded lagoon with wading birds, and the beach is a resting area for terns, gulls, sandpipers and many other species of shorebirds. Roger Tory Peterson, famed ornithologist and author of the first modern field guide to birding, visited Little Estero Island and declared it possibly the best place in the world to photograph shorebirds. Some estimate that up to 150 species of birds visit the area annually since 1998; participants in the eBird checklist (<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1142803>) have recorded sightings of 83 bird species at the Little Estero Island CWA.

Little Estero Island CWA is a site in the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail (GFBWT) system. The GFBWT is a 2,000-mile, self-guided highway trail that connects 515 birding and wildlife sites in Florida. The sites are divided into regions and each region has its own guidebook available through the GFBWT website (<http://floridabirdingtrail.com>). For each site there is a checklist and data on bird species spotted at that site.

The town of Ft Myers Beach encourages people to enjoy walking in the Little Estero Island CWA, but remember that while you are here to recreate, other creatures' survival depends on your behavior.

The town's website gives the following rules to minimize impact on wildlife:

1. PLEASE, KEEP YOUR DISTANCE! When you see concentrations of birds, a good "rule of thumb" is to stay at least 500 feet away. Minimizing disturbance to concentrations of birds is the key to conserving them.
2. WALK AROUND! Please, do not ever intentionally force birds to fly. If you see birds on the beach, in the lagoon, or on a sandbar -- always give them the right of way.



3. KEEP YOUR PET LEASHED! Never approach a bird colony accompanied by your dog. One loose dog can destroy a colony of ground-nesting birds within a matter of minutes. Pets are not allowed in Little Estero Island Critical Wildlife Area.
4. SUPPORT POSTING EFFORTS. Honor these closed areas and encourage others to do the same.

**HELP SPREAD THE WORD.** If you see others disturbing wildlife, let them know about the effects of their actions. Many people don't realize that their actions may be harmful to wildlife. If you see someone maliciously disturbing a bird colony, contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (1-888-404-FWCC), the Lee County Sheriff's Department, or officials with the Town of Fort Myers Beach.

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