



Globally Important Bird Areas



Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Canaveral National Seashore, and Cape Canaveral Air Station, Florida

Ornithological Highlight: One of the larger populations of Florida's only endemic species, the Florida Scrub-Jay

Location: Atlantic coast near Titusville

- *Peninsular Florida* (NABCI Bird Conservation Region #31)
- *Peninsular Florida* (PIF Physiographic Area #02)

Size: 212,000 acres

Ownership: NASA (managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), National Park Service, U.S. Air Force

Habitats: brackish estuaries and marshes, coastal dunes, scrub oaks, pine forests and flatwoods, palm and oak hammocks

Site description: The refuge is a 139,000-acre overlay of the John F. Kennedy Space Center; this means that while NASA owns the land, the Fish and Wildlife Service manages much of it. Adjacent to it are the Canaveral National Seashore (57,600 acres) and the Cape Canaveral Air Station (15,400 acres). The refuge administers Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, Lake Wales Ridge National Wildlife Refuge, Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge and St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge as part of the complex. The 24-mile-long National Seashore is the longest stretch of undeveloped beach on Florida's Atlantic Coast.

Birds: Florida Scrub-Jay is resident on this complex of sites; the bird is extremely sedentary and rarely wanders more than a few miles from which it was born. Wood Stork and Reddish Egret occur on the refuge; the former, which now winters there, used to breed but has not done so since a freeze in the late 1980s killed much of the mangrove community. Up to 200,000 waterfowl winter, most abundant of which is the American Wigeon; many Redhead winter as well. Other species include Mottled Duck, Willet, Brown Pelican, breeding Least Tern, Black Rail, and breeding Chuck-will's-Widow. Bachman's Sparrow is rare resident also recorded as a breeding species. Up to several thousand wading birds occur seasonally, and the area is important for wintering and migrating shorebirds.

Conservation issues: About ten years ago there were some 400 groups of scrub-jays were found on the refuge with another 100 or so groups on Cape Canaveral Air Station, to which there is no public access, and about 20 groups on Canaveral National Seashore, but the numbers have decreased markedly in recent years. The cause of the decline is probably due primarily to a lack

of prescribed burns needed to create the habitat that sustains the species. At present some new habitat is being created for the bird by an alternate means, involving clearing areas with heavy equipment; there is some controlled burning. Water levels within the refuge's 76 impoundments are managed for migratory birds, wading birds, shorebirds, and other native species of plants and wildlife. Non-native invasive plants such as Brazilian Pepper are combated by use of chemical and mechanical control. The area of the refuge is subject to intense development pressure, bringing with it pollution and recreational overuse, including disturbance to the birds by watercraft. Management on the National Seashore and the Air Station is similar to that on the refuge, but the effort, at least on the Air Station, is thought to be at a scale too small to allow the jay population to recover. Merritt once had one of the only two populations of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow; mosquito control measures were a factor in its demise.

Visitor information: Best time to visit is fall through spring. Contact P.O. Box 6504 Titusville, FL 32782, tel 321-861-0667.