

aqua-notes

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SOLUTIONS

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Mark your calendars...

- Feb 14– Mar 2, 2017, Nassau County. Florida Master Naturalist Program-Freshwater Systems Module. See www.masternaturalist.org for more information or to register.
- More on back page!

Trying to better protect right whales

A few North Atlantic right whale calves have been reported so far this season (see page 3 for more NARW information). One of the biggest threats to these animals is boat strikes. A recent publication from Florida Sea Grant (*Offshore Recreational Boating Characterization in the Southeast US*) documents results of a map-based survey given to offshore boaters in Georgia and northeast Florida. It is hoped that the data will be useful for better management of public access and safety while reducing adverse effects of encounters between right whales and humans. You can read the report at <http://bit.ly/2ihrvHw>



Above: Propeller wounds killed this NARW. Photo credit: NOAA.

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Cooler water temperatures lead to marine mammal migrations

The term “snowbirds” has long been applied to people who flock to Florida to live here during the winter months, then return “up north” once the weather starts to warm. But people are not alone in seeking refuge in warm Florida during the winter. Two marine mammal species, in particular, hold annual winter migrations to warmer Florida waters. The Florida manatee, while a Florida resident year-round, will migrate to wintering areas when water temperatures start to fall. Prolonged exposure to temperatures below 68°F will make manatees experience cold stress (the animal equivalent of hypothermia). Around the state, there are natural and human-made winter refuges where manatees gather. Individual manatees tend to return to the same area each winter. In Flagler County, the closest winter manatee refuge is at Blue Spring State Park, in Volusia County. Manatees that normally live in the St. Johns River during the rest of the year will congregate at Blue Spring during the colder months. It is not uncommon for there to be 300 or more manatees in the spring run on a chilly winter morning.

(continued on page 3)

Non-native apple snails

From time to time, people will bring snail shells in to the UF/IFAS Extension Flagler County office for us to identify. One snail that is sometimes found in and around the stormwater swales is the non-native island apple snail. While there is also a native apple snail found in Florida, the non-native species tends to be more common. Island apple snails can grow to be more than 3.5 inches in size, while Florida apple snails only grow to slightly over two inches. The two species also have different diets. The Florida apple snail feeds on algae and bacteria, while the island apple snail eats the vegetation of rooted aquatic plants. It is difficult to distinguish between native and non-native apple snails; size is often used for this purpose.

Island apple snails are thought to have been introduced into Florida's natural environment through the release of aquarium or ornamental pond specimens. These animals are native to tropical and subtropical areas of South America. There are now established populations in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. Island apple snails have also been reported from South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Arizona and Puerto Rico. They are found in freshwater lakes, rivers, streams, ponds, and ditches. They seem to prefer water bodies that are slow-moving. Adult snails will sometimes bury in the mud, especially during times of low water/drought. They can survive for several months in that environment.

Both native and non-native apple snails crawl up onto emergent plants or man-made structures to lay their clumps of eggs out of reach of aquatic predators. The Florida apple snail lays larger eggs than the island apple snail, and the native eggs have a white or pale pink "shell" surrounding each egg. The island apple snail lays large masses of smaller eggs, which are generally very pink in color. A single mass can contain about 2,000 island apple snail eggs. When recently laid, the island apple snail egg masses will look slimy as they are covered with a mucus film. As this mucus dries, it helps stick the eggs together. To help control island apple snails, people can knock the egg masses into the water. This will kill the developing baby snails. Both native and non-native apple snails lay eggs between about March and October. Eggs take about two weeks to hatch.

The Florida apple snail is an important food source for the limpkin (and in South Florida, the endangered snail kite). Island apple snails grow to be too large for these native predators to eat, although the birds can probably still eat the smaller animals.



Island apple snail shell (left) and egg mass (right)



Cooler water temperatures lead to marine mammal migrations (cont.)

The water coming out of the spring boil is a fairly constant temperature (about 70-72°F). While Blue Spring allows people to swim, tube and dive in the spring run during the late spring through fall months, people are not allowed in the water when manatees are visiting in the winter. However, people can still get quite close to (but not touch!) the manatees, especially at the swimming dock. Here manatees can swim underneath the floating platform where people are standing. The park is a very popular place during the winter, and people who want to go there to see manatees are advised to plan to arrive early. Once all of the park's parking spaces are filled, the park will not let additional vehicles in until other vehicles leave. This can happen as early as 10 am.



Before heading to Blue Spring, it is a good idea to check with the park to see how many manatees are in the spring run. If we have a few days of particularly warm weather, it is not unusual for the manatees to head back into the river to get something to eat. Each morning, the park rangers and park volunteers conduct manatee counts within the spring run. You can call the park at 386-775-3663 or can check periodic reports at <http://www.savethemanatee.org/savethemanateecam.html>. The website also has a live web camera feed, so even if you cannot visit the park, you can check out some of the action. Many individual manatees have names and can be recognized by the unique scar patterns on their bodies.

Another marine mammal that makes a winter migration to Florida's warm waters is the North Atlantic right whale. This whale spends most of its time in waters around the Gulf of Maine and Newfoundland, but pregnant females migrate to waters off the southeastern US to have their calves in the winter. As a result, between December and April, it is sometimes possible to see this highly endangered whale very close to Flagler County's coast. Right whales got their name because (in the late 1800's and early 1900's) several aspects of their behavior made them the "right" whale to hunt. They are large whales, growing to be about 55 feet in length. They have quite thick blubber. They are slow swimmers, and tend to stay fairly close to the surface most of the time. They tend to feed in areas that are close to the coast. So, they were fairly easy to spot and kill, and they provided a good yield of meat, oil (blubber) and whalebone (baleen).

Today, the North Atlantic right whale is considered critically endangered, and extra protections are in place for this species. People may not approach within 500 yards of a right whale without a permit—this applies to boats as well as to surfers, paddle boarders and drones. Right whales are dark in color, with only small patches of white on the head. They sometimes have a white belly, but that part of the whale is rarely seen. They do not have a fin on their backs, so when they are at the surface, they can be very difficult to see. When they breathe, the spray that shoots into the air forms a V-shape. People who think that they see a right whale are asked to report their sighting to the Marine Resources Council by calling 1-888-97-WHALE (94253). This will allow researchers to learn more about individual whales that might be in our area, and can help notify ships/boats about the presence of whales in specific locations.

We're now on Facebook—check out [facebook.com/NEFLSeaGrant](https://www.facebook.com/NEFLSeaGrant) and “like” it to keep informed about coastal topics in the region. Don't have a Facebook account? That's OK—you can view the page without one :)

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More “Mark your calendars”

- Feb 13-March 8—St. Johns County. Florida Master Naturalist Program-Upland Systems Module. See www.masternaturalist.org for more information or to register.
- Feb. 17-March 24—Volusia County. Florida Master Naturalist Program-Coastal Module. See www.masternaturalist.org for more information or to register.
- Feb 24-March 31—Volusia County. Florida Master Naturalist Program-Upland Systems Module. See www.masternaturalist.org for more information or to register.
- March 4-5—Florida SpringsFest (Silver Springs State Park, Ocala). Event is from 10 am to 4 pm each day. <https://www.facebook.com/floridaspringsfest>
- March 10-12—Seminole County. Feb 13-March 8—St. Johns County. Florida Master Naturalist Program-Wildlife Monitoring Topic. See www.masternaturalist.org for more information or to register.
- March 22-April 17—Levy County. Florida Master Naturalist Program-Coastal Module. See www.masternaturalist.org for more information or to register.
- March 28-April 2—Duval County. Florida Master Naturalist Program-Coastal Module. See www.masternaturalist.org for more information or to register.

Please check the calendar at <http://calendar.ifas.ufl.edu> for other environmental education programs around the state.

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