

## Celebration of Merritt Island NWR's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

My name is Larry Salata. I was on the staff at the Refuge in 1979 and 1980. At the time, I was finishing my Master's degree in Biological Sciences at California State University, Sacramento. Rob Lee, who was the Assistant Refuge Manager and a friend and colleague of mine from graduate school, brought a job announcement to my attention for a NTE one year appointment at the Refuge. I applied, was selected, and arrived for work in January of 1979. That year I worked through August then returned in February of 1980 to complete the appointment.

I am forever grateful to Rob for thinking of me, and to him and his wife, Jackie, for extending the hospitality of staying at their home in Titusville during the first months of being on-the-job. This position represents the beginning of my almost 32-year (and counting) career as a wildlife biologist working in the arena of endangered species conservation.

When I reported for duty it was my first visit to Florida. My first impressions were all positive. Rob and other Refuge staff were friendly, smart, helpful, dedicated to the mission, and had a good sense of team, and a good sense of humor. I especially enjoyed listening to the different forms of "southern accent." The landscape was beautiful, the wildlife diverse, and in January the humidity was low and the chiggers were uncommon. Seeing and visiting NASA facilities on the Refuge, such as Launch Pad 32, the Vehicle Assembly Building, and the shuttle runway, was also most interesting.

My job duties included conducting surveys for the dusky seaside sparrow with Beau Sauselein (mostly at the St. John's River NWR), planning and implementing a census of the Florida scrub jay on the Refuge (my thesis research involved scrub jays and Stellar's jays in the SF Bay area of California), collecting information on water bird nesting activities on islands in the Banana River, helping with surveys for the Atlantic saltmarsh snake, and dissecting duck gizzards to collect lead shot samples. One other memorable duty was monitoring interior least tern breeding activities on the overrun area of the shuttle runway. At one point, the Space Shuttle Enterprise was parked on the tarmac after being detached from the 747 that carried it to the Space Center from California. NASA personnel at the airport invited me to walk around and under the Enterprise, which I did. Having grown up at the time of the moon program (I graduated from high school in 1969 when the U.S. first landed on the moon) and enjoyed the Star Trek TV series, this was most interesting and fun.

I also assisted on two control burn projects, one of which became uncontrolled. To this day, the deafening roar, enormous flames, and intense heat of that fire cause me to pause and really appreciate the dangerous job of wildfire control. In the summer of 1981, I received the very sad news that Beau and another Refuge technician, Scott Maness, whom I never had the pleasure of meeting, had been killed by a wildfire started by a lightning strike. Beau was a savvy, competent, good-natured professional. His loss still makes me sad.

Following my tenure at the Refuge, a captive-rearing program was established for the dusky seaside sparrow at of all places, Disney World. In 1979 and 1980, Beau and I documented only a handful of singing males on the St. John's Refuge, no females. All of the females apparently perished in a wildfire in 1978 that started on private grazing land adjacent to the Refuge and burned through the Refuge at the peak of the sparrow's nesting season. The captive breeding program failed and the last known dusky seaside sparrow on the planet died in captivity at Disney World in the mid-1980s. My experience with the dusky as an employee of the Refuge and an appreciation of the factors responsible for its extinction (as chronicled in the book *A Shadow and a Song* by Mark Walters) left an indelible mark on me and have guided my work since. Endangered species conservation has everything to do with attention to detail and the obligation to make tough decisions using the powerful authority granted to the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service under the Endangered Species Act. I wish the fate of the dusky seaside sparrow had been different. In this respect, my job at Merritt Island NWR had a profound influence on my career.

Since my job at the Refuge, I have continued to work with the Service in southern California and in the Pacific NW on endangered species conservation activities. I also worked for four years (1984-1988) as a biologist with the U.S. Navy in San Diego and at San Clemente Island off the coast of southern California conducting endangered species recovery activities. I am especially proud of my field work on the least Bell's vireo, an endangered songbird. For 14 years (1980-1993) I conducted intensive vireo nest monitoring and cowbird trapping in riparian areas on Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base in northern San Diego County. That work and continuing efforts on the Base have led to a large increase in the vireo population and served to guide similar management efforts for the vireo throughout southern California. The attention to detail has made a significant difference. For the last 19 years, I have served as a Branch Chief in the Service's Endangered Species Program for Consultation and Conservation Planning at the Pacific Regional Office in Portland, Oregon.

As I'm writing this, I'm recollecting fond memories of interacting with Rob Lee, Stevie Chestnut, Suse Shane, Ward Feurt, Alan Flock, Elwood Hurte, Howard Poitevint, Phil Street, Steve Vehrs, Dorn Whitmore, Georgina Gower, Bill Leenhouts, and others whose names I have forgotten.

I'm so glad I had the opportunity to be part of the Refuge staff, if only for a short period, and to "launch" my career at Merritt Island Refuge. I look forward to visiting the Refuge again and I wish I could have made it to the reunion. Happy 50<sup>th</sup> birthday Merritt Island NWR, and best wishes to my former colleagues.

Sincerely,

Larry Salata