Passage Key and the American Wildlife Conservation Movement

On October 10, 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt, at the urging of the National Audubon Society, established Passage Key National Wildlife Refuge in Tampa Bay as a Federal Bird Reservation. It was one of the first of the 55 “Roosevelt Refuges” that he would establish. Today it is one of more than 540 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System which conserves nearly 100 million acres of land for this nation’s fish and wildlife resources. But a century ago, America’s wildlife was in trouble, and the wildlife conservation movement was a new idea.

Passage Key: A Rich Florida History
Passage Key is located at the entrance to Tampa Bay and it was an important landmark for early Spanish and British explorers. The island was first identified on nautical charts as “Isla de San Francisco y Leon,” then “Burnaby Island,” and later “Cayo del Pasaje,” or Passage Key.

In 1898, the Tampa Bay area played a key role in America’s history. Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders were stationed in Tampa, preparing for the Spanish American War. Roosevelt and the Rough Riders would have surely noticed Passage Key as they left the area bound for Cuba.

Wildlife In Crisis
As the 20th century approached, America’s wildlife resources were in trouble. Years of unchecked hunting saw the decline of many species we consider common today, such as deer and turkey.

Unfortunately, this all changed in 1921 when a severe hurricane pounded Tampa Bay, virtually destroying Passage Key. While Passage Key has never been the same, some of the island has rebuilt over time. Today Passage Key, in combination with nearby Egmont Key NWR hosts the largest colonies of Royal and Sandwich terns in the State. The island’s importance was recognized in 1970 when it was designated a Wilderness Area. In 1991, the island was closed to the public year round to protect the island’s sensitive bird nesting habitat.

Tampa Bay Refuges
Today Passage Key National Wildlife Refuge is one of three national wildlife refuges in the Tampa Bay area, along with Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge and Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge. These refuges continue to provide essential sanctuary for local breeding birds and other species. Ongoing partnership between all levels of government, non-profit citizen support groups, and the private sector can assure another 100 years of conservation success in Tampa Bay.

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Background information on Asa Pillsbury courtesy Bradenton Herald.