

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.

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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.



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A “wild frontier” mentality was prevalent in Florida, where populations of pelicans, egrets, spoonbills, and other water birds were suffering at the hands of market hunters. Plume feathers, which were used to adorn women’s hats, were worth more than gold. Conservationists were alarmed by this vicious slaughter of birds, and faced off against market hunters in what became known as the “Feather Wars.”

In 1901, the American Ornithologists Union and the Florida Audubon Society led a successful campaign to pass legislation in Florida calling for the protection of non-game birds. Over the next several years, the Florida Audubon Society hired wardens to protect four critical bird habitats. Two were killed in the line of duty.

Warden Asa Pillsbury

When Passage Key was designated as a federal bird reservation by President Roosevelt in 1905, it was a 60-acre island with a freshwater lake and lush vegetation. Asa Pillsbury and his family homesteaded on Passage Key in 1908. In 1910 he was hired by the Audubon Society as the part-time warden of the key, a post that he held until 1921. He also built fishing boats, and was the caretaker of Fort DeSoto. Pillsbury and his wife reported 102 species of birds on the island in 1910.

Background information on Asa Pillsbury courtesy *Bradenton Herald*.

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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