

# CHOCTAWHATCHEE AUDUBON SOCIETY

P. O. Box 1044, Niceville, Florida 32588

*ChoctawhatcheeAudubon.org*

Hi fellow Audubon members, wildlife photographers, nature lovers, and friends,

September 1, 2016

Veterans Park is surrounded, and Okaloosa County's largest Great Blue Heron nest rookery is under threat....

Veterans Park is 14 acres of County land on Okaloosa Island. If you have never visited the park, we urge you to do so. Veterans Park is located by the Emerald Coast Convention Center. Ospreys, other raptors, doves, song-birds, and marsh birds are easy for children to see at the park's five wetlands, oak woodland dunes, and bayside habitats. You'll also see examples of Florida's State Tree, the Sabal Palm. Birders visit the park from many other states to see rare warblers, tanagers, and flycatchers at eye level. Least Bitterns and Gray Kingbirds nest here.

It has come to our attention (August 3 Northwest Florida Daily News) that the owners of Wild Willy's Adventure Zone is attempting to lease from Okaloosa County a 4.5-acre parcel of land (what we call the "H Tract" on the attached PDF map) next to Veterans Park to greatly increase the size of their amusement park. The increased noise and congestion created by the facility's new rides would likely interfere with people wishing to enjoy time with nature. When you approach the park entrance and look toward the water tower, do you want to see carnival rides, or do you want to see birds ??

Doubling Wild Willy's will disrupt the wildlife of Veterans Park. Thousands of songbirds crossing the Gulf take shelter where they feel safe, some of them stop to rest at Veterans Park, and the Great Blue Heron rookery may be abandoned if development continues too far (and too close). To date, 212 bird species have been sighted here.

The attached map's "R Tract" (our name for it) is also in danger. The County decided not to extend the Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge lease on that 3.2-acre parcel. Soon, Okaloosa Co. may try to lease this parcel to a developer. The land includes a 0.7-acre wetland (with a pond where Purple Gallinules raised 4 chicks this year) and several Great Blue Heron nests, all of which would be disturbed by any road entering the parcel. Great Blue Herons can seem tame, but they are different birds near their nests. Florida scientists have suggested a 100-m buffer for them.

We are asking for your help! There are two rapidly approaching County Commission meetings during which our five Commissioners will decide whether or not to lease the GCMLC parcel (the "H Tract") to Wild Willy's. The newspaper article reported that the, "Commissioners voted to postpone their decision until the board's Sept. 20 meeting in Shalimar to give south-end residents the opportunity to speak on the land-use change." Commissioner Carolyn Ketchel added, "I think we want to make sure we give everybody a chance before we move too quickly."

Friends, please let each of the Commissioners know that you are opposed to re-leasing the former GCMLC and ECWR leases (don't use the H and R names) to Wild Willy's and other developers. The Commissioners are under pressure to turn "idle" County land into County revenue. Please counter with your own pressure - Send the Commissioners your letters and e-mails. Also, if you really want to make a big impact, please consider attending one or both of the County Commission meetings to briefly address our five....(continued next page)

*"CAS is dedicated to the protection of bird and wildlife habitat, environmental education, and a greater appreciation of Northwest Florida's natural beauty."*



County Commissioners in person. During the Public Comments portion (the first of which starts near the beginning of these meetings), just stand up and raise your hand to be called upon to state your opposition to leasing County land adjacent to the park. It is good to put your thoughts in your own words, but if you are uncertain as to what to say, you are certainly welcome to use the following statement composed by CAS:

Statement (feel free to use in e-mails, letters, or in person at the County Commission meeting): "I love Veterans Park. I am very opposed to leasing the former GCMLC and ECWR leases to Wild Willy's or any other developer. I feel the increase in noise and congestion that development would bring would be detrimental to our enjoyment of the park and harmful to the wildlife that live there. I am for using both parcels to expand the Veterans Park."

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Alan Knothe (of Fort Walton Beach, FL)  
President Choctawhatchee Audubon Society

Malcolm Mark Swan (of Valparaiso, FL)  
Conservation Chair, Choctawhatchee Audubon Society

Commission Meetings:

In the North part of the County: Tuesday, September 6, 2016 | 6:00pm - 8:00pm  
in the Crestview City Hall, BCC Meeting Room, 198 North Wilson Street, Crestview, FL

In the South part of the County: Tuesday, September 20, 2016 | 8:30am - 10:30am  
in the Okaloosa Co. Admin. Bldg. - BCC Meeting Room, 1250 Eglin Pkwy., Shalimar, FL

District 1 Commissioner Wayne Harris  
EMAIL: [wharris@co.okaloosa.fl.us](mailto:wharris@co.okaloosa.fl.us)  
Board of County Commissioners  
302 North Wilson Street  
Crestview, FL 32536  
(850) 689-5030

District 2 Commissioner Carolyn Ketchel  
BCC Vice-Chairwoman  
EMAIL: [cketchel@co.okaloosa.fl.us](mailto:cketchel@co.okaloosa.fl.us)  
Board of County Commissioners  
1250 N Eglin Parkway, Suite 100  
Shalimar, FL 32579  
(850) 651-7105

.... continued on Page 3

*"CAS is dedicated to the protection of bird and wildlife habitat, environmental education, and a greater appreciation of Northwest Florida's natural beauty."*



District 3 Commissioner Nathan Boyles  
EMAIL: [nboyles@co.okaloosa.fl.us](mailto:nboyles@co.okaloosa.fl.us)  
Board of County Commissioners  
302 North Wilson Street  
Crestview, FL 32536  
(850) 689-5030

District 4 Commissioner Trey Goodwin  
EMAIL: [tgoodwin@co.okaloosa.fl.us](mailto:tgoodwin@co.okaloosa.fl.us)  
Board of County Commissioners  
1250 N Eglin Parkway, Suite 100  
Shalimar, FL 32579  
(850) 651-7105

District 5 Commissioner Kelly Windes  
BCC Chairman  
EMAIL: [kwindes@co.okaloosa.fl.us](mailto:kwindes@co.okaloosa.fl.us)  
Board of County Commissioners  
1250 N Eglin Parkway, Suite 100  
Shalimar, FL 32579  
(850) 651-7105

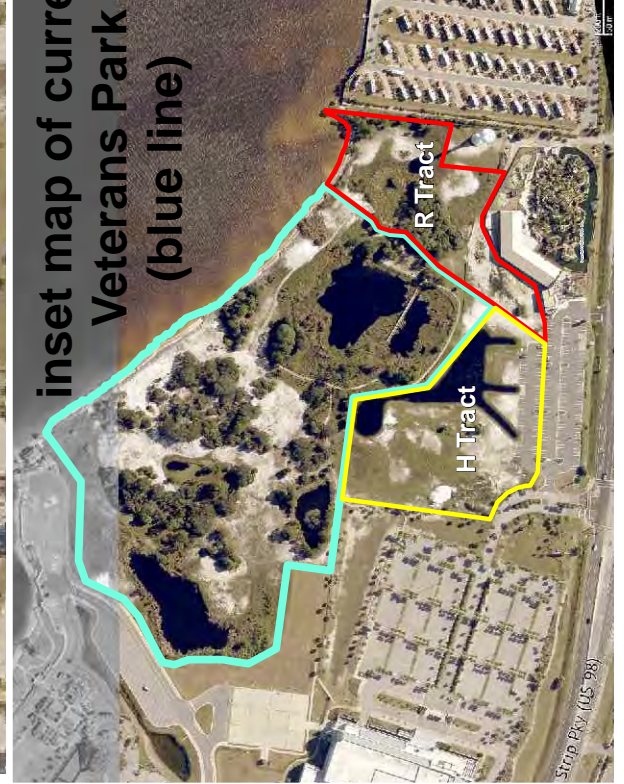
eBird Check-list of Veterans Park birds:  
[http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L2809733?yr=all&m=&rank=lrec&hs\\_sortBy=date&hs\\_o=asc](http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L2809733?yr=all&m=&rank=lrec&hs_sortBy=date&hs_o=asc)

Northwest Florida Daily News articles:  
<http://www.nwfdailynews.com/news/20160803/county-to-consider-expansion-of-wild-willys>  
<http://www.nwfdailynews.com/news/20160802/biologist-reviews-veterans-park-local-birders-remain-concerned-video-photos>

Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners (BCC)  
<http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/bcc/home>

*"CAS is dedicated to the protection of bird and wildlife habitat, environmental education, and a greater appreciation of Northwest Florida's natural beauty."*







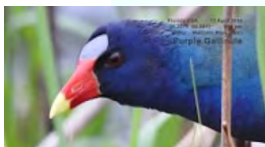
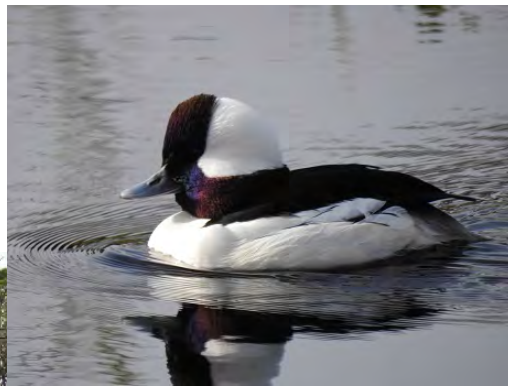


photo by Murray Cragin