



2022 THE VG VOICE

W E E K L Y N E W S L E T T E R

*Wildlife
with
John
Serrao*



WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-01-05

Our Little Turtle

There are 4 small turtles in our area that are often mistaken for “babies” on the rare occasions that they leave their aquatic homes and venture onto dry land. With shells, only 3 or 4 inches long, these highly aquatic turtles are among the smallest in North America. Two of them are Mud Turtles and the other two are Musk Turtles and the best way to differentiate these two very closely related groups is to pick up the turtle and examine the bottom shell, or “plastron”. In the Mud Turtles, the plastron has 2 separate hinges, enabling it to close at both the head and tail ends. In the Musk Turtles, the bottom shell has just a single hinge, and is much reduced in size. Also, the Musk Turtles are equipped with glands on each side of the shell that produce an offensive odor, or musk, when the turtle is disturbed or handled.

All 4 of these turtles have dark, olive-brown or blackish upper shells, or carapaces, that are domed in shape. The Striped Mud Turtle’s shell usually has 4 yellowish lines that run longitudinally from front to back. This common turtle also has 2 stripes on each side of its face. The other mud turtle, the Eastern Mud Turtle, lacks these facial and shell stripes.

The Common Musk Turtle, or “Stinkpot”, also has 2 facial stripes on each side, and so it might be mistaken for the Striped Mud Turtle at first glance. But the single hinge on the bottom identifies it. Take care when handling these little turtles, however. Their strong jaws can deliver a painful nip (see my photo).

The final species is the only one of the four that isn’t found in Victoria Park. The Loggerhead Musk Turtle — named for its enormous head (an adaptation for crushing mollusks) — inhabits Florida’s freshwater springs and their associated streams and rivers. Canoeists and kayakers occasionally spy these turtles basking on cypress knees and tree limbs angling down to the water.



WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-01-19

VG Voice

Common Snipe

There's a medium-sized, plump bird hiding in Florida's marshes, flooded pastures, pond edges, and grassy mudflats this winter. It's so secretive and well-camouflaged that very few people ever see it or even know of its existence, and many think it's really just a myth. And yet, during its annual season (from Nov. 1 to Feb. 15 in Florida), hunters have been known to flush 1000 of them in a single day! (Yes, "Snipe Hunting" is a real thing). This mysterious bird, the Common Snipe, can be seen along the banks of some of Victoria Park's ponds, and I've flushed quite a few of them along the wet cattle pasture that borders Victoria Gardens.

The Snipe is a member of the sandpiper family, but it doesn't frequent beaches or coastal sandy areas. Instead, it prefers more inland areas with grassy cover. About 10 inches long, the Snipe sports an impossibly long, straight bill that it uses as a sewing machine to probe the mud for insects, worms, and crustaceans. The tip of the bill is sensitive and flexible, enabling it to open and grab its underground prey like forceps while the rest of the bill remains closed. A close relative, the woodcock, has the same adaptation.

The brownish, grayish, streaked plumage enables the Snipe to remain concealed even to the sharpest eyes. Furthermore, it stays perfectly still and close to the ground until it's almost stepped on, then suddenly takes off in a zig-zag flight and utters a characteristic "skaipe-skaipe" call. Found in Florida and other southern states only in winter, (as well as tropical America), the Common Snipe migrates back to its breeding grounds in the northern states and Canada in the beginning of spring.



WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-02-07

VG Voice



White Ibis

Have you noticed groups of white, long-legged, long-billed birds roaming around the neighborhoods of Victoria Park? These are White Ibis, Florida's most abundant wading bird, and they're becoming even more numerous in the last few years, reversing decades of declining populations. In 2018 there were a record 95,000 nests in the Everglades alone!

But there's another reason we've been seeing more of these beautiful birds, with their red faces and legs, black-tipped white wings, and distinctive pink, downcurved bills. The White Ibis is successfully adapting its habits to areas developed by humans — residential lawns, golf courses, parks. In fact, biologists are now worrying that this bird may soon be “urbanized” and become a pest like the Canada Goose in our northern states, which has exceeded human tolerance by spreading disease in its droppings and fouling ponds and lawns. So far this hasn't happened with the White Ibis, but if people continue to feed these flocks bread and leftover food, that outcome gets more likely.

The main habitats of the White Ibis are still wetlands (fresh, salt, and brackish) such as marshes, flooded pastures, wet meadows, and mangroves, especially near the coast. Here they probe the muddy ground with their specialized, sensitive bills for insects, worms, snails, frogs, crabs, fish and —especially — crayfish (see my photo). Besides Florida and other southern states, this bird is found in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America. The White Ibis is non-migratory but exhibits nomadic behavior. A highly sociable bird, large flocks move from place to place looking for the most productive areas for food. At night they roost in large groups in the tops of trees. Even during the nesting season they stay in flocks and build their stick nests in big colonies near water, from ground-level all the way up to 50 feet high.

If you see darker but similar birds traveling with flocks of White Ibis, these are juvenile birds that haven't acquired their immaculate white feathers yet. There is a second species of ibis in Florida, the Glossy Ibis, but this bird, with its iridescent bronze-green plumage, is rare in Victoria Park.

Join Marg and John for their monthly Nature Walk and discover the vast nature trails VG has to offer.

NATURE WALK



WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-02-16

VG Voice

Our Ponds

With a 6-month rainy season, and 70 or more inches of rain per year, Florida is blessed with an abundance of ponds, lakes, streams, swamps, and other wetlands. However, this same abundance of rainfall causes many problems when our state is gaining 1000 residents every day and so much of our land is being cleared of trees, paved over, and developed into residential communities. Instead of soaking into, being absorbed, and filtered by plants, soil, and leaf litter, or being held by natural spongy wetlands and bodies of water, the rain now falls on hard pavement, buildings, and other impervious surfaces and quickly runs off. This runoff picks up silt, pollutants, pesticides, and other chemicals, and there is the potential danger of the water overwhelming these paved areas and causing downstream flooding. That's why Florida requires the construction of storm-water ponds and/or swales (ditches) with new developments. These "artificial" bodies of water retain the runoff, remove pollutants, prevent erosion, and slowly release it to replenish our groundwater (90% of Florida's drinking water is supplied by groundwater!), reducing its downstream impact and, at the same time, creating habitat for wildlife. Victoria Park has more than 40 of these ponds, mostly in the Gardens and Trails, with one in Victoria Oaks, 8 in the Hills (mostly on the golf course), and the single large "Lake Victoria" in the Commons. When our 1900-acre

development was originally planned in 1999, it was decided to leave almost one-third of this land undeveloped as "Open Space" and "conservation areas" which would be permanently reserved for ecological preservation. What about the ponds that were also planned for construction? Victoria Park's Site Mitigation and Management Plan of 1999 states that these bodies of water should be augmented with aquatic vegetation, and that "vegetated littoral edges around the lakes will, in most instances, attract native wildlife and enhance water quality". Sadly, for many years, this practice was not followed and the ponds were all mowed right to their shoreline edges and appeared sterile, "naked", and unattractive to wildlife. Furthermore, with nothing along the pond edges to stop them, the grass clippings fell into the water where they decayed, used up precious oxygen, and formed growths of algae. A few years ago, Victoria Park decided to begin purchasing native flowering plants to add around the shorelines of several ponds. And this month, a special meeting was held with our management and several Victoria Park residents who are professional experts in this field, to create an official Pond Management Policy. (continue to page 10)

NATURE WALK



WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

Our Ponds
continued

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-02-16
VG Voice

The native plantings will be continued, and the use of harmful pesticides will be strictly limited in and around the banks of our ponds. Not only will this increase the ponds' water quality and aesthetic appeal, but also their attraction to wildlife. Turtles, frogs, herons, egrets, anhinga's, and even wood storks will take advantage of the cover provided by these plants. The shoreline plants will also stop grass clippings and other organic debris from falling into the water, thus preventing the growth of harmful algae and bacteria, which has been a problem in some of our "sterile" ponds. None of these plantings will grow taller than 2 or 3 feet, so view-scapes of the water will be unimpeded, and none of the plants spread uncontrollably or become invasive like some species of alien plants. These decisions were not made casually. They have been strongly recommended by agencies at the county, state, and federal levels, as well as experts at Florida's universities who are devoted to improving the health of our state's waterways and making them optimum habitats for our treasured wildlife. Hopefully, Victoria Park can do its part and finally meet the goalsof our founders.



NATURE WALK

WITH JOHN SERRAO & MARGARET GOLDSCHNEIDER



On Feb. 19, a group of 17 people, led by Naturalists Marg Goldschneider and John Serrao, walked the trail in Victoria Gardens' North Preserve to the natural pond that is situated near the northern end of our conservation areas. Graced with beautiful, blooming white water lilies, the pond was being stalked by both a Great Egret and a Little Blue Heron. Along the trail, we saw the blossoms of Blue Butterwort and Yellow Star Grass, fresh scat of Bobcat and Black Bear, and several flocks of overwintering Cedar Waxwings flying in tight, synchronous groups with 100s of birds. A Red-Shouldered Hawk perched in a dead tree, several Sandhill Cranes flew overhead, and a pair of rare Wood Storks also made an appearance on this mild, overcast mid-winter day.

Our next Nature Walk, on **Saturday, March 19**, will be the Annual Victoria Park Bird Count. Check the pages of this newsletter over the next few weeks for more information about this exciting, popular event.

[NATURE WALK](#)



[SELF-GUIDED
MAP](#)



WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-03-02

VG Voice



Sandhill Cranes

PLEASE DON'T FEED THE CRANES — AND OTHER WILDLIFE.

We're approaching that time of year when the thousands of Sandhill Cranes that migrated to Florida to spend the winter are leaving to return to their breeding areas in the marshes of the northern states and Canada. But Florida is also blessed with a population of resident, non-migratory Sandhill Cranes — about 5000 of them — that remain here year-round and begin to nest and raise their young now in our state. So, unlike most regions of the country, we can enjoy these majestic, beautiful birds all year long.

Some people are tempted to feed these cranes, either out of sympathy or a desire for closer encounters. First of all, this has been illegal in Florida since 2002. Secondly, there's no reason to feel sorry for cranes since they're perfectly capable of finding their natural foods — acorns, worms, grubs, crickets — on their own in our lawns, yards, roadsides, pond shorelines and conservation areas. Cranes are extremely well adapted to probe the grass and soil with their powerful, sensitive beaks to find this abundant food.

Thirdly, feeding cranes (and other wildlife) causes them to lose their natural fear of humans and become a nuisance by approaching people too closely, pecking windows and screens, and possibly getting hit by cars. And, finally, the food that humans offer cranes (bread, corn) isn't their correct diet and is nutritionally deficient. When they fill up on this they may become unhealthy and less resistant to disease. And Victoria Trails has now developed a new problem as a result of this feeding practice — an exploding population of exotic MUSCOVY DUCKS that are fouling the waters of our ponds and devouring all the shoreline vegetation, including expensive plants purchased to stabilize the banks and cleanse the water.

It's a general rule of thumb that feeding wildlife is wrong. We all know stories of black bears breaking into homes, wrecking campsites, trash bins and bird feeders, and even injuring people after they've associated humans with easy, free food handouts. And the same is true for alligators that have not only lost their fear of humans but have developed a dangerous association with humans after being thrown fish, chicken parts, and marshmallows in the water. Raccoons may not be as dangerous, but feeding them causes them to gather in high concentrations and spread disease among themselves and any cats and dogs that join them for free lunch.

What about bird feeders? Feeding songbirds and doves is generally viewed by scientists and conservationists as a wonderful way to introduce people, including children, to nature at close range, develop a bond with birds, and a desire to preserve their habitats. As long as the feeders are taken inside each night to thwart the bears and raccoons, it's okay.

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-03-16
VG Voice



Three Song Birds

We're now being greeted each morning by the voices of songbirds in Victoria Park. In response to Spring's lengthening days ("photoperiod"), birds experience hormonal changes that cause them to get ready for another breeding season. In a male songbird, an important part of this response is singing, both to attract a mate and to advertise its staked-out territory to other competing males. Each kind of bird has a different song meant for only its own species, and we humans benefit by hearing a rich repertoire of music.

Three of these songbirds are members of the "Mimid" family, closely related to the thrushes. These are slim, long-tailed birds that usually inhabit brushy areas rather than forests, and are more likely to fly low and horizontally — or even run along the ground — into a thicket to escape danger rather than high into a tree. The most common and familiar of this trio is the Northern Mockingbird, Florida's official "State Bird" and one of Victoria Park's most recognizable birds. About the size of a Robin (10-1/2 inches), the Mockingbird is pale gray with white wing patches (visible in flight) and white outer tail feathers. Famous

for its ability to mimic dozens of other birds and even the sounds made by cars and machines, the Mockingbird repeats each short phrase over and over (usually 3 times but sometimes more), then pauses and switches to the next phrase, on and on. Even on moonlit nights a Mockingbird may sing its music for hours.

The second Mimid is a bit larger (11- 1/2 inches — about the size of a Blue Jay) and is rich, rufous-brown above and white below with dark streaks. The Brown Thrasher is much more secretive than the Mockingbird and spends most of the time on the ground in thickets, tossing over dead leaves in search of insects. But in Spring, a male will perch up in a tree or tall shrub and sing its loud, beautiful song: a series of short, richly whistled phrases, each one given usually twice (not 3 or more times like a Mockingbird), followed by a pause, then the next repeated phrase.

The third member of this family will only be with us for a few more weeks. Unlike the Mockingbird and Thrasher, the Gray Catbird is in Florida just for winter and will fly back up north for the breeding season. About 8 -1/2 inches long, this slim, sleek, long-tailed bird is uniformly dark, slaty gray with a darker cap and a patch of chestnut-colored feathers under the tail. Its name comes from its catlike "meyew" call, given as part of an irregular mixture of clear musical notes and mechanical squeaks, with very little repetition.

11TH ANNUAL VICTORIA PARK BIRD COUNT

UPDATE BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-03-22

VG Voice



From the Victoria Gardens Clubhouse, 8 birders set out to find as many species of birds as possible in 4 sections of Victoria Park. Making stops at the Cattle Pasture and North Preserve trail, they next visited the ponds and wetlands in Victoria Trails (Bald Eagle, Purple Martin, Greater Yellowlegs), then into Victoria Hills to see the Red-Headed Woodpecker nesting in the dead tree on the golf course, and then on to the highlight of the day — the ponds and wetlands around the 13th golf course hole, where they saw several species never before found in the 11 years of this annual Bird Count (Common Moorhen, Glossy Ibis, Blue-Winged Teal) as well as Pied-Billed Grebe, Phoebe, Cedar Waxwings and close looks at Osprey, Red-Tailed Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker, and 7 kinds of Herons/Egrets.

The morning ended with lunch at Lake Victoria's picnic tables. At that point, the total count was 59 species. Then, John Serrao spent the afternoon visiting several other areas in Victoria Park and managed to find 9 more species: an Ovenbird (first time ever for the annual count) in the South Preserve; Blue-Headed Vireo, and Palm, Black & White, and Yellow-Throated Warblers in the woods along Spaulding Way in the Hills; American Kestrel in the cattle pasture; a pair of Hooded Mergansers and Least Sandpipers at the detention pond in the Hills' newest section; and, finally, 3 Wood Storks standing at the edge of the pond at the 15th golf course hole. Total Species for the day: 68, breaking last year's record by one! (Check the VP website for a list of all 68 species).

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-03-29
VG Voice



Feral Hog

Several years ago, while enjoying a run along a sandy trail in beautiful Myakka River State Park near Sarasota, I rounded a bend and came face to face with a large Wild Hog and her 4 piglets. Rather than run away like they usually do, this mother hog charged me. Fortunately, there was a pine tree with low branches nearby, and I was able to climb to safety just in time to escape her sharp tusks. I had to remain up in the tree for 5 minutes until that hog decided that her offspring were safe and she trotted away with them.

Fear Hogs, or Wild Boars or Wild Pigs, are not native to the United States. It is thought that they were originally brought here way back in 1539 by Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto to provide food for a settlement near present-day Sarasota, FL. Today, it's estimated that 3 million of these invasive, prolific animals live in our southern

states, including the lower Appalachians. Florida alone has 500,000, second only to Texas. Adults usually have black fur, but some are reddish-brown, blonde, or a mixture. They can be hunted year-round, and there are various state programs to trap them, but their numbers haven't been controlled.

Wild Pigs cause millions of dollars in agricultural damage in Florida every year, and their destruction to wildlife habitats is immeasurable. They root through the forests, marshes, and farms searching for acorns, seeds, roots, insects, reptiles, bird eggs, and anything else that's edible, and when they move on, the scene resembles an area that's been plowed beyond recognition. It's been estimated that their activities have led to an alarming reduction in the populations of ground-nesting birds, turtles, and other animals.





Our Smallest Snake by John Serrao

There are about 50 different species of snakes in Florida, 46 of which are native to our state. Of the 4 alien species, two — the Boa Constrictor and African Rock Python — inhabit very limited areas around Miami, where they were either originally released or escaped as pets. The other two non-native snakes (...)

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WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

BY JOHN SERRAO

2022-04-18
VG Voice



Our Smallest Snake

There are about 50 different species of snakes in Florida, 46 of which are native to our state. Of the 4 alien species, two — the Boa Constrictor and African Rock Python — inhabit very limited areas around Miami, where they were either originally released or escaped as pets. The other two non-native snakes, however, have managed to successfully establish breeding populations across vast areas of Florida. One of these — the Burmese Python — is one of the world's largest snakes (up to 20 feet long) and has famously become one of the most problematic invasive animals in our country. Numbers in the Everglades are estimated to be anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000, and these predators are responsible for drastic declines of raccoons, opossums, marsh rabbits, deer, bobcats and wading birds.

At the opposite end of the snake spectrum, the other alien snake is one of the world's smallest, with a maximum length of just 6 1/2 inches!! The Brahminy Blind Snake may be tiny, but it's an amazing animal. First of all, it is the most widely distributed snake in the world, found just about anywhere that's warm. Originally native to southern Asia, its tiny size has enabled it to be transported

unknowingly by humans in flower pots, sod, and ornamental plants. And, it only takes a single successful transplant to establish a population of Brahminy Blind Snakes because it is parthenogenetic. Every one of these remarkable snakes is a female, capable of laying eggs without mating! "Virgin birth", or parthenogenesis, is found in some insects, fish, and even a few lizards, but it's extremely rare in snakes.

I saw my first Brahminy Blind Snake just 2 weeks ago when my friend, Terry Farrell, a Biology Professor at Stetson University, e-mailed me that he had just found a few on campus. I met him there and we lifted a few old railroad ties, rocks, and tarps around the buildings and found 5 more! This shiny, dark brown snake vaguely resembles an earthworm but clearly has scales covering its body. The head and tail are nearly indistinguishable, but the head is rounded and has a pair of vestigial "blind" eyes (and a flicking tongue) and the tail has a pointed tip.

Fortunately, unlike the Burmese Python, this alien snake has not become a pest and poses no threat to our native species. It eats termites and ant pupae, occupying a niche that isn't filled by any of our native snakes, and thus it doesn't compete with them. The next time you lift a flower pot or plant container and see a shiny earthworm, look carefully to see if it's one of these fascinating, tiny snakes.





Hummingbird

Written By: John Serrao

Since mid-March I've been entertained by a feisty Ruby-throated Hummingbird that has taken and guarded a perch in my backyard. Sitting on a thin horizontal branch (see my pictures), the male periodically darts over to take nectar from the blooms in my wildflower garden or the sugar-water (...)

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THE WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD

Since mid-March I've been entertained by a feisty Ruby-throated Hummingbird that has taken and guarded a perch in my backyard. Sitting on a thin horizontal branch (see my pictures), the male periodically darts over to take nectar from the blooms in my wildflower garden or the sugar-water feeder hanging nearby. If another hummingbird dares to enter this territory, the trespasser is quickly attacked and escorted away into the forest.

Our smallest Florida bird at 3 1/2 inches, the Ruby-throated is also the



only hummingbird that nests east of the Mississippi River (several other species breed in the western states). Its nesting range extends from Canada to Florida and the other Gulf Coast states, but in autumn almost every one of these tiny birds makes a miraculous, non-stop migratory flight across the Gulf of Mexico to wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. (A few, however, remain in southern Florida for the winter). Its difficult to imagine such a fragile animal flying 500 miles or more, beating its tiny wings continuously without resting. When it finally arrives at its destination, a hummingbird has lost half its body weight by depleting its fat reserves.

Both the male and female Ruby-throat are metallic, iridescent green above and grayish-white below. The male



has a brilliant red throat, or gorget, and a dark face. They make a mouse-like twittering squeak, and the humming sound of their wings can be heard at close range as the birds fly forward, backward, up, down, or hover in one place. In spring, the male also performs a spectacular “pendulum dance” to impress a prospective mate. I was fortunate enough to witness this in my yard: the male swings back and forth in the air in a 180 degree arc, buzzing loudly, while the female sits and watches quietly from a perch. After mating, the male takes no part in incubating the eggs or raising the babies.

Although hummingbirds are famous for sipping nectar from flowers and artificial feeders (a solution of 1 part sugar and 4 parts water), they also supplement their diet with insects and

spiders which they glean from leaves, take from the air, or even snatch from spider webs. This protein is an important source of protein for the nestlings that sit in their walnut-shell-sized nest for 21 days before they assume independent lives.





Avian Flu

Written By: John Serrao

Fear and confusion seem to go hand in hand when it comes to awareness of new (or reappearing) diseases, especially at the beginning when actual facts and research are still in short supply. In the last few weeks, the Avian Flu has been in the news, and tens of millions of domestic poultry have been killed. (...)

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WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao



AVIAN FLU!

Fear and confusion seem to go hand in hand when it comes to awareness of new (or reappearing) diseases, especially at the beginning when actual facts and research are still in short supply. In the last few weeks, the Avian Flu has been in the news, and tens of millions of domestic poultry have been killed. This is a highly contagious virus that is almost always fatal to certain kinds of birds and can spread not only among domestic birds but also wild birds that flock together and come into contact with each other, as they often do during migration.

The latest research, as documented by Cornell University's prestigious Laboratory of Ornithology, has confirmed some of the early



fears about Avian Flu but has allayed others. First of all, it's extremely unlikely and rare for this disease to spread to humans. Secondly, the overwhelming number of victims have been domestic poultry, among which the mortality rate of infected birds may approach 100%. Raptors, such as eagles, and vultures are also rather sensitive to the virus, and this is troublesome because these birds often gather together in groups around kills and carrion. Waterfowl (ducks, geese, swans) can carry and transit the disease but rarely get sick. And songbirds and other wild woodland birds don't appear to act as reservoirs of this virus and are at very low risk of getting sick. A recent USDA survey (2022) of wild birds found the virus present in 857 birds, only 6 of which (crows) were songbirds.

So how does this concern us in Victoria Park? None of us should be feeding Sandhill Cranes anyway, since it's illegal and nutritionally harmful to these majestic birds. For additional



reasons, no one should be feeding the exotic Muscovy Ducks that are multiplying and spreading at a troubling rate in the ponds of Victoria Park. These large, invasive ducks may represent ideal reservoirs for Avian Flu and other diseases, and their congregation around sources of food can not only spread diseases among themselves but any wild ducks, herons, egrets, and other aquatic birds with which they come in contact.

What about Bird Feeders and Bird Baths? Michigan's Department of Natural Resources recommends removing them for a year to play it safe, and warns unequivocally, "don't feed waterfowl"! However, Cornell's Lab of Ornithology does not recommend this, since the risk of the disease affecting songbirds is so low, especially in Florida where feeders don't attract large groups of birds like they do in northern states. However, feeders and bird baths should be cleaned every 2 weeks. And remember: study after study has shown that feeding wild birds

does not increase their survival, except during severely cold weather and ice storms. The main benefits of bird feeding don't come to the birds, but rather to we humans who enjoy close views at their beauty and behavior.





Fishing Spider

Written By: John Serrao

A boardwalk crosses one end of Lake Ashby and then enters a swamp dominated by enormous bald cypress trees. Their swollen bases flare out to support the tall trunks, and their “knees” emerge from the water like rounded wooden chimneys. On one of (...)

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THE WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

FISHING SPIDER

A boardwalk crosses one end of Lake Ashby and then enters a swamp dominated by enormous bald cypress trees. Their swollen bases flare out to support the tall trunks, and their “knees” emerge from the water like rounded wooden chimneys. On one of these trees, in mid-May, about 3 feet above the surface of the water, a huge spider was stretched out — the biggest spider I’ve ever seen in the eastern United States. It was an Okefenokee Fishing Spider, a species with which I’ve long been fascinated, not only because of its size and ability to overpower crayfish, small fish, and even frogs, but also because of its preferred habitat of primeval cypress swamps and serene Florida rivers.



After photographing the spider, I managed to capture it in a net and talked my wife into letting me place it in her hand for a photo to illustrate its size (see the result). The spider's body measured more than 1 1/2 inches and its legs spread almost 6 inches from top to bottom! Despite this impressive size, it's harmless to humans. Although its fangs can deliver a strong nip, its venom is effective only in capturing and digesting prey (mostly insects). Still, I'm very proud of Felicia for agreeing to model yet another spider, snake, lizard, or other creature that would frighten most other people.

The Okefenokee Fishing Spider is named after Georgia's famed swamp where it was first described. It is the largest spider in the eastern U.S. and belongs to a family of spiders called "Nursery Web Spiders" that don't build webs to capture prey but rather to create a tent-like nursery for the egg sac and hundreds of babies that emerge. The female spider stands guard over this nursery until the tiny babies molt their

skins for the first time and then depart to lead independent lives.

All members of this family are large and live on or near water. One species — the 6-Spotted Fishing Spider — is commonly seen running or skating over the water's surface, from lily pad to lily pad. The Okefenokee Fishing Spider usually lives on the trunks of cypress and other trees along rivers and in swamps, where it waits, camouflaged and motionless, for prey to come near. If you're ever boating along the St. John's or other river, look for these amazing arachnids along the shorelines.





Swallow-Tailed Kite

Written By: John Serrao

If asked to choose Florida's most beautiful bird, I wouldn't hesitate to select the Swallow-tailed Kite. Even though I've seen hundreds of them, I still can't help but stop whatever I'm doing when one appears in the sky and just marvel at its beauty and grace until it (.....)

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WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

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SWALLOW-TAILED KITE

If asked to choose Florida's most beautiful bird, I wouldn't hesitate to select the Swallow-tailed Kite. Even though I've seen hundreds of them, I still can't help but stop whatever I'm doing when one appears in the sky and just marvel at its beauty and grace until it disappears like a spirit over the trees. This raptor is an unforgettable and unmistakable sight as it soars across our skies just above the tops of the trees. Its long, narrow, pointed wings — black on top and bicolored below — spread just over 4 feet. The white head and undersides contrast markedly with the black back. But its most unique and recognizable feature is the deeply forked, black tail, which this extraordinary bird simply flicks to instantly change direction as it soars, twists, turns, and swoops with barely a beat of its wings.



Swallow-tailed Kites arrive in Florida and neighboring southeastern states in early March after spending the winter as far away as southern Brazil — another trait that makes this bird so amazing. After arriving here they construct nests of twigs and Spanish moss in the tops of the tallest pines and cypress trees in a swamp, prairie, or along a river. The female incubates the eggs and then both parents bring food back to the nestlings. Unlike most of our other raptors, the prey of the Swallow-tailed Kite consists of small animals like dragonflies, beetles, grasshoppers, tree frogs, anole lizards, small snakes, and bird nestlings. These prey items are either snatched in mid-air or deftly plucked from the tops of trees without even landing. Drinking water is also accomplished in flight by swooping right across the top of a river or lake with its mouth agape!

In July, all the Swallow-tailed kites in a specific region gather together at a communal roost to prepare for their long migration back to the tropics. One such roost in a remote area of Volusia County along the St. Johns River contains almost 1000 kites! Then, sometime in August or early September, these iconic birds leave our state and don't return for 6 months.

Wildlife with John Serrao

The Glass Lizard

At the risk of sounding arrogant, I'm always surprised when I come upon a "new" animal in an area that I've explored for years — and even more so if somebody else brings it to my attention! How could I not have previously encountered this creature, considering all the hours I spend outdoors? [Read more...](#)





WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

THE GLASS LIZARD

At the risk of sounding arrogant, I'm always surprised when I come upon a "new" animal in an area that I've explored for years — and even more so if somebody else brings it to my attention! How could I not have previously encountered this creature, considering all the hours I spend outdoors? An example — a road-killed Eastern Screech Owl just a few hundred feet from my home in Victoria Gardens a few years ago — a species I've never seen or heard before or after in my 11 years in Victoria Park. And, in early June of this year in the Gardens, I found a road-killed Eastern Glass Lizard, a strange reptile that I've seen dozens of times in Florida but never alive in Victoria Park.

Unlike the Screech Owl, the Glass Lizard is



active in daylight, so its hard to imagine how I wouldn't have seen one in our conservation areas. At first glance, this lizard resembles a snake — it has no legs! It does, however, possess movable eyelids and external ear openings, 2 features lacking in all snakes but present in almost all lizards (except most geckos, which lack eyelids). And Glass Lizards aren't as supple or sinuous as snakes since their body scales have stiff osteoderms, or bony plates, beneath them.

The name “glass” comes from one of this group of lizards (there are 4 species in Florida) most amazing characteristics. When captured, the lizard thrashes around wildly, and its tail — which comprises 2/3 of its 2 to 3-foot body length — breaks off from the rest of its body like broken glass. The tail continues to wiggle around, increasing the probability that the predator will pay attention to it and allow the lizard to escape and grow a new tail. (See my photo of one re-growing its tail)



The species of glass lizard that is most common in central Florida is the Eastern Glass Lizard, which is greenish brown with stripes along the sides that fade as the lizard ages. It feeds on insects — caterpillars, grubs, crickets, beetles — and spends most of its time burrowing under grass or hiding beneath fallen logs. Females remain with their clutch of eggs for the 2-month incubation period — see my photo of a female with her eggs that I uncovered under an old railroad tie in Tiger Bay State Forest.

Wildlife with John Serrao

Great Horned Owl

Sooner or later, most Florida residents will get to see one of our most charismatic animals — the Barred Owl. This large, dark, brown-eyed owl is common throughout our region, especially in swamps, riverside forests, shady oak forests and other moist areas. In Victoria Park's drier pine-oak and scrub woodlands, [Read more...](#)



WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

GREAT HORNED OWL



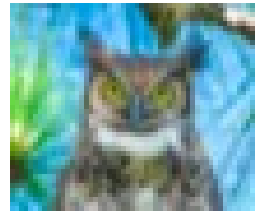
Sooner or later, most Florida residents will get to see one of our most charismatic animals — the Barred Owl. This large, dark, brown-eyed owl is common throughout our region, especially in swamps, riverside forests, shady oak forests and other moist areas. In Victoria Park's drier pine-oak and scrub woodlands, however, this nocturnal raptor is uncommon. Another, even larger, yellow-eyed owl dominates our conservation areas, and through the month of June, I was fortunate to have several encounters with this magnificent bird.

The Great Horned Owl is one of our country's fiercest and most powerful winged hunters. Although most prey is rabbits and rodents, it is known to take animals as large as skunks, cats,



hawks, and other owls with its incredibly strong, sharp talons. Its yellow eyes, with their huge pupils, are among the largest in proportion to the animal's size of all terrestrial vertebrates. Situated in front of the owl's face, they give it extremely acute binocular vision, but they don't move in their sockets. Instead, the owl can swivel its head and neck 270 degrees to survey its surroundings. Its hidden ears are also amazingly sharp at detecting the slightest squeak of a mouse or scurrying feet of a rabbit. And, like all owls, the Great Horned's wings have a fringe of soft feathers that give it silent flight as it glides in for its prey.

Standing 2 feet high, with a wingspread of 5 feet, this owl is larger than the Barred Owl and lighter in color — streaked with various shades of brown and gray. Its most distinctive feature is the pair of “horns”— 2 feathery tufts that stand on top of its head, giving it a catlike appearance. Its deep call is a series of quick hoots: “hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo”, without the loud,



ending drawl of the Barred Owl's call.

Great Horned Owls are among the earliest birds to breed in our country— as early as Feb. in the northern states, where the incubating parents may even be covered with snow on the nest. They, like other owls, don't build a nest but simply use an old hawk, osprey, or crow nest (or steal one from its owner), or the broken top of a tree for their eggs. Both parents bring prey to the young for about 10 weeks, and then continue to care for them for several more weeks — one of the longest periods of parental care of any bird in the United States. Such a family group has caught my attention several times this June on the trails of our conservation areas, where the screeches and squawks of the 2 full-grown but still “earless” and dependent fledglings have revealed themselves on the limbs of tall longleaf pines, with their wary parents perched nearby (see my photos).

Wildlife with John Serrao

Polyphemus Moth

It's positively startling to come across a Polyphemus Moth in its woodland setting. It's even more surprising to see one perched on the screen of your lanai, like I did a few weeks ago. I had found a large cocoon suspended from the twig of a shrub while walking on a trail and decided to take it home to see what emerged. After a few days, I forgot about it, so the sudden appearance...

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WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

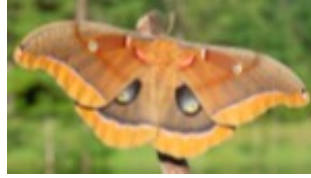
by John Serrao



POLYPHEMUS MOTH

It's positively startling to come across a Polyphemus Moth in its woodland setting. It's even more surprising to see one perched on the screen of your lanai, like I did a few weeks ago. I had found a large cocoon suspended from the twig of a shrub while walking on a trail and decided to take it home to see what emerged. After a few days, I forgot about it, so the sudden appearance of this huge, beautiful insect was a wonderful experience. I photographed it and released it safely in the woods.

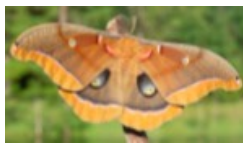
The Polyphemus is one of our country's largest moths, with a wingspread of about 6 inches. Only the closely related Cecropia Moth rivals it in size. Both species, along with the Luna, Prometheus, and a few others, belong to the



Saturniidae, or Giant Silk Moth, family. These impressive moths are strictly nocturnal, and, as adults, do not even eat (all food is taken during the leaf-eating caterpillar stage). Their brief existence as adult moths is spent seeking mates, laying eggs on the caterpillar's specific food plant, and then dying after just a few days.

The male and female Polyphemus share the same yellowish- to reddish-brown wing coloration, and oval, transparent “eye spots” on both upper and lower wings. These clear spots are beautifully ringed in yellow, blue, and black. The one major sexual difference is the size of the antennae. In the male, such as the one that I had (see photo), the antennae are huge, feathery, multi-branched appendages that stick out of the tiny head. They're extremely sensitive to odors and can detect minute quantities of the sex pheromones emitted by a female Polyphemus from miles away.

The male dies soon after mating, as does the



female soon after she lays dozens to hundreds of tiny, oval eggs on an oak, maple, hickory, pine, or other food plant. From these eggs, tiny green caterpillars emerge and do nothing but eat, molt, and grow to be as large as a human thumb before finally spinning and attaching their thick silken cocoons to the ends of twigs.



Wildlife with John Serrao

Black Bear

Bear sightings have been increasing throughout Victoria Park — and central Florida — in recent week. Many residents have captured impressive photos and videos of bears in their yards. A mother bear with 3 cubs crossed in front of my car along an isolated dirt road in Ocala National Forest in early July, and at the end of that month I photographed a bear standing.....

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Wildlife with John Serrao

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There are several reasons for the increase in bear sightings. First of all, the Florida black bear population — once down to the hundreds — has now climbed back to more than 4000 thanks to scientific management and habitat protection (a \$200 million bill has recently been passed to acquire and protect a “wildlife corridor”



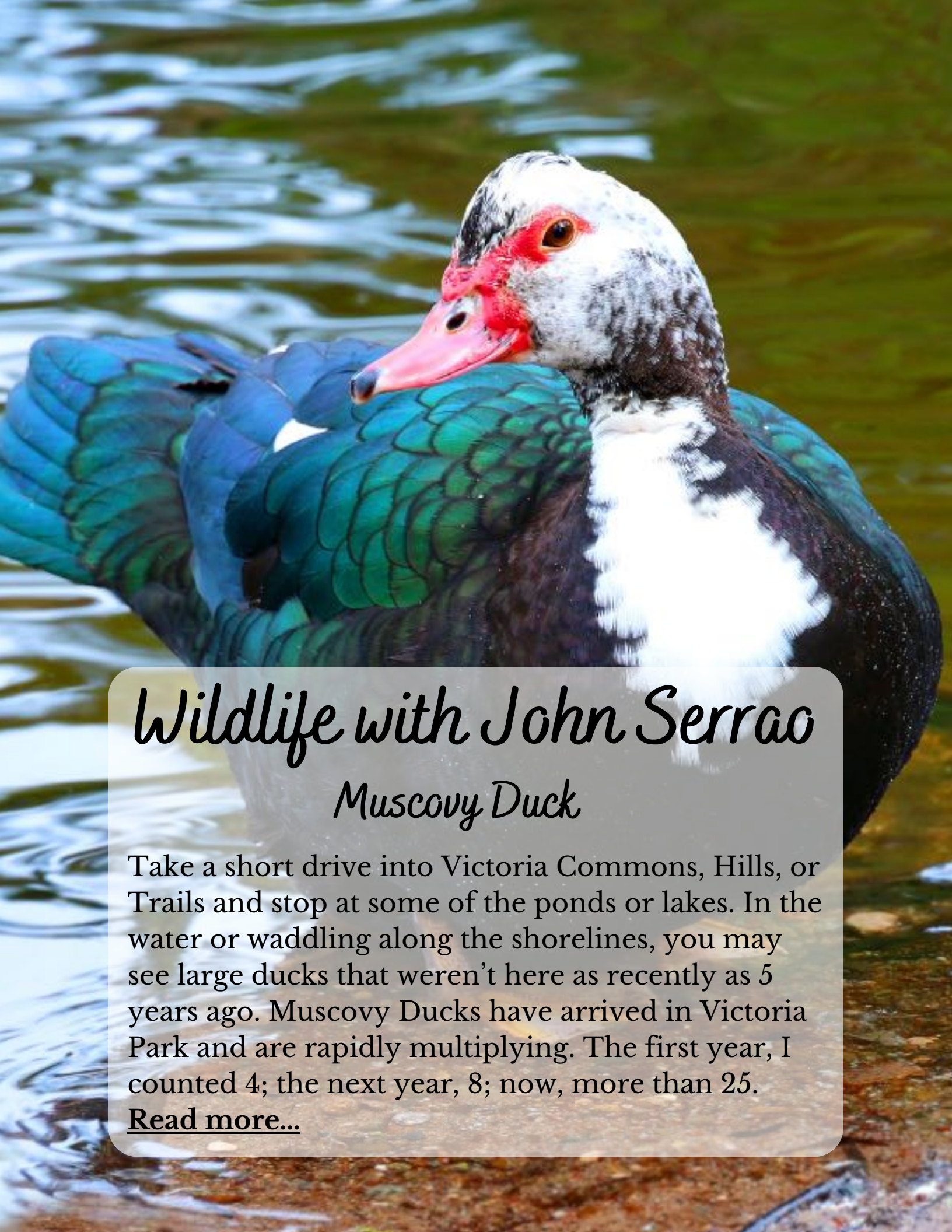
extending from the Everglades to Okefenokee Swamp on the FL-GA border for bears and panthers!). Bears have repopulated 50% of their historic range in our state, where they were once reduced to 18%. And one of Florida's densest bear populations is in Ocala National Forest, just 10 miles from Victoria Park. Secondly, at least in residential communities, bears have become adapted to supplementing their diets with human food such as food waste and bird seed, especially in areas where uncontrolled development has squeezed them into smaller and smaller areas (just drive north along Martin Luther King, Jr. Beltway and see what has happened to hundreds of acres of former woodland).

Third, this is now the mating season for black bears in Florida (June through August), so these animals are more actively searching for mates and roaming larger areas. Cubs that were born 2 winters ago are now also leaving their mothers as these females once again become free to



breed in mid-summer. These 1 & 1/2-year-old bears must now seek out their own territories and are thus more likely to enter residential areas.

Black bears are the largest terrestrial animals in Florida. The record weights for male and female in our state are 760 and 460 pounds, respectively! Despite this size, they almost never attack humans. Most such incidences have been provoked by the presence of a dog that the mother bear perceived as a threat to her cubs. More than 80% of a black bear's diet is plant material, like acorns, berries and other fruits. As far as property damage, the best ways to keep a bear from affecting your home or yard are putting out the trash in the morning of the scheduled pick-up instead of the night before, and taking bird feeders inside at the end of each day. Otherwise, consider yourself lucky if you catch a glimpse of one of Florida's truly magnificent animals.



Wildlife with John Serrao

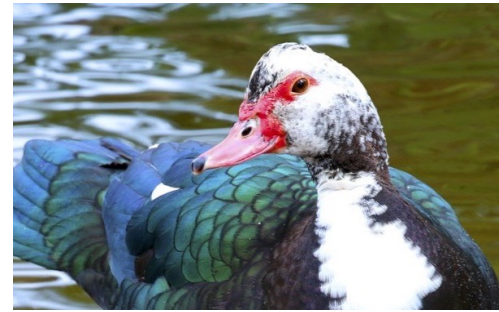
Muscovy Duck

Take a short drive into Victoria Commons, Hills, or Trails and stop at some of the ponds or lakes. In the water or waddling along the shorelines, you may see large ducks that weren't here as recently as 5 years ago. Muscovy Ducks have arrived in Victoria Park and are rapidly multiplying. The first year, I counted 4; the next year, 8; now, more than 25.

[Read more...](#)

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao



MUSCOVY DUCK — A GROWING PROBLEM

Take a short drive into Victoria Commons, Hills, or Trails and stop at some of the ponds or lakes. In the water or waddling along the shorelines, you may see large ducks that weren't here as recently as 5 years ago. Muscovy Ducks have arrived in Victoria Park and are rapidly multiplying. The first year, I counted 4; the next year, 8; now, more than 25. Some residents are even feeding them, and I saw one nest in the Trails with a sign posted, asking people not to disturb it.

Where did they come from? Perhaps the pond in downtown DeLand, where these big waterfowl have fouled the water with their droppings (they're the south's answer to Canada Geese,



which have become responsible for closing lakes and parks up north). Maybe a few decided to take to the air in search of greener pastures and found Victoria Park. However, Florida isn't even their natural home. Muscovy Ducks (no one seems to know how they got this inappropriate name) are native to Mexico, Central and South America, and extreme southern Texas. They came to our state either by being illegally released as pets, or by escaping from “ornamental” ponds. And now, like many other escaped alien species, they've become pests.

These ducks are easy to recognize. They're big — males weigh as much as 10 pounds — and sport fleshy red tumor-like growths on their faces. Their feathers may be mostly white or brownish black, with iridescent green and purple wing patches. They waddle and don't quack — they hiss instead. And they're extremely prolific and capable of dramatically increasing in numbers once they become



established in a new location, such as Victoria Park.

In addition to polluting the water and shorelines with their copious droppings, Muscovies can outcompete and drive away native, wild waterfowl and even spread diseases to other species. In Victoria Park, their main damage is destroying vegetation in and around our ponds. These ducks devour plants that would normally cleanse the waters and keep grass clippings from washing into the ponds (which causes algal growth). By losing these plants, the ponds also lose their ability to support wildlife.

The Florida Wildlife Commission allows landowners to remove Muscovy Ducks, and there are several professional Animal Control companies that can do this. No permit is required. It is illegal to release them anywhere. And please don't feed them!



Wildlife with John Serrao

Geckos

A few years ago my brother called me about a strange noise he kept hearing at night, coming from the basement of a house he was renting in Ormond Beach. The 2 of us crept down the stairs into the basement, turned on the lights, and saw a large, colorful lizard dash behind the water heater. [Read more...](#)

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

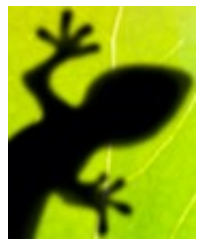
by John Serrao

GECKOS



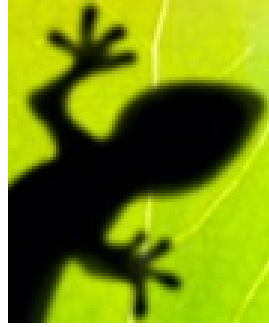
A few years ago my brother called me about a strange noise he kept hearing at night, coming from the basement of a house he was renting in Ormond Beach. The 2 of us crept down the stairs into the basement, turned on the lights, and saw a large, colorful lizard dash behind the water heater. It was a Tokay Gecko, a “monster” of the gecko family that’s native to Asia, grows up to 15 inches long, and has been known to eat small snakes and lizards!

The Tokay is one of about 15 species of geckos found in Florida. All of them are non-native, exotic lizards that originated either as escaped (or released) pets or as stowaways aboard ships, floating debris, or other means. The one possible exception — the tiny Reef Gecko of the



Florida Keys — is considered by some biologists to be our state's only native gecko. Almost all of Florida's geckos are restricted to the southern parts of our state, especially the Miami area. But 4 of them (including the Tokay) have been able to disperse from there throughout most of Florida. Victoria Park has 3 of these. (**The lizards commonly seen around our homes in the daytime are NOT geckos — they're anoles, in a separate family of lizards).

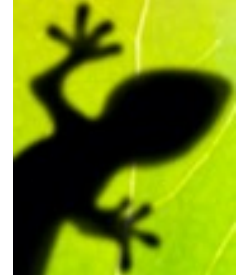
Most geckos differ from other lizards by lacking eyelids — their huge eyes are always open. They clean their eyes by licking them! Most geckos are also nocturnal, unlike all of our other lizards which are active in the sunlight. One of the most amazing adaptations of geckos is their ability to climb up smooth, vertical surfaces (including glass) by virtue of brushlike pads on their expanded toes that contain millions of microscopic bristles. And finally, unlike almost all other lizards, geckos can make sounds, usually chirps but, in the case of the Tokay, a



loud “to-kay!”

Victoria Park’s 3 gecko species all live on or in buildings and emerge at night to hunt for beetles, crickets, moths, cockroaches, and other insects that are attracted to lights. All are about 5 inches, including the tails which can easily detach when grabbed, allowing the gecko to escape and grow a new one. The Tropical House Gecko is gray or brown, with dark chevrons across its back, crossbands along its tail, and tiny bumps or “tubercles” on its skin. It’s native to tropical sub-Saharan Africa. The Mediterranean Gecko is whitish, tan or pinkish and has distinct rows of large tubercles on its body. And the Indo-Pacific Gecko — native to southeast Asia — usually has a yellowish belly and often semi-transparent skin. Amazingly, this gecko is parthenogenetic — every one of them is a female capable of laying eggs without mating!

Even though these geckos aren’t native to



Florida, they haven't become pests like most other alien species, simply because there were no native, nocturnal lizards in our state that the geckos could have outcompeted, so they occupied an empty niche. To see these interesting animals, go out at night with a flashlight and search the outside walls of buildings that keep their lights on, like our clubhouses.

Wildlife with John Serrao

Gopher Tortoise

A decade ago, Victoria Park was a refuge for 5 species of animals that were officially considered either “Threatened” or of “Special Concern” on the Endangered Species List. Sadly, the Florida Scrub Jay is gone from V.P. — the last ones were seen in our conservation lands about 4 years ago.

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WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

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GOPHER TORTOISE

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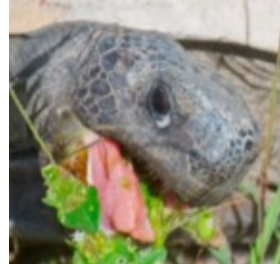
Sadly, the Florida Scrub Jay is gone from V.P. — the last ones were seen in our conservation lands about 4 years ago. The Eastern Indigo Snake, our country’s largest native snake, was last seen here at the end of 2013. The Sherman Fox Squirrel hasn’t been seen among the pines of the Victoria Hills Golf Course in 3 years.

These animals disappeared for the usual reason — loss of habitat when hundreds of homes replaced the pine-oak forests and scrub that they called home, both inside Victoria Park and in adjacent areas along Martin Luther King Beltway.



But we still harbor 2 other iconic Florida species from that “Endangered” roster: Sandhill Crane and Gopher Tortoise. Cranes seem to be doing quite well here, with a half-dozen or more pairs of these majestic birds successfully raising their young (“colts”) every year in our wetlands.

Gopher Tortoises are also still present in fair numbers, but this species needs a bit of habitat management to thrive. When trees and shrubs mature and cover formerly open areas with dense shade, the tortoises suffer. They require lots of grasses, legumes, and other low-growing plants for food, and these sun-loving plants disappear beneath the dense cover of trees. So, Victoria Park uses the services of Miller-Legg, a biological company, to maintain open areas in our conservation lands by annually clearing the understories of certain sections. It seems to be working, but only time will tell. Gopher Tortoises live more than 60 years, so we may be seeing the same old ones all the time instead of younger generations.



Gopher Tortoises have declined in numbers by 80% in the past century throughout the southeast, mostly from clearing their longleaf pine savannas, scrub woodlands, and dry prairies for houses. Their burrows, which may go as deep as 9 feet and as long as 45 feet, represent important shelters from predators, fires, heat, and cold for not only them but also many other animals like gopher frogs, burrowing owls, lizards, indigo snakes, and hundreds of insect species. They dig these burrows with their shovel-like front feet and elephant-like hind legs, physical features common to the world's tortoise species. (the name “gopher” comes from the rodent that also digs burrows).

Look for this “keystone species” as it grazes along the grassy borders and openings of our conservation areas.



Wildlife with John Serrao

Greenhouse Frog

In the last “Wildlife” article, the subject was the Gopher Tortoise, whose deep burrows shelter hundreds of species of animals. Most of these inhabitants are insects and spiders, but several lizards, frogs, mice, snakes, and even the Burrowing Owl are known to use the tortoise’s home to hide from predators, fires, heat, cold, and dryness.

[Read more...](#)

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

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GREENHOUSE FROG

In the last “Wildlife” article, the subject was the Gopher Tortoise, whose deep burrows shelter hundreds of species of animals. Most of these inhabitants are insects and spiders, but several lizards, frogs, mice, snakes, and even the Burrowing Owl are known to use the tortoise’s home to hide from predators, fires, heat, cold, and dryness. The most abundant of these vertebrates, according to some biologists, is the Greenhouse Frog.

Reaching only one inch in size, the Greenhouse Frog is one of our smallest frogs, as well as one of the most secretive. It spends its days hiding beneath boards, rotting logs, steppingstones, outdoor mats, flower pots, or simply in mulch and leaf litter. At night it ventures out to look



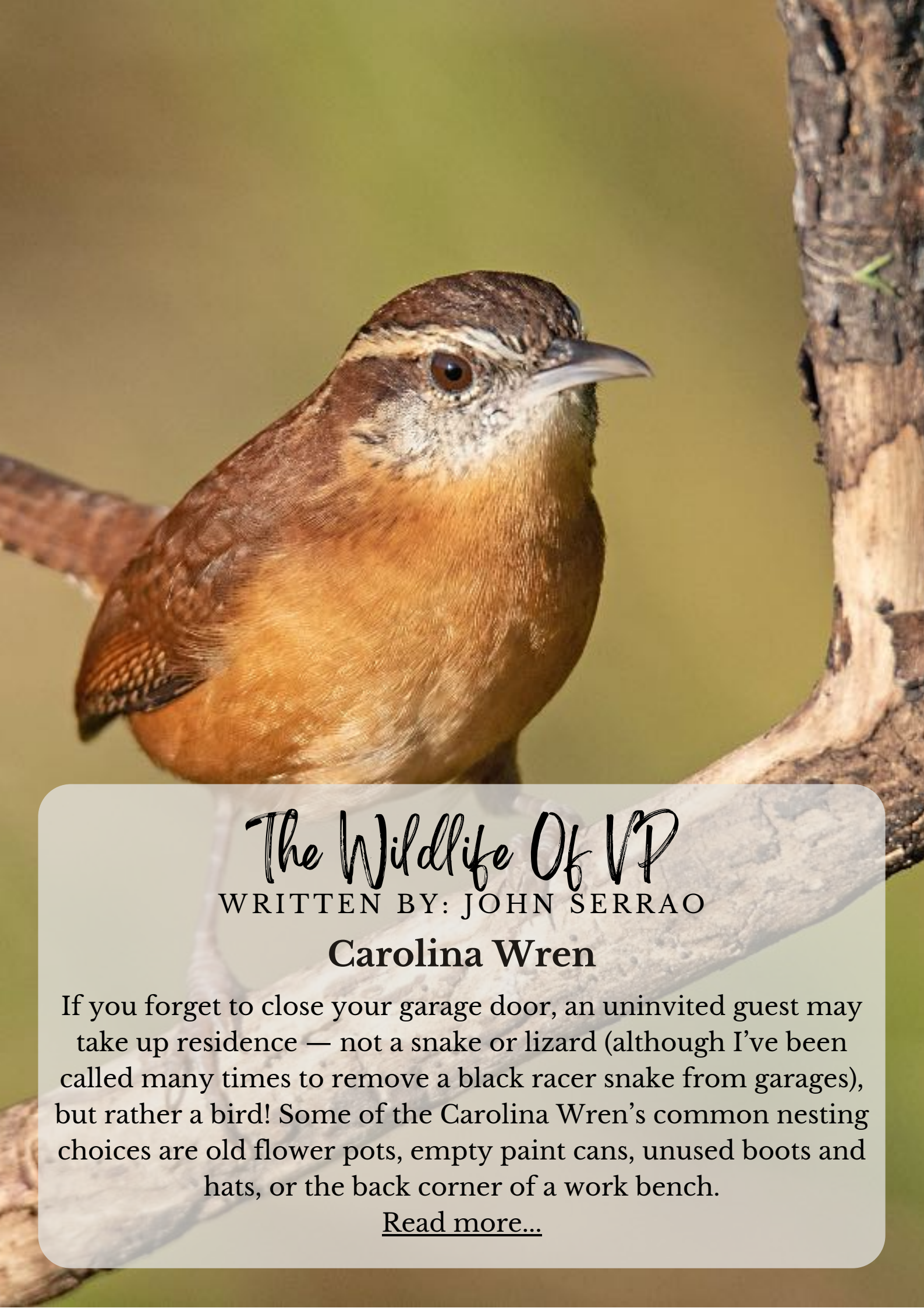
for ants, spiders, beetles, and other prey. Although it can occur in forests and scrub woodlands, most sightings are around houses and other buildings, especially greenhouses, nurseries, and gardens. I often see one or two hopping across the floor of my screened lanai if I turn on the outside light at night. They take short, zigzag hops to the nearest form of cover, or squeeze their flattened bodies under the door to the outside.

The Greenhouse Frog is rusty brown or bronze with either 2 longitudinal stripes or a mottled pattern, and small warts on its skin, and it lacks the webbed toes that characterize the feet of our tree frogs. Males call from a secluded spot in the ground litter or mulch on warm, damp nights — and sometimes on heavily overcast and rainy days — with a voice that easily mistaken for a cricket: soft chirps and short trills. I've never been able to find one in the act of calling. Females lay their eggs in moist places on the ground and, 2 or 3 weeks later, tiny frogs



emerge! Yes, that's right — this amazing frog doesn't have an aquatic tadpole stage. Instead, it undergoes direct transformation from egg to terrestrial frog.

This unusual adaptation has enabled the Greenhouse Frog to successfully disperse from its native Cuba and Bahamas into Florida by supposedly hitching rides on ships, perhaps as long as 150 years ago. Then since it doesn't require ponds, rivers, or swamps to reproduce like other frogs, it spread throughout our state in flower pots, nursery plants, and other damp vessels.



The Wildlife Of VP

WRITTEN BY: JOHN SERRAO

Carolina Wren

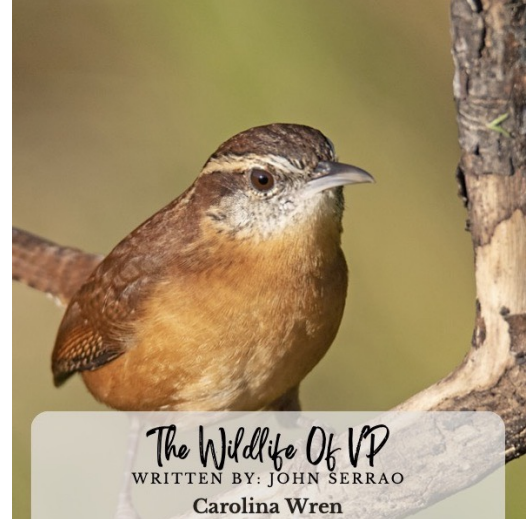
If you forget to close your garage door, an uninvited guest may take up residence — not a snake or lizard (although I've been called many times to remove a black racer snake from garages), but rather a bird! Some of the Carolina Wren's common nesting choices are old flower pots, empty paint cans, unused boots and hats, or the back corner of a work bench.

[Read more...](#)

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

CAROLINA WREN



If you forget to close your garage door, an uninvited guest may take up residence — not a snake or lizard (although I’ve been called many times to remove a black racer snake from garages), but rather a bird! Some of the Carolina Wren’s common nesting choices are old flower pots, empty paint cans, unused boots and hats, or the back corner of a work bench. In a short time, a pair of wrens will construct a bulky, messy, domed nest of twigs, weeds, and dry leaves in one of these places, then line the inside with softer moss and feathers, and — if allowed free entrance and exit from the garage — lay eggs and raise a family. The homeowner may not even be aware of the wrens’ presence, until one day, long after the birds have departed, the empty nest is discovered.



Along with the cardinal and mockingbird, the Carolina Wren is probably Victoria Park's — and all of Florida's — most familiar and widespread songbird. We've all seen these small, energetic, rusty-brown birds busily darting around our shrubs and gardens searching for insects, spiders, millipedes, and even small lizards. With its long, slender, down-curved beak, white eye-stripe, and habit of holding its tail upright, there's no mistaking this bird for any other Florida songbird. And even if it's not seen, its loud, musical songs can be heard all year long: “tea kettle, tea kettle, tea kettle”, or “cheery, cheery, cheery”. The male is the one that sings these songs, both to advertise his territory and to attract and bond with his mate, but the female sometimes answers with a trill of her own.

Besides manmade nesting choices (including hanging flower pots and mail boxes), Carolina Wrens select natural cavities in trees to build



their nests. But they are birds of the shrubs and thickets rather than the trees — the undergrowth rather than the canopy. In the 1970s, the Carolina Wren was a rare sight in the northeastern states, but this adaptable bird started expanding its range northward about that time. However, it's a true “southerner”, and the occasional hard, cold, snowy winter causes it to lose its hold in the north and retreat southward, only to regain its former expansion during warmer years. As our climate continues to get warmer, the Carolina Wren will become a more common sight and sound in the northern states.

A Red-shouldered Hawk is perched on a weathered, light-colored branch. The hawk has a brown head with a yellow patch around its eye, a yellow beak, and a yellow throat. Its chest is a warm orange-brown color, and its wings and back are covered in intricate brown and white patterns. The background is a clear, bright blue sky.

Wildlife with John Serrao

Red-shouldered Hawk

Florida's most common raptor, the Red-shouldered Hawk is often heard before it is seen. A whistling, rising "kee-rah" pierces the air from a forest where this gorgeous bird perches on a branch or soars in circles above the trees. These calls advertise its presence to a lifelong mate or offspring, or else serve as communication from fledglings to parents.

[Read more...](#)

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The Red-shouldered Hawk is medium-sized, standing about 2 feet high and spreading its wings about 3 1/2 feet — considerably smaller than America's most widespread and familiar raptor, the Red-tailed Hawk, which is much less common in Florida than its smaller cousin. As



Wildlife with John Serrao

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its name indicates, the shoulders are a rich, reddish-brown color, as are the chest and belly of an adult bird. The tail has horizontal, alternating bands of black and white, and the back of a perched bird has a checkered, dark-and-white spotted look. In flight, a clear, translucent “window” appears at the tip of each wing. In Florida, Red-shouldered Hawks are paler, especially their heads and breasts. All in all, it’s one of America’s most beautiful hawks.

Favorite prey includes snakes, frogs, mice, small birds, lizards, crayfish, and large insects. I’ve photographed these hawks perched on branches clutching snakes in their talons, and with mole crickets in their mouths. They hunt most commonly from a perch on a tree limb or fence post, scanning the ground with their huge dark eyes. They also soar in the sky and search for prey high above the trees.

Wet forests bordering rivers and swamps are favored habitats, but they have adapted well to



farms, pastures, and residential neighborhoods like Victoria Park.



Wildlife with John Serrao

How Many Species?

Those of you who have been reading these biweekly “Wildlife Of Victoria Park” articles over the past 6 years may have noticed that “birds” have been the subjects much more often than other groups of animals. This isn’t necessarily because people are more fond of birds than other wildlife (although this is probably true). The simple reason is that birds far outnumber all other groups of vertebrate animals in number of species.

[Read more...](#)

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Those of you who have been reading these biweekly “Wildlife Of Victoria Park” articles over the past 6 years may have noticed that “birds” have been the subjects much more often than other groups of animals. This isn’t necessarily because people are more fond of birds than other wildlife (although this is probably true). The simple reason is that birds far outnumber all other groups of vertebrate animals in number of species. And, unlike mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish, birds are highly visible rather secretive and nocturnal.

On our “Victoria Park” website, there is a “Conservation and Wildlife” category located on the top bar. Clicking on this topic reveals a “Wildlife Information” heading, and included in



this are checklists of all the birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians that have reliably been recorded in Victoria Park. The Bird checklist contains 145 species, compared to 23 Mammals, 17 Amphibians (almost all of which are frogs), and 44 Reptiles (11 turtles, 11 lizards, 21 snakes, and the American alligator).

The Bird Checklist is also annotated, noting whether a species resides in this part of Florida all year long (“res”) or just in summer (“S”), winter (“W”), or as a migrant (“M”) that passes through our region in spring or fall. If a species of bird has only been seen here once or twice, the word “rare” follows its name on the checklist. These lists are by no means final. New species are periodically seen and added to the website if their identification can be verified by one of our resident Naturalists.

So, check out these lists and see how many of the species you’ve been able to see in our community. And, if you see something that you



think is not on the checklists, try to get a photo and send it in.

Wildlife with John Serrao

Alligators

There have been many wildlife success stories since the U.S. Department of the Interior issued its first list of “Endangered Species” in 1967 (the more comprehensive “Endangered Species Act” was passed 6 years later). The American Alligator was one of the first animals to be placed on that list, and 20 years later it was delisted because its continental population had recovered so greatly that it was no longer in danger of extinction.

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WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

ALLIGATORS!



There have been many wildlife success stories since the U.S. Department of the Interior issued its first list of “Endangered Species” in 1967 (the more comprehensive “Endangered Species Act” was passed 6 years later). The American Alligator was one of the first animals to be placed on that list, and 20 years later it was delisted because its continental population had recovered so greatly that it was no longer in danger of extinction. So successful was the alligator’s recovery that today, hunters are permitted to take up to 20,000 per year in Florida alone.

It is estimated that Florida is home to between 1 and 2 million alligators. A popular cliché in our state claims that “if there’s water, there’s an



alligator living in it”. This, of course, isn’t entirely true, but the reptile does inhabit a great variety of watery habitats, ranging from residential detention ponds and canals to our largest rivers, lakes, swamps, and wilderness areas like the Everglades. Wherever it occurs, the adult alligator is the apex predator, feeding on everything from fish and turtles to waterfowl and raccoons (see my photo of a large alligator with a huge snapping turtle in its jaws, photographed while I was biking in the Lake Apopka Wildlife Area last month). Young alligators, however, are fair prey to a variety of predators, such as great blue herons, river otters, black bears, bobcats, raccoons, and even large fish and snapping turtles.

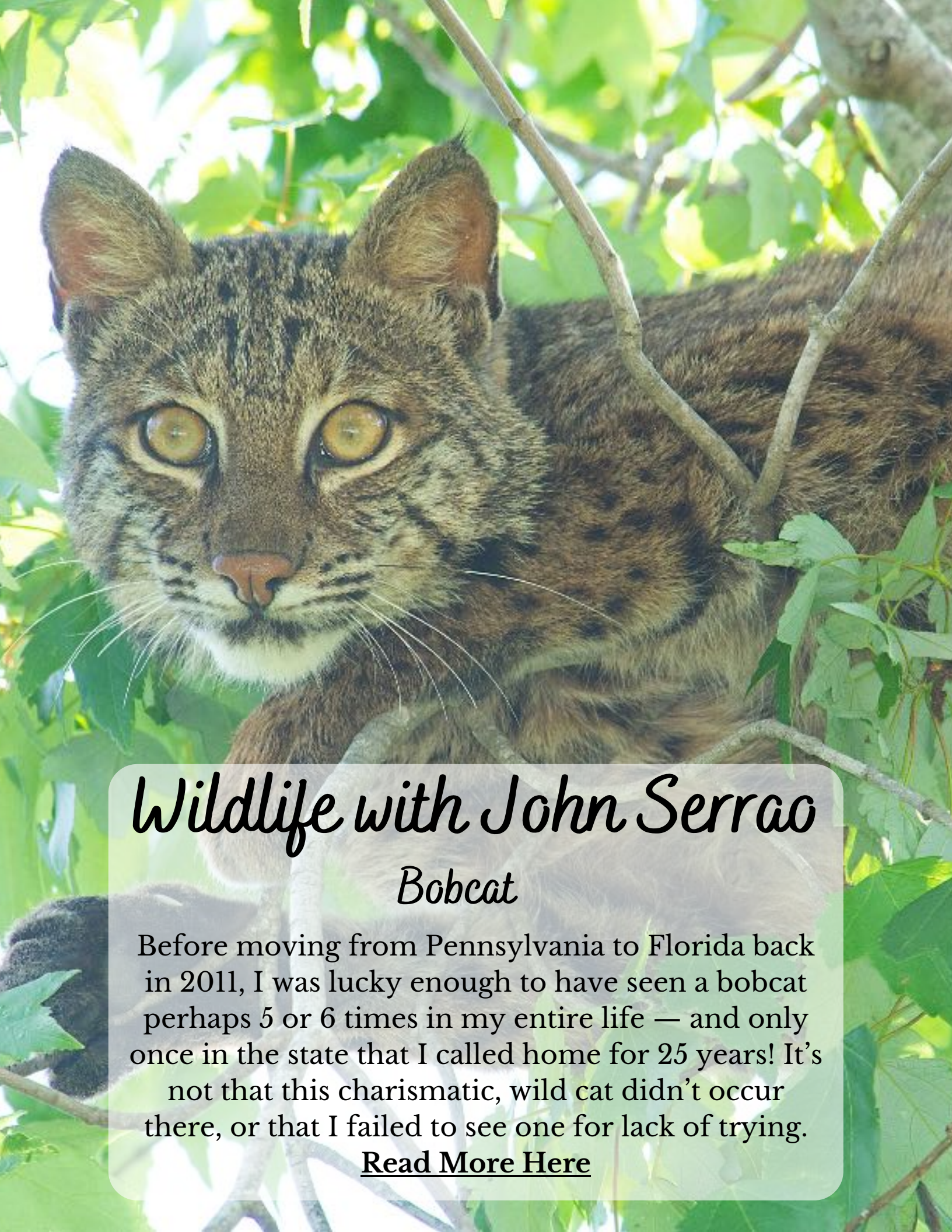
Alligators grow rapidly, however, and in just a few years they’re large enough to be free of any danger of predation — except for humans and, rarely, Florida panthers. But there is another exception — the invasive Burmese python, which has been known to kill and swallow



medium-sized alligators. How big do alligators grow? The largest officially accepted size in Florida is 14 feet 3 inches long, but an Alabama specimen measured 15 feet 9 inches and weighed just over 1000 pounds. There is also an unverified claim of an alligator measuring 19 feet 2 inches long and weighing 2200 pounds!!

Any alligator that happens to visit one of our ponds in Victoria Park will be much smaller than these giants — usually 4 to 6 feet long — and represents no threat to an adult person. In fact, alligator attacks on humans are extremely rare. Unless it's being fed by people (an illegal act) and has become acclimated to them, an alligator avoids any contact with humans.

However, small dogs shouldn't be permitted to approach any alligator and should always be kept on a leash outdoors. The American Alligator is probably Florida's most iconic animal and should be regarded as a cherished part of our natural heritage.



Wildlife with John Serrao

Bobcat

Before moving from Pennsylvania to Florida back in 2011, I was lucky enough to have seen a bobcat perhaps 5 or 6 times in my entire life — and only once in the state that I called home for 25 years! It's not that this charismatic, wild cat didn't occur there, or that I failed to see one for lack of trying.

[Read More Here](#)



That all changed after I became a resident of Florida, where bobcats are not only plentiful (at least a million live in our state) but more apt to appear in the open, in daylight, and in residential situations. A few weeks ago, while running on a trail in Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in Titusville, I came face to face with a bobcat about 50 feet away — my 49th sighting in Florida since 2011!! I've encountered them in Tiger Bay State Forest, Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge, Canaveral National Seashore, Lake Apopka Wildlife Area, Appalachian National Forest, and in my own backyard in Victoria Gardens. And the thrill of seeing one of these beautiful, wild felines never gets old.

Recent studies have also shown that the bobcat is becoming a successful urban predator and, in some states like Connecticut, actually choosing to live around houses and buildings. Not only do such human-associated habitats and structures



contain abundant prey — squirrels, rabbits, pigeons, raccoons, rats, and opossums — but den sites are readily available in the form of abandoned buildings, sheds, vacant lots, scrap yards, and even under decks. As long as they are able to avoid roads and have access to wetlands or streams for water, the bobcat can thrive in urban environments. This predator is gradually assuming an important role in controlling the numbers of other urban and suburban animals that tend to become nuisances if allowed to increase unchecked.

As the bobcat continues to adapt to human neighborhoods, we will experience more encounters with it. This medium-sized, 20-to-35-pound cat represents no threat to humans. Seeing a bobcat in the wild is always an experience to be savored.