

Conservation

Trust and Teamwork in Action

By Jim Trice with collaboration from Dr. Jerry Lorenz

“What birds can have their bills more peculiarly formed than the ibis, the spoonbill, and the heron? Yet they may be seen side by side, picking up the same food from the shallow water on the beach; and on opening their stomachs, we find the same little crustacean and shell-fish in them all.”

----- Writings of Alfred Russel Wallace – 1853

When taking friends fishing in the Everglades National Park, it never fails. If they are lucky enough to see a Roseate Spoonbill, most get far more excited than catching and releasing fish.

Occasionally, we see the pink beauties flying when fishing near Frank Key or Carl Ross Key, and sometimes we would see a small colony around remote islands that are seldom visited by anglers due to the surrounding waters being so shallow.



At first, my friends would think they were seeing Pink Flamingos. This opened the door for me to tell them a great story about scientists, anglers, environmentalists and government agencies trusting each other and rapidly working together to protect this magnificent bird.



Spoonbills were nearly wiped out by feather hunters in the early 1900's. Hats and fans with spoonbill feathers were vogue in those days. There were less than 20 pairs remaining in Florida in 1935. With the establishment of the Everglades National Park, designating the Roseate Spoonbill as a protected species, and with help from the Audubon Society and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Service, by 1950 their numbers started increasing.

They are spectacular birds. Both females and males have the same plumage and coloring. Being very social, they live in colonies. Each year, males and females pair off for the breeding season and work together to raise their chicks. Together, they build the nest, incubate 2-4 eggs, and teach their young how to sweep their bill from side to side to capture prey.

Teamwork is why I feel so much connection with this bird. Roseate Spoonbills have survived teaming as mates in colonies, and they have survived with teamwork from anglers, scientists and government agencies. It has not been easy though.



Dr. Jerry Lorenz, State Research Director for Audubon of Florida, and perhaps the leading expert on Roseate Spoonbills, estimated that in 1978 the number of pairs of Roseate Spoonbills in the Everglades had increased to 1,250.

Unfortunately, by 2002 the number of pairs had declined to 500, “primarily due to the water management practices that degraded their foraging grounds in the eastern Bay rendering nearby nesting sites as relatively useless,” according to Lorenz. “To figure out what is going on in the Everglades, we’ve got to better understand this bird,” Lorenz said. Biologist John Moulding of the Army Corps of Engineers echoes Lorenz’s comments and considers the Roseate Spoonbill “an indicator species for Everglades’s restoration.”

With the numbers declining, actions were taken. In her 2002 Everglades Compendium, the Everglades National Park Superintendent closed the waters immediately adjacent significant Spoonbill nesting locations such as Sandy and Tern Keys. Additionally, some remote shallow waters where baby Spoonbills are taught to feed remained closed to motorized vessels.

Nevertheless, the number of nests in Florida Bay was estimated at a mere 325 in early 2005 and produced only 250-300 chicks.

Adding to the concern about Roseate Spoonbills, on October 24, 2005 Hurricane Wilma swept through Florida Bay. Sandy Key was devastated and Frank Key, another critical nesting location was stripped of almost all foliage.

Lorenz described the damage to Sandy Key: “My impression is that the west side of the island flipped over onto the eastern side like an omelet. Nearby Carl Ross Key was denuded and split in half. The 6-8 foot surge took out all nests from previous nesting.”

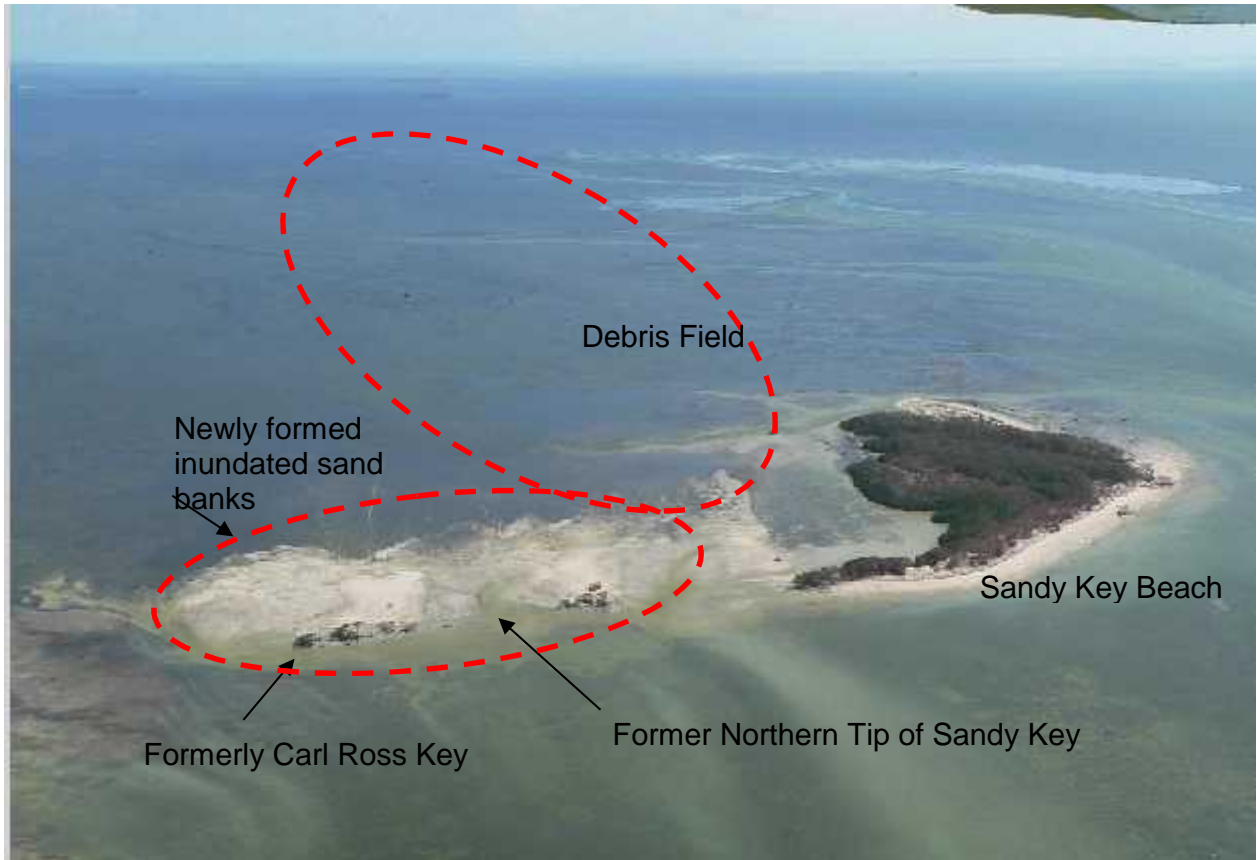


“Sandy Key after Hurricane Wilma”



“Carl Ross and Sandy Key after Hurricane Wilma”

An emergency existed because the birds nesting season started in a matter of weeks.



To make matters even worse, Frank Key, a very significant Spoonbill nesting site in Florida Bay had another serious problem. With essentially no foliage, the Roseate Spoonbill colony had no cover. Vessel traffic in the moat surrounding the island was spooking birds off their nests. Because the Key was in close proximity to the mainland, “Crows and night herons were keying in on the sound of an approaching boat like it was a dinner bell and eating the eggs and chicks,” according to David Szmanski, former Florida Bay Program Manager. By the time the flushed parents could return to their nests, many chicks were dead.



Within a matter of days after Dr. Lorenz's report of Wilma's devastating impact on Roseate Spoonbill nesting sites, a total team effort began. Everglades National Park leadership immediately and very personally reached to Florida Bay guides, anglers, environmentalists and the media for coaching regarding educating the public about the precarious situation of Roseate Spoonbills, as well as the probable need for boat traffic closure at Frank Key and Carl Ross Key. Carl Ross is a stone's throw from already-closed Sandy Key, and actually served as an official campsite in the Park – thus a magnet for visitors to encroach on Sandy Key.

However, the word CLOSURE is considered a sinful word to many users of the Park. It is like hitting a raw nerve when the word is even whispered. Past promised temporary closures, like in Joe and Little Madiera Bays to protect Crocodiles were never opened again, even with Crocodiles proliferating.

Captain Hank Brown shared, "I was very skeptical at first, because I have never in my life seen the Park close and then reopen anything." Hank was the leading force behind eliminating commercial fishing the Park in the 1970's. He added, "This is the first time I have witnessed everyone working together to take rapid action without litigation being involved."

Captain Gary Ellis, who has perhaps guided anglers to catching more snook, redfish and an occasional catfish than anyone in the vicinity of Frank Key, also supported the closure, under the condition it be reopened after the nesting season.

What was different this time? First, Everglades Park Superintendent Dan Kimball had established himself as a man of his word and for being an outstanding consensus builder. Second, Dr. Lorenz, has earned a high degree of credibility with anglers and guides. Third, Captain Tad Burke, Commodore of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association, and their membership jumped on board, and fourth, the nesting season was starting in a matter of days.

No one could argue with the fact we had a very serious and urgent situation on our hands.

After only 15 days of intense communications and teamwork between Everglades National Park leadership, hundreds of guides and anglers, and Dr. Lorenz, it was clear everyone was on the same sheet of music.

A temporary closure was mandatory, but if the closure lasted beyond the nesting season, it would be very difficult to re-establish trust between conservation-minded anglers and environmentalists in the future.

On November 30, 2005, Park Superintendent Dan Kimball signed the closure order with essentially no objections from any user group. However, along with it came the promise to reopen the areas by March 15, 2006 or the end of the spoonbill nesting season, whichever comes first. Additionally, a commitment was made to better mark the closure areas and to post additional Ranger capacity on the sites.

Regulations plus enforcement plus education equal results. On February 20, 2006, Dr. Lorenz recommended reopening Frank Key Channel and Carl Ross Key as the nesting season was over. He also reported, "Overall, spoonbills had their best nesting year since 1992. Sandy Key did very good producing 160 fledges from 120 nests and Tern Key produced an estimated 164 chicks from 106 nests."

The bad news was Frank Key was again devastated with only five fledges from 93 nests. As much as everyone tried, we failed to educate enough boaters about the closure at Frank Key. Lorenz stated in his report, "The problem with Frank Key was boats continued disturbing the nests," and the villainous crows and night herons cleaned out the colony of chicks. With only a few months to get the word out and post clear signage around Frank Key, too many anglers and guides were unaware of the Frank Key closure and why it was closed.

Five short days after Lorenz recommended reopening the closed areas; Dan Kimball lifted the closure in the boating channel near Frank Key and Carl Ross Key, almost three weeks earlier than expected. However, the moat remains a NO-WAKE zone as it was designated in 2004.

Yes, the 2006 Spoonbill nesting success was due to teamwork and TRUST. But not just teamwork between anglers, scientists and Park Leadership, but also government agencies like the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) working with scientists such as Dr. Lorenz and Audubon of Florida.

Prior to 2006, water releases did not take into consideration water levels that provide breeding grounds for the Roseate Spoonbill's prey. This year, after receiving definitive data from Lorenz, the SFWMD made less abrupt adjustments to their water releases as the wet season turned dry.

The results have been fantastic. The success at Tern Key... 25 chicks in 2005 to 164 chicks in 2006 is believed to be due, in part, to this change.

While God, through Hurricane Wilma accelerated developing trust levels between anglers, environmentalists, and government agencies that love and respect the Everglades National Park, we still have several remaining, but solvable issues to address.

For example, Wilma destroyed the dams that control water flow in and out of East Cape Canal and Lake Ingraham. Named and unnamed bodies of water north of Lake Ingraham typically take three months to go dry, giving Spoonbills ideal conditions and plenty of time to teach their chicks to survive. This year, the water was dumped out in approximately three weeks. Again, a group of concerned, yet diverse teammates are meeting in late May to jointly develop rapid solutions.



Additionally, Wilma was only a Category 1 Hurricane when it passed near the Flamingo area. We must expect to team together again with even more speed, compromise, trust and mutual respect in coming years to preserve and protect Everglades National Park resources.

If you would like to learn more about what you can do to help preserve the Everglades National Park (ENP), my advice would be to stay informed throughout the creation of the new ENP 20 Year General Management Plan. A set of alternatives is expected to be made public this fall.

Jim Trice is a Fortune 500 operations excellence management consultant and an avid recreational angler. He is Chairman of Islamorada's Near Shore Water Citizens' Support Committee, is President of the Islamorada Fishing and Conservation Trust, Member of the Don Hawley Foundation Board of Directors, President of Bonefish and Tarpon Unlimited, alternate for Recreational Fishing on the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC), Trustee on the Coalition of Park Users, and is the Conservation Chairman on the Islamorada Fishing Club's Board of Directors. He graduated from University of Miami – Magna cum Laude and IBM's Executive MBA program at Harvard and Northeastern University.



Dr. Jerome J. Lorenz is currently the State Research Director for Audubon of Florida and received his PhD in Marine Biology and Fisheries from the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine & Atmospheric Sciences (RSMAS). His dissertation on an eleven-year study of fish and spoonbills in Florida Bay earned him the Smith Prize from RSMAS faculty for the most outstanding dissertation in 2000. He was honored as Alumnus of the Year in 2004 from North Kentucky University for his work in the Everglades. He was appointed as a founding member of the Florida Oceans and Coastal Resources Council through 2009. Jerry serves as the Everglades Restoration Scientist on the Florida Keys National Marine SAC and is a member of the Islamorada Land Acquisition Advisory Council.



Photographs by Bob Royall.