

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

MERRITT ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

This week it's time to go "off site" as I do periodically in order to showcase some of the beautiful natural areas within an hour's drive of Victoria Park. Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge is a huge, 250,000-acre expanse of saltwater marshes, tidal lagoons, freshwater ponds, pine forests, sandy scrub, and palm-oak hammocks in Titusville (exit 220 of I-95). It's one of several hundred federal refuges across our country that have been set aside over the past century for the protection of wildlife and for human enjoyment. Winter is the best season to visit since thousands of waterfowl and other birds spend the next few months there. In addition, plenty of alligators can be seen basking in the sun, and there's even a viewing

area above a canal where manatees gather.

When I spend a day at Merritt Island I start at the Visitor Center to check the daily log book for sightings of rare birds and other wildlife. There are also educational exhibits, wildlife displays, a gift shop/nature book store, and short boardwalk trail there. Then I drive back 3 miles and turn off to the “Black Point Wildlife Drive”, a superb 7-mile loop through marshes, mudflats, ponds, and mangroves where herons, egrets, storks, ibises, sandpipers, bald eagles, roseate spoonbills, anhingas, and a dozen or more kinds of ducks can be seen.

After the Wildlife Drive I head for BioLab Road, a 6-mile dirt road with even more opportunities to see birds and alligators. I’ve seen bobcats and otters there a few times. Finally, at the end of BioLab Road I turn left onto the road through Cape Canaveral National Seashore, where there are several pond- and marsh-lookouts as well as boardwalks leading to

beautiful, unspoiled beaches.

(Bring your National Park Pass since there are visitor fees in some of these areas)