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# Celebrating the Earth

## Audubon Preserve attracts nature and people to marvel

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Special to the Herald

MANATEE — Under the rustling branches of oaks, slash and long leaf pine, bird watchers, gardeners and children had plenty to see during a Earth Day celebration at the Felts Audubon Preserve northeast of Palmetto.

Near the preserve's entrance Saturday, Bob Dean, a volunteer with the Manatee Audubon Society, greeted visitors, directing them to walking trails and activities.

The preserve's features include paths, wetlands, a wildflower meadow, ponds and a shady place where folding chairs can be set up to make a woodland auditorium under tall water oaks.

Adults and children accepted Dean's invitation to look through a bird watcher's spotting scope set up on a tripod. In the scope you could see a round, hollow opening, the nest of a pileated woodpecker. Full grown, they are nearly as large as a crow.

"About every 10 minutes the female comes back to feed the babies inside," Dean said.

According to his wife, Nancy Dean, who led walks in the meadows and woodlands, the former cattle pasture and ponds were restored with native plants that attract wildlife, including many species of birds.

The land for the preserve was a gift to the Audubon Society. It's south of 49th Street West-Experimental Farm Road centered between U.S. 41 and Ellenton-Gillette Road.

Together the Deans teach a popular two-week bird watching course each January.

The sweet aroma of fresh kettle corn drifted through the oak hammock where Spanish moss made dancing shadows on the tents and table exhibits. Displayed along the path were native potted plants and critters from Elmira's Wildlife Sanctuary.

At the end of the path was a butterfly garden and a bird blind, an inconspicuous green building ventilated by screened windows and a glass wall that keeps the birds from noticing observers.

Children had plenty to do, including ducking into woodsy forts made of branches and exploring a green building they learned was called a bird blind. A little girl with her face painted ran up to join another girl proudly carrying a collage of an owl she'd made with colored paper, twigs and downy bits of feathers.

A dozen Boy Scouts from Troop 76, students from Bayshore High School and Lee Middle School, came to view the butterfly garden where they had helped plant eight species of small plants.

"Everything is native. The rock in the middle is meant to attract rainwater," said Ivan Nogueras.

"Some are going to have flowers with nectar that attract butterflies" said Nick Zapata. Others will be host plants for eggs and caterpillars, he said.

Stephanie and Lathel Crews brought their three children to see the butterfly garden. Their children worked on it during spring break while attending a camp led by Karen Fraley of Around the Bend Nature Tours.

“I learned about birds and bats and snakes and owls,” said Aaliyah, 6, beaming brightly. Her brother, Malek, 9, explained, “I made a fort with palm fronds and bamboo.”

This year Earth Day reflected the growing interest in hardy native plants that are adaptable to wet or dry conditions.

There was a cluster of people picking up information sheets from the Manatee County Extension Office booth, which was manned by volunteer master gardeners.

“Native plants were here long before we were. They come into natural balance in native communities and provide food for wildlife,” said Dave Feagles, president of the Florida Native Plant Society, who passed out the “Guide for Real Florida Gardeners” at his booth. They are also more resistant to insects he added.

If you wanted to learn how to attract Purple Martins, Lea Etchells, born and raised in Sarasota, offered a selection of housing options, including a simple gourd that they seem to prefer. The mosquito-eating birds migrate annually from Brazil and raise babies in the area each July.

Floridians familiar with recent drought cycles sought another busy spot: a display of native Florida plants.

“Interest is growing in outdoor living spaces and small gardens with edible plants,” said horticulturist Tom Heitzman, a specialist in hardy, drought-resistant native plants. Vice president of the Manatee Audubon Society and former president of the Florida Native Plant Society, the owner of Sweet Bay Nursery in Parrish was kept busy answering questions.

Some people wanted to attract butterflies. Others sought shrubs that bear tasty berries that attract birds.

“The coontie makes a nice low growing border plant that is very drought tolerant. Wax myrtles will can take wet or dry conditions, sun or shade” Heitzman said.

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