

# Nature's Own

By Cindi Para

As you step onto the shores of Egmont Key, you cannot help but notice the natural beauty of the island. From the clear blue water surrounding the island and the sea oats swaying gently in the breeze on the dunes, to the open savannah and wooded areas inland, all are providing habitat for many native and exotic plants and animals. It is all part of what makes Egmont Key a valuable and important place for wildlife.

The gopher tortoise is the most prominent of the wildlife on Egmont Key. They're everywhere! With its medium brown carapace and claw like front feet, it moves about with surprising speed, across open areas and crashing through the underbrush. The top of their carapace often has been rubbed smooth from their roaming in the scrub areas searching for flowers and fruits to eat. The burrows they live in are a unique eco-system within itself and they share it with lizards, frogs and snakes. NEVER, put your hand into a burrow. You do not know what you might find! Be careful where you step, that soft sand in front of the burrow may contain eggs. And please do not confuse them with other land turtles like the smaller box turtle, with its yellow patterned shell, or the loggerhead sea turtle, that only comes ashore to nest, both of which are present on the island as well.

The sea grass beds on the East beach provide protection to a variety of marine life including fish, shrimp and other mollusks. At low tide, on the protected beach behind the sea grass beds you can see snowy egrets, American oyster catchers and occasional blue herons wading and in search of food. The southern part of the island is a protected bird sanctuary and parts of the interior of the island are a wildlife refuge. The bird sanctuary boundaries have been enlarged and as a result there has been an increase in the number of tern and black skimmer nests. This has also enlarged the resting and feeding areas for willets, sander lings and the white ibis, with its long red curved bill. Egmont Key is one of the sites for the Audubon migratory bird count in the spring and the fall, noting the species and numbers of birds seen on the island.

None of the wildlife would be here though, if food and shelter were not available. Plants are the key to having wildlife but a healthy habitat has to have diversity. Unfortunately, the island is being taken over by Brazilian pepper trees and Australian pines. There is an active eradication program in place on Egmont Key and as areas die out and are cleared, many natives and beneficial plants are making a comeback. Sea grape, Hercules club and wax myrtle are becoming more common in the interior, while partridge pea, blue porterweed and beach sunflowers can be seen closer to the coast.

From the sea grass beds along the shoreline to the interior elevations, habitats are created, for all creatures great and small. And so with the sea life and the wildlife I would have to agree, what a wonderful and wondrous place - Egmont Key!