

October 1, 2007

Chairman Ronnie Duncan  
Pinellas County Commission  
315 Court Street  
Clearwater, FL 33756  
*via email to [rduncan@pinellascounty.org](mailto:rduncan@pinellascounty.org)*

Re: New Management Plan for Shell Key

Dear Chairman Duncan:

As Florida's population grows and more people flock to our beaches, safeguarding habitats for shore-dependent birds is becoming ever more critical to the many species' survival. One such safeguard that is increasingly important is prohibiting dogs in preserves, such as Shell Key Preserve, which is why I hope you will support the proposed revisions to the current Shell Key Management Plan.

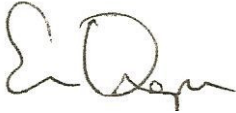
While this provision aims in part to safeguard public health and safety, prohibiting dogs would also protect Shell Key's shore and sea birds from disturbances that can be life-threatening. Scientific studies have demonstrated that disturbance by dogs flushes birds from their nesting and resting areas. When parent birds are flushed from their nests, these birds cannot provide crucial shelter to their chicks and eggs. Exposed to predators and the summer sun, eggs and chicks succumb quickly. A single disturbance event can destroy the nesting attempts of an entire colony for the season. Outside the breeding season, Shell Key is a critical stopover area for shorebirds which must feed and rest during long-distance flights to wintering and breeding grounds. Birds that do not store enough energy frequently perish before reaching their destinations, or arrive at nesting sites in the Arctic without the reserves to breed and provide for their young. Florida's beaches, including Shell Key Preserve, are crucial to the survival of not just Florida's shorebirds, but those of an entire international flyway. This is why terms of the State of Florida's lease to Pinellas County are so explicit, emphasizing that the lease's primary purpose is "to ensure management compatible with the protection and conservation of wintering and nesting shorebirds."

Most dog owners are responsible, and would not knowingly allow their pet's exercise to harm birds. However, the implications of disturbance are not readily apparent to beachgoers and dog owners. And sadly, according to the reports of our volunteer wardens, there are some dog owners who prioritize their dog's experience over the survival of birds. When a single disturbance can lead to the loss of chicks or the loss migrating birds, and not all dog owners are willing to exercise voluntary restraint, prohibition is the only option.

Disturbance events are increasingly common. It is critical that the regulations at Shell Key Preserve include provisions that protect nesting and resting birds from disturbance, throughout the year. Both resident and migratory and wintering shorebird species deserve this protection.

Thank you for your continued commitment to natural resource conservation. We urge your support of the revised Shell Key Management Plan, which protects some of Florida's most vulnerable species by prohibiting dogs from the island year-round.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Draper". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eric" and last name "Draper" clearly distinguishable.

Eric Draper  
Deputy Director  
Audubon of Florida