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# The Head Spring

## Friends of Blue Spring State Park Newsletter

February 2024

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### Meet a member of the Friends of Blue Spring - Nancy Jeffreys

In this newsletter issue, we would like to introduce Nancy Jeffreys a CSO member since 2022. A native Floridian, Nancy worked for Halifax Health as a project manager. After retiring, she and her husband Emery packed their bags and headed for Kentucky to spend time with the grandchildren, but it wasn't long before they decided to leave Kentucky and return to the warmer weather of Florida!

Nancy and Emery live about half a mile from the River to Sea Bike Trail, and since they are avid cyclers, they can now hop on and off the trail at a moment's notice. The first week back in Florida Nancy was out riding and discovered Blue Spring State Park. Soon afterward, she started volunteering at the park, and joined The Friends of Blue Spring State Park; pitching in where she could. Nancy has worked on a lot of projects for the park and Friends of Blue Spring, including as a Manatee Observer, Boardwalk Interpretive guide, helping with the Christmas Parade, and decorating the Thursby House for Christmas. Many times, Nancy has said out loud "I love it" meaning the work and meeting the people.



Nancy's newest project is helping get the Tracked Chair Program off the ground. Once the program is up and running, people with disabilities will have the opportunity to travel the park's trails and experience nature the same way other visitors can. The new chair made its first appearance at the Manatee Festival and visitors loved it!

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**If you are interested in volunteering with the Friends, click [here!](#)**

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### Four decades of Manatee Research at Blue Spring State Park

by Cora Berchem

The manatee festival once again drew thousands of people to Blue Spring State Park the last weekend of January, excited to get a glimpse of slow moving "sea cows". Every winter sets a new record count with hundreds of manatees flocking to the warm protected sanctuary at Blue Spring to escape the colder water

of the St. Johns River. But just as interesting as watching these magnificent creatures is understanding the history of manatee research at Blue Spring.

It all started in 1970 when 11 manatees were recorded at the park, and Jacques Cousteau made his famous documentary "The Forgotten Mermaids" which drew attention to the plight of the manatee.



In 1978, Wayne Hartley, a park ranger at Blue Spring State Park started the manatee genealogy research program; recording 35 manatees. At that time seeing one manatee calf was good, seeing four was extraordinary. Wayne has meticulously documented the Blue Spring manatees since then, establishing the longest manatee genealogy program in the world.

*The early days of manatee research: Ranger Wayne Hartley on the park's research canoe. Photo by Laura Osteen.*

So, what goes into manatee research? Not only are manatees counted, but individuals are identified by unique scar patterns on their backs and tails (mostly from collisions with watercraft). Numbers of reproductive females and calves are recorded, which allows scientists to estimate reproduction and survival rates. Photos are submitted to the Manatee Individual Photo Identification database (MIPS), formerly run by the U.S. Geological Survey Sirenia Project, and now by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Some individuals using Blue Spring have been matched to manatees known from Brevard County or even South Florida!

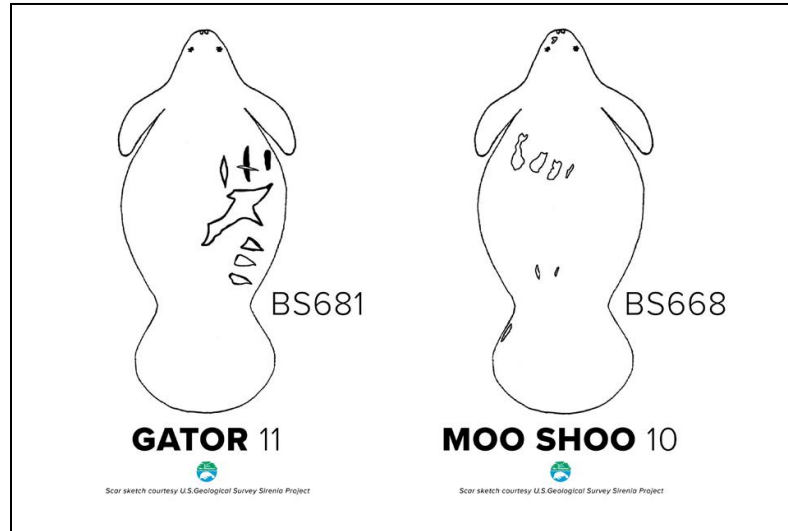
Like everything concerning manatees studied at Blue Spring, genealogies start with life history. Family trees are established, but unlike people, who build the tree backwards, starting with themselves, manatee researchers go forward, starting with mom, then daughter, then the daughter's daughter and so on. Since researchers can't track fathers, they get the short straw in the program. As each generation starts with a female, they are referred to as matriarchies. Some matriarchies are now in their 7<sup>th</sup> generation! This past winter season a total of 826 manatee were observed, 87 of them were calves. This season will most likely break a record again.



*Wayne worked as a park ranger for many years before joining the Save the Manatee Club staff in 2010 after retiring from the park service.*

As numbers of manatees using Blue Spring in the wintertime grow, so does the number of visitors lining up to see the manatees on a cold winter day or coming to the annual festival to learn about manatees

and see them in their natural habitat. One reason why manatees at Blue Spring are doing so well are the protections they receive. They have the entire spring run to themselves between November and March each year and can rest, play, and nurse their young, undisturbed by people. This is what makes Blue Spring such a unique place and so unlike many others in Florida.



Wayne uses scar charts to keep track of all the Blue Spring manatees. Photo by Thuyvi Gates. You can find more [scar charts](#) of your favorite Blue Spring manatees or even [adopt a manatee](#) in partnership with the Save the Manatee Club. Click [here](#) to read more about manatee adoptee Moo Shoo!



Wayne and Cora Berchem, Manatee Research Associate for Save the Manatee Club, do a manatee count together on a cold winter morning in 2017. Photo by Steve Branyon. Manatee Phyllis and her calf Puddles in 2013. Identification photos are now taken with GoPro cameras on an extendable pole from the research canoe under USFWS and DEP research permits. Photo by Wayne Hartley.

Wayne's impressive contribution to manatee research is reflected by his being awarded the Interpreter of the Year Award from the park service in 1998 and being featured in countless news stories and documentaries. He even had a special helper at a manatee release the same year - Governor Jeb Bush! You can learn more about Wayne Hartley's incredible work, first as a park ranger and currently as the Manatee Specialist at Save the Manatee Club and read up on the manatee genealogies [here](#). Wayne's work is also the basis for [Save the Manatee Club's Adoption Program](#). You can study Wayne's [scar charts](#) and watch [live webcams](#) from anywhere in the world.

In our next issue, we will take look at the indigenous people who lived in and around Blue Spring State Park.

## Blue Spring State Park Junior Ranger Friends

Charlee the Manatee likes to help researchers Wayne and Cora count his manatee friends. He knows that an extra pair of eyes can be a big help when there are hundreds of manatees in the water. Junior Rangers like Charlee know that the spring run needs to be closed to swimming and boating during the winter months to give manatees a safe and quiet place to sleep, rest, and stay warm. Did you know that manatees living in the St. Johns River are doing really well? It's because we protect the spring and river for them, even when that sometimes means slowing down our boats and staying out of the water. Junior Rangers know that wildlife needs to be protected.



**Quilt Giveaway** - We gave away a beautiful manatee-themed quilt at this year's Manatee Festival, and in the process raised over \$3,400 for the park! The quilt was hand-made and donated by CSO member Kellie Muddiman. Thank you all for making donations to receive a chance to win the quilt, and to support our park! Congratulations to Ralph Jewell, winner of the quilt (pictured below with his wife), April Boyles, winner of the hand-made stuffed manatee, and Nicholas Kresky, winner of the Friends of Blue Spring manatee travel mug.



CSO member Kellie (our quilt maker) poses at our booth at the Manatee Festival with all of the hand-made stuffed manatees. Ralph Jewell and his wife pose with their new manatee quilt at the Blue Spring Pizzeria and Brew Pub!

# 2023 Friends Accomplishments

by Rich Hatton

**January** - The year always starts with the big Manatee Festival at the end of January. We helped load people onto the busses that run between Valentine and Blue Spring, and our booth was filled with t-shirts, stickers, magnets, and other souvenirs.

**February** - The Friends helped out with a massive undertaking...the release of 12 manatees! We set up a table and answered questions from guests and helped the manatee crews as much as we could.

**March** - We start looking for fireflies in March, and this year firefly season began in the middle of the month and lasted until the beginning of April. Guests were able to stay in the park for an hour after sunset to see one of Nature's coolest light shows. We also sponsored a small "sneak peek" event for sponsors the day before the season began.



**April** - The Park couldn't function without all of the volunteers who help with tasks like trash pick-up, directing traffic during events, and giving talks on the park and its inhabitants. The Friends helped the Park put on a banquet and awards ceremony at the Stetson Aquatic Center.

**May** - Bingo at the Blue Spring Pizzeria and Brewery continues throughout the year on Wednesday nights; all proceeds go toward the park.

**June** - The Friends purchased three new all-terrain vehicles for park rangers to zoom around on.



**July** - The Junior Ranger Program gained some new plushy friends who have been posting regularly in our newsletter and social media. Keep an eye out for posts from Charlee the Manatee, Jake the Snake, Olivia Otter, Hooty the Owl, Springrunner Bear, Snapper Snick the Alligator, Paloma the Skunk, and Aurora the Eagle.

**August** - Water safety is a big deal in the spring run and river. This month, the Friends purchased new reflective vests and radios for the Manatee Observer Program.

**September** - One of our members (Kellie) made a beautiful manatee quilt and we started a raffle with the quilt as a prize.



**October** - We held our annual meeting and elected new officers. We also held a Trunk or Treat event in the park for trick or treaters, and great time was had by all.

**November** - The Friends sponsored an afternoon social hour followed by a Blue Spring Adventures river cruise; the weather was perfect and we all had a lovely time.

**December** - We participated in the Orange City Christmas parade along with Save the Manatee Club, Hope the Manatee, and Guest Services. Everyone did a fantastic job decorating and we were awarded the all-around grand prize for our float!

We hope you will join us and help out with this year's events

**Upcoming Events:**

**Feb 9<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 24<sup>th</sup>** - Blue Spring JayWalk 9:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. Meet at the Admin Building near the Ranger Station



**Weekly Wednesday Bingo** - Wednesday nights at 6:30 p.m. at the Riverwalk Pizzeria and Brew Pub in Orange City. Come join the fun and maybe you will win a stuffed manatee or another fun prize!

Would you like to help out at Bingo? We are always looking for volunteers to sell bingo cards and call numbers. Please click [here](#) to sign up to help.

## Critter Corner

Article and photos by Missy Gibbs

### Sailfin Suckermouth Catfish - *Pterygoplichthys disjunctivus*

Have you ever wondered what those large dark fish are on the bottom of the spring run, under logs, on the steps of the swim dock, or on the manatees? Well, they are an exotic, invasive species of armored catfish. An exotic species is any species that does not belong here and couldn't have gotten here by itself. An invasive species is one that takes over wherever it settles in (think about how Boston ferns spread, or the thousands of tilapia in our rivers and springs). The armored catfish are native to part of the Amazon basin in Bolivia and Brazil. They are popular in the aquarium trade, and that is how they ended up in nearly all of our waterways. I started to see them in Blue Spring in 1999, and since then, their numbers have exploded!

Some people buy armored catfish to eat algae from the sides of their fish tanks, but it turns out that although they do eat algae off the tank walls, when they defecate, the feces contains live algal cells and digested cells (fertilizer), so the amount of algae in the tank will actually increase. The next time you go swimming in the spring run, look at all the "spinach linguine" on the bottom of the spring and on log...that isn't spinach...it's catfish feces! Armored catfish are adding a lot of fertilizer to the spring run, which is unfortunately helping to feed the explosion of algae growing in the springs.



Another big problem with armored catfish is that they like to [eat algae off the manatees](#), and that really annoys the manatees. Although the catfish don't hurt the manatees (catfish have very soft mouths and brush-like "teeth"), manatees with catfish on them tend to move around a lot more, burning extra calories and not getting as much rest.

If you see someone getting ready to dump their aquarium in a river, spring, or pond, you can tell them about all the bad things an invasive species is capable of!