



News from...

Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve

Sawfish: growing up in Florida's estuaries

Did you know that sawfish live in shallow coastal waters in the Reserve? You would if you attended the "Summer of Sharks" June lecture featuring George Burgess, curator of the National Sawfish Encounter Database from the University of Florida. His presentation revealed the incredible importance of pristine, mangrove-forested estuaries to young of these unique shark and ray relatives that can reach lengths up to 18 feet.

Smalltooth sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*) were once found around the Gulf of Mexico and eastern Atlantic as far north as NY but populations declined over the 20th Century due to a combination of habitat loss, fishing pressure and bycatch. They were often entangled in fishing gear and saws taken as souvenirs. Today they seem to be maintaining a small core population along the southwest Florida coast, but because they reproduce at such a slow pace scientists believe it could take decades before signs of recovery are observed.

Smalltooth sawfish population estimates in the U.S. are between 5,000 and 10,000 individuals, with the majority of sightings reported in southwest Florida.

The smalltooth sawfish was listed as an Endangered species in 2003 and in 2009 the National Marine Fisheries Service designated two sites in southwest Florida as Critical Habitat, including more than 600,000 acres in the Ten Thousand Islands.



Juvenile sawfish caught in the shark research net are measured, tagged and released.

Neonate sawfish (called "pups") and juveniles are extremely vulnerable to predators such as crocodiles, sharks and even dolphins, which is why the protective shelter provided by mangrove estuaries is so important. Plus, estuaries provide a bountiful resource of food: small invertebrates and fish.



Reserve biologist Pat O'Donnell (above) knows firsthand that mangrove estuaries are good habitat for young sawfish. Since 2000 when he began monitoring sharks in the reserve, O'Donnell has captured, documented and released sawfish on more than 30 occasions, including several recaptures. Individuals have ranged in size from 31 to 96 inches.

Because sawfish haunt shallow coastal waters and feed on some of the same prey items as sport fish, they are occasionally caught on hook and line or entangled in gear. **It is illegal to hook or net one without a permit, however, Sawfish Safe Release Guidelines have been developed:**

- Keep fish in the water at all times.
- Carefully untangle and remove line from saw or cut line as close to the hook as possible.
- Do not attempt to handle the animal or remove the hook unless using a long-handled de-hooker.
- Do NOT remove the saw.

The Florida Museum of Natural History urges boaters to report any sightings to the National Sawfish Database to assist with ongoing research.

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/sharks/sawfish/form.html>
352-392-2360 sawfish@flmnh.ufl.edu

Rookery Bay Environmental Learning Center August 2011 Events

Special Deals!

From Memorial Day through Labor Day, enjoy \$1 off with valid Florida driver's license or "buy one, get one free" with valid Collier County driver's license. Max 4 per offer, excludes events.

Thursdays (9 to 11 a.m.)

Guided Kayak Tours. Pre-registration required.

Kids Free Fridays!

Enjoy crafts, storytelling and shark-related activities from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Kids ages 6-12 get in free with paid adult. Food vendor on site.

Weekly themes:

August 5 - Stingray

August 12 - Thresher Shark

August 19 - Whale Shark

Ray Troll "Sharkabet" on exhibit through Sept. 2

Summer of Sharks Lecture Series (5 to 7 p.m.)

\$10 (\$5 members) includes light refreshments. Pre-registration recommended.

August 17: Pat O'Donnell, "Shark Nurseries in the Ten Thousand Islands." Rookery Bay Reserve's fisheries biologist will present an overview and preliminary results of his shark monitoring program.

August 18 (6 to 8:30 p.m.)

EcoTour Training Series: Stewardship BMPs, Wildlife Rules and Laws. Presented by Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission and Florida Sea Grant. FREE, light refreshments.

Pre-register for events at www.rookerybay.org

Summer hours: Monday - Friday, 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Admission: \$5 adults, \$3 kids 6-12, under 6 FREE.
Daily programs offered at 11 a.m. & 2 p.m.

Rookery Bay Reserve, located in southwest Florida, is recognized as one of the few remaining pristine, mangrove-forested estuaries in the U.S. The Reserve is managed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas in cooperation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). As one of 28 sites within NOAA's National Estuarine Research Reserve System, Rookery Bay serves as an outdoor classroom and laboratory for students and scientists from around the world. (239) 417-6310, 300 Tower Rd., Naples, FL 34113 (located off Collier Blvd. 1 mile south of U.S. 41/East Tamiami Trail). www.rookerybay.org, [facebook.com/friendsfrookerybay](https://www.facebook.com/friendsfrookerybay)