

# Estero Bay

# AQUATIC PRESERVE

*“Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve is an extremely productive estuary supporting a diverse array of marine life that enhances Lee County’s intricate and unique ecosystem.”*

*Ray Judah, Lee County Commissioner*

## Key Accomplishments

- In coordination with West Coast Inland Navigation District, Lee County, Sea Grant and DEP’s Environmental Resource Permitting staff, assisted with the 7-year process resulting in the adoption of a DEP Rule that identifies locations and dredge depths for public navigation channels, as well as two No Internal Combustion Motor Zones within the preserve.
- Provide a teaching venue where the public can discover estuarine environments through hands-on wading trip explorations. Participants can meander through mudflats, explore seagrass beds and use nets and field microscopes to uncover and study animals such as starfish and seahorses.
- Water quality data collection is ongoing and includes three continuous monitoring datasondes, as well as participation in the Charlotte Harbor Estuaries Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Network.
- Conducted training for members of the Lee County Marine Law Enforcement Task Force concerning new seagrass prop-scarring legislation. Information packets and Aquatic Preserve boundary maps were provided and an in-the-field seagrass identification session was conducted to familiarize officers with the five species of seagrass that can be found within Estero Bay.



In addition to filtering and cleaning bay waters, the many oyster bars in Estero Bay provide habitat for other invertebrates such as sponges, starfish, and crabs.

## Project Spotlight

### Rookery Monitoring and Protection Program

Staff and volunteers annually monitor wading and diving bird nesting

colonies, also called rookeries. Many species of birds nest together on the islands in Estero Bay including five state listed species of special concern; brown pelican, reddish egret, little blue heron, tricolored heron and snowy egret.



Brown pelican chicks on a mangrove rookery island

Nesting islands are surveyed monthly throughout the nesting season which runs January through September. Direct count surveys are conducted by slowly circling each island by boat at a safe distance so the nesting birds will not be disturbed. Each nest is counted, identified by species and designated as Unknown, Empty, Incubating or Chicks. Staff and volunteers also work to protect nesting colonies by conducting trash cleanups and working with local agencies to educate the public about rookery islands. You can do your part to help protect rookeries by properly disposing of fishing line and trash and always maintaining a 300 foot buffer between the nesting birds and yourself.

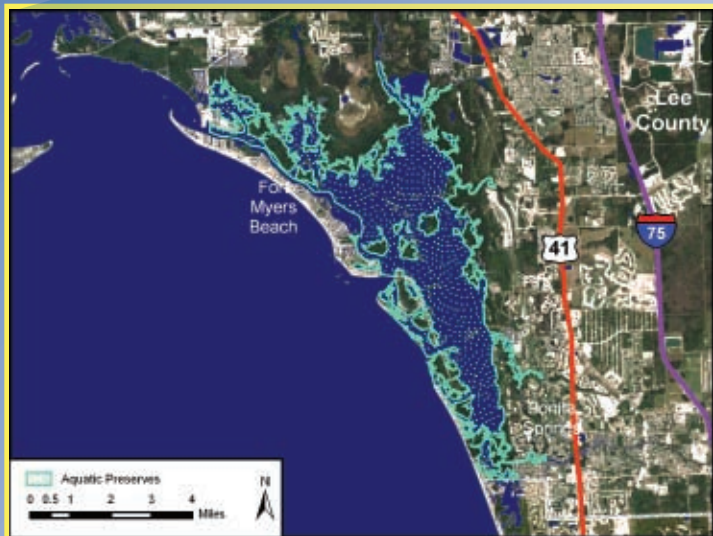
# Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve

## Location:

Southwest Florida, along the Gulf of Mexico in Lee County between Bonita Springs and Ft. Myers Beach

## Acreage:

11,000 acres of sovereign submerged lands



## Local Contact:

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Snowy egret at Mullock Creek



Nine-armed sea star under the sand in Ostego Bay



Visitors discovering natural treasures on a New Pass wading trip

## Aquatic Preserve Facts:

- Florida's first Aquatic Preserve, designated in 1966
- Shallow estuary fed by five minor freshwater tributaries, but influenced more by tidal action
- Contains strong currents near passes with areas of slow waters in between where bird rookeries can be found
- Diverse habitats include seagrass beds, mangrove islands, salt marshes, tidal flats and oyster bars
- Designated as Outstanding Florida Waters because of exceptional ecological significance
- Includes many historic and archaeological sites such as those on Mound Key, some of which are submerged



The shrimp fleet on San Carlos Island plays a major economic role in Lee County.



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