

Digging up history on Pelican Island Refuge



Photos by SAM WOLFE • sam.wolfe@scripps.com

U.S. Fish and Wildlife archaeologist Rick Kanaski, left, and volunteers Cheryl Cummins, center, and Mary Fredell sift through a mixture of sand and soil during a dig in the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge. The archaeologist was spending several days checking different locations along the Jungle Trail for any signs of historic significance.



Volunteer Mary Fredell holds up a fossilized tooth discovered during an archaeological dig along the Jungle Trail in the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge.

Sampling under way on 200-acre tract off A1A

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ORCHID —

Federal archaeologist Rick Kanaski looked over the ridged, bony fragment that stood out last week from the surrounding crushed shell that was left from a sifted pile of soil at Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge.

"Oh, it's a tooth," he exclaimed, prompting volunteers Cheryl Cummins and Mary Fredell to pause in the sifting.

It was ridged for grinding, he said. But was it from a horse? Or maybe some prehistoric plant-eater?

"I don't know what it's from," Kanaski said. "It's a herbivore of some sort, but that's all I can tell."

Another find, however, was more familiar to him. Kanaski and his volunteers found an Ais Indian shell midden Thursday.

"It's fairly near the surface," he said. "There are oysters, clams and even some whelks."

That would indicate where the area's original inhabitants dumped their shells after dining on the plentiful mollusks, he said.

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Rick Kanaski, Federal Archeologist

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PRESERVING HISTORY

It’s all part of Kanaski’s specialty, he said — human tools or other artifacts.

That’s why he was sampling soil on land where barrier-island pioneer Joe Michael once grew citrus.

Kanaski, of Savannah, Ga., is the Southeast regional historic preservation officer for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

He is leading an archaeological sampling on a 200-acre tract to see if there are any “historically significant” remains in the soil before Refuge Manager Paul Tritaik restores the old grove to its native state.

Fish & Wildlife in 2003 paid \$988,800 for the last 12 acres of Michael’s Earring Point Groves on State Road A1A. At the time, Tritaik said he hoped to return the land to live oaks, gumbo limbos and other native plants over the years.

The plan still is alive, he said, even though he is waiting to design a scope of work — and get cost figures — for the restoration.

Kanaski shoveled out several holes at uniform intervals to a depth of 50 centimeters and dumped each scoop into a screen, which Cummins and Fredell shook to let sand fall past larger items.

With the new discovery, he said on Thursday, he will have to return in July for a more focused dig.

“We’ll block off this area, so when they do the restoration, they stay out of this area,” he said.

RESTORATION WILL GO ON

Tritaik initially hoped Kanaski wouldn’t find anything significant. But he said on Thursday the discovery won’t delay his project. His goal, he said, will be to leave the archaeological remains alone while restoring the habitat.

As Kanaski and his team dug, dark brown topsoil, colored by the plant roots, gave way to lighter sand and shells.

Most of what they found before Thursday, he said, was all related to the grove operation.

And that was a bit too recent to count as significantly “historic,” he said. So the occasional bits of old glass and nails were noted, but not collected.

“This is the nitty-gritty of doing archaeology,” Kanaski said. “It’s hard work, sweaty and dirty, and a lot of empty holes until we find an actual site.”

Kanaski said the National Historic Preservation Act generally discounts anything as historic if it’s less than 50 years old.

That is unless, he said, an item less than 50 years old was connected somehow to a significant cultural event, such as the Cold War.

At 51, Cummins said, that made her feel special.

“If anything over 50 is historically significant, I am,” she said, chuckling.



File

PELICAN ISLAND MANAGEMENT

Paul Tritaik, manager of the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, has the following among his tools to do the job:

- Wildlife surveys and studies.
- Restoration of habitat for wildlife, such as turning the 200-acre former Earring Point Grove property back to nature.
- Volunteers, such as Cheryl Cummins and Mary Fredell, to keep costs down.
- Law enforcement to protect the wildlife, habitat and visitors.
- Mechanical/chemical control of invasive plants such as Brazilian peppers.
- Community partnerships, such as the Pelican Island Work Group, to keep the general public informed.

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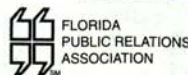
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