

GUEST COLUMN

Ken Grudens: To protect wildlife, consider other sites for cell tower



Bee Gum Point in Indian River Shores. (FILE PHOTO)

By Ken Grudens

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The Indian River Land Trust fully supports the installation of a cell tower in the town of Indian River Shores to provide residents and visitors with reliable cell service. However, we believe it is extremely important that town leaders constructively and thoughtfully consider all options and factors, including reception reliability and environmental impacts, in its deliberations on where best to place a tower.

It is well established that the construction of towers close to important bird habitat, such as that found on Bee Gum Point, can significantly impact the birds using these natural areas.

The Indian River Land Trust owns and manages the 111-acre Bee Gum Point Nature Preserve in Indian River Shores. The primary purpose for purchasing Bee Gum Point was to protect and enhance the important habitat for wetland-dependent residents and migratory birds. Comprised of environmentally sensitive coastal wetlands and containing a mile of Indian River Lagoon shoreline, its protection supports the major objectives of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. That is why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supported the preservation of Bee Gum Point by providing a \$1 million grant toward its acquisition in 2011.

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act was enacted in 1989 in an effort to provide matching grants to carry out wetlands conservation projects across the United States, Canada and Mexico for the benefit of wetlands-associated migratory birds and other wildlife. The act conserves North America's waterfowl, fish and wildlife resources while producing a variety of environmental and economic benefits. Its success is driven by partnerships involving federal, state and local governments, and nonprofit organizations like the Land Trust.

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Many of the bird species at Bee Gum Point include state or federally-listed species. More than 135 species of birds have been documented using this preserve, including the federally threatened wood stork. Many birds use this sanctuary to feed and rest as they migrate along the Treasure Coast and beyond on the well-documented Atlantic Flyway. Others nest there and live on the preserve year-round.

The proliferation of new cell towers and studies conducted by wildlife biologists have brought the issue of avian (bird) collision mortality to the attention of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It is estimated that as much as 90 percent of bird mortality could be avoided by implementing simple conservation measures such as considering the location of towers with regard to bird concentration areas.

Indian River Shores and other coastal towns in the region can help achieve better protection of migratory and endangered birds by following U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guidelines when considering the location of a new communication tower. Specifically, the guidelines state towers should not be sited in or near wetlands, other known bird concentration areas, in known migratory or daily movement flyways, or in habitat of threatened or endangered species. Additionally, the guidelines state if significant numbers of breeding, feeding or roosting birds are known to habitually use the proposed tower construction area, relocation to an alternate site should be recommended.

The Indian River Land Trust is encouraging Indian River Shores to continue to protect our local wildlife by constructing a tower at other proposed sites that would have less of an impact on birds and wildlife, rather than next to the critical coastal wetlands of the Bee Gum Point Nature Preserve.

Ken Grudens is executive director of Indian River Land Trust.