

Volunteers create bird habitat on Tampa Bay island

Yvette C. Hammett



Daniel Rizzo, a junior at [Center Academy in Riverview](#), helps fill mesh bags with oyster shells that will form a barrier along the shoreline at Green Key to prevent erosion and provide a food source for wading birds.

By [YVETTE C. HAMMETT](#) | The Tampa Tribune
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RIVERVIEW - A huge mound of [oyster shells](#) dumped alongside the boat ramp at Williams Park dwindled with the day last week as hustling high schoolers shoveled them into mesh bags destined for Green Key.

The bags will become a manmade reef along the edge of the island in Tampa Bay to stop erosion and re-create important foraging grounds for colorful, [rare birds](#) such as American oystercatchers, [reddish egrets](#) and roseate spoonbills.

The volunteer day in Riverview was a combined effort of the Audubon of [Florida Gulf Coast](#) Ecosystem staff and Tampa Bay Watch, a volunteer-based organization that works to restore the health of Tampa Bay.

"It's really hard work," said Katy Ferraro, a junior at [Center Academy](#), a private high school in Riverview that sent students to fill mesh bags with oyster shells. On this cold morning, she'd been filling bags and peeling off layers of clothing, along with shoveling partner Alisha Smith, a senior at the school.

Volunteers headed back to the park on Friday to finish off this leg of the work. Six more work days will take place between now and fall to complete the shoreline reconstruction, said Serra Herndon, [environmental scientist](#) for Tampa Bay Watch.

When it is done, volunteers will have created 200 feet of [oyster shell reef](#) habitat along the shoreline of Green Key, which lies just south of the Alafia River. Living oysters that attach to the manmade reef will filter the water and provide a food source.

Green Key was once an essential nesting area for [wading birds](#) but has lost much of its shoreline to erosion, said Ann Hodgson, science coordinator for Audubon of [Florida Gulf Coast Ecosystem](#).

Construction at Port Redwing in the 1960s drove the birds north about three miles to the Rich T. Paul Alafia Bank [Bird Sanctuary](#) Islands, Hodgson said. "We are not anticipating that the nesting colony will come back, but it is still a very important roosting and foraging area," she said.

The [oyster reef](#) project is jointly funded by Restore America's Estuaries, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Restoration Center and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

"This is a great project for the students from [Center Academy](#) to get involved in," Hodgson said, "because they get to participate in an important environmental activity and they get to see the biology happening."

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