



## GICIA announces Mercabo Preserve tour dates

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The Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association (GICIA) is excited to announce the 2020 dates for the Mercabo Preserve Site Tours. The five tours held in 2019 were completely booked, so don't wait to call to reserve your spot. This year's tours will educate guests about the GICIA's successful acquisition of the parcel, the completed upland restoration and the soon-to-begin Mercabo Cove project.

This innovative project is planned to begin in early March and will transform the basin area of the Mercabo Preserve into a marine sanctuary. The long-term benefits of this project will include improved water quality, enhanced native fish and bird habitat, reduced seawall maintenance costs and improved aesthetics of the site. Tours of the site will be led by GICIA volunteers.

The plans for the Mercabo Cove Project include removing the seawall caps and existing sidewalks from sections of the 4,700 linear feet of seawall.

The concrete from those sections will be crushed into various sizes called "riprap" and placed in front of the seawall.

The use of riprap will fortify the seawall, increase habitat for juvenile fish and provide substrate for oysters to settle upon. Besides riprap, other techniques will be used in front of the remaining section of wall, such as using pieces of culvert pipe as planters for mangroves and installation of reefballs (dome-shaped concrete structures that provide benefits similar to riprap).

One of the most interesting design elements of the project is the construction of a tidal creek that will allow the free flow of tidal water out of the east section of the basin into the Bay. This will allow flushing and significantly improve water quality in the entire Cove system. Project plans also include the addition of clean fill, which will reduce water levels and allow for the possible reintroduction of seagrasses.

Healthy seagrass beds are an important part of the marine environment because they absorb nutrients, slow the flow of water and trap and stabilize the sediment, which improves water clarity and quality. Healthy seagrass areas are one of the most productive ecosystems in the world and are critically important to juvenile tarpon, snook, the federally listed smalltooth sawfish, turtles and manatees.

This year's tours will allow GICIA members and supporters of Mercabo Preserve to see firsthand the exciting ecorestoration efforts on this important 30-acre parcel. The tours will be limited to 15 guests per tour, and the spots will fill up quickly.

The dates are set for Jan. 6 & 23, Feb. 3 & 20, March 9 & 26 and April 2 & 13. Tours will begin at 9 a.m. and reservations are required.

GICIA members and donors to Mercabo Preserve will be given priority when booking these limited tours.

To sign up for a tour or contribute to this exciting project, contact the GICIA Office at (941) 964-2667.



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