



Audubon FLORIDA



State of the Everglades

Spring 2018

Friends,

A number of long-awaited Everglades projects are finally approaching ribbon-cutting status this year. This gives us an opportunity to celebrate while advancing the next set of projects from planning to construction. We've never been closer to our shared vision of a fully restored River of Grass!

Wading bird nesting results told us that hope is alive and well in America's Everglades, but that our job is far from over. **The birds are telling us that we can, and we must, get the water right.**

I hope this issue brings you a renewed sense of hope for America's Everglades and energy to keep up the work. We have a lot coming, and we're ready for more!



Celeste De Palma
Director of Everglades Policy
Audubon Florida



Audubon-Backed Everglades Reservoir Clears Significant Milestones

After six months of intense planning, the South Florida Water Management District approved the Tentatively Selected Plan for the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Storage Reservoir project in March. The project remains on schedule. Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Noah Valenstein also added assurances that the project would provide its promised benefits while meeting strict water quality standards- a move strongly supported by Audubon and allies.

In combination with other restoration projects, the selected plan for the EAA Reservoir will reduce harmful Lake Okeechobee discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries by 56 percent and cut the recurrence of discharge events by 63 percent. The project will also deliver an annual average of 120 billion gallons of clean water to the parched Everglades National Park and Florida Bay, and significantly increase freshwater flows to the bay during the dry season when it needs it the most.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is now reviewing the plan before submitting it for the required Congressional authorization. Congressional authorization will make the project eligible for federal funding. Audubon's top 2017 legislative priority, the EAA Reservoir, is one step closer to becoming a reality! Audubon remains focused on working with the Corps and Congress to have a fully authorized project by the end of 2018.



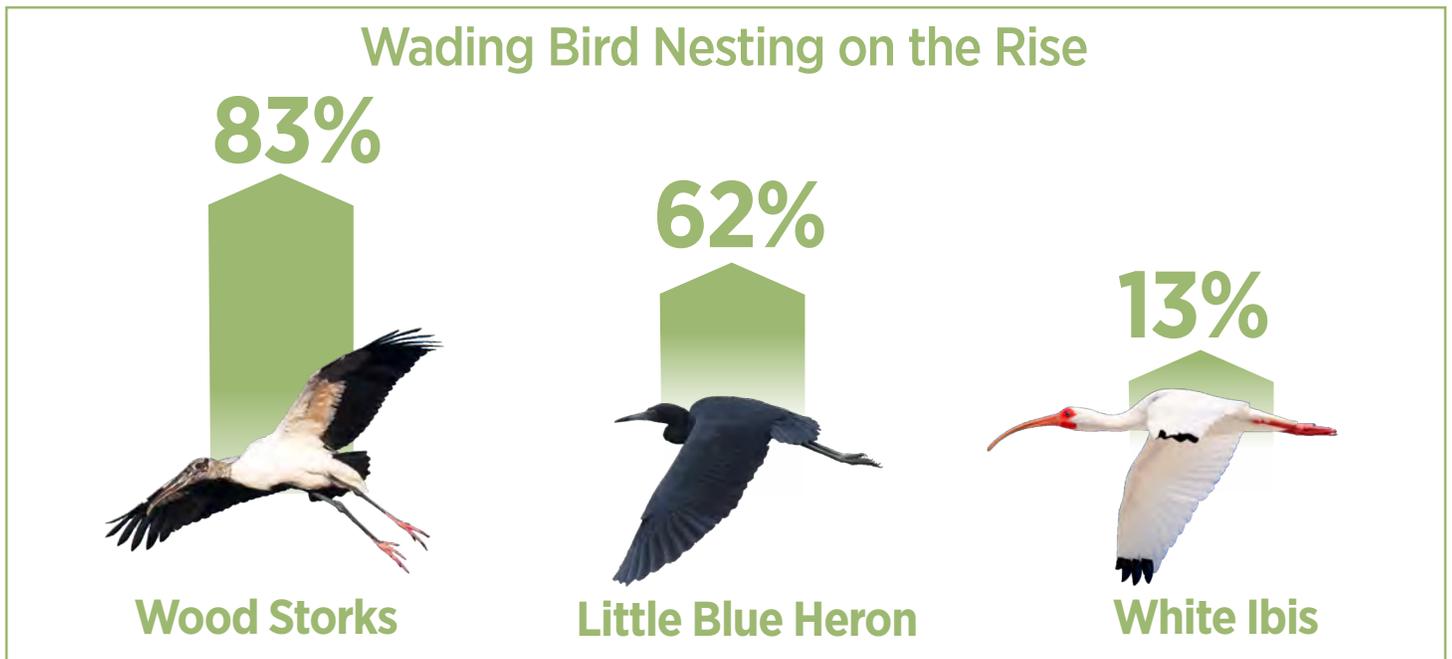
Photo: Dr. Tabitha Cale

Wading Birds Give Hope to America's Everglades

According to the annual South Florida Wading Bird Report, 2017 produced some of the highest nest counts in the Everglades in a decade. The success was characterized by hydro-patterns mimicking historic, pre-drainage conditions in some parts of the Everglades. The report, authored by the South Florida Water Management District with contributions from Audubon Florida, showed improvements in nesting for many of our key Everglades indicator species.

Compared to the 10-year average, nesting by Wood Storks was up 83 percent, Little Blue Herons up 62 percent, and White Ibis up 13 percent. Despite these successes, wading birds continue to struggle in areas cut off from adequate freshwater flows, like the Florida Bay and Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary historic nesting strongholds. Roseate Spoonbills in Florida Bay produced one of the lowest total nest numbers in 50 years. Although Wood Stork nesting initiated earlier at Corkscrew Sanctuary, which should increase productivity, nesting success was diminished by overdrainage of the watershed.

Results from 2017 indicate positive signs that birds maximize nesting when hydrologic conditions improve. However, the long-term survival and turnaround of all wading birds in the Everglades depend on how quickly freshwater flow is restored throughout the entire watershed. Preliminary results from the current 2018 nesting season bear this out. Robust water levels left by Hurricane Irma seem to be resulting in better nesting results for wading birds in much of South Florida.



Progress in Removing Impediments to Important Freshwater Flows

The Tamiami Trail, a 1920s road built to link Tampa and Miami, chokes the flow of much-needed freshwater through the historic heart of the Southern Everglades. Just over two years since groundbreaking, the second phase of the Tamiami Trail bridging project, which allows water to flow under the road, is on track to be completed by the end of 2018. This 2.6-mile bridge is a significant restoration milestone and will provide much-needed freshwater to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.



Tamiami Trail Bridging Project Helps Restore the Natural Flow of Water, Providing Much-Needed Freshwater to the Southern Everglades and Florida Bay. Photo: John Kominoski

Kissimmee River Restoration Project 90 Percent Built and Already a Model for Restoration

The Kissimmee River Restoration project is tantalizingly close to completion. Once finished in 2020, more than 40 square miles of river floodplain will flood seasonally, and the river will meander again. After restoration, Lake Kissimmee will rise 1.5 feet deeper each year, storing water to feed the river during the dry season and rehydrating another 30 square miles of dried marshes around it.

Flashes of what's to come have already appeared:

- Wading bird numbers have surpassed restoration goals,
- Waterfowl and shorebirds are seasonally abundant,
- Bass and sunfish have increased, and
- The green, blue, and flowery beauty of the river marshes has returned.



The Kissimmee River floodplain, where the C-38 canal has been filled. Not only is the river meandering again, but the floodplain is full of water. Photo: South Florida Water Management District

This project's primary goal is to restore the Kissimmee's ecosystems, but it benefits everyone downstream as well. It will store more water during wet periods, provide more flow during dry periods, and the water in the river will be cleansed by the plant communities. Natural restoration in action.

Celebrating the project's success, Congressman Darren Soto filed legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives to designate the Kissimmee River as a National Wild and Scenic River. Audubon believes the restored river will richly deserve this recognition.

So Close! After a Decade, Picayune Strand Restoration Project Almost Complete



Thousands of American White Pelicans and wading birds enjoying Picayune's restored areas in December 2017. Photo: Ken Humiston

The Picayune Strand project was the first of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) components to begin construction. It is now close to becoming one of the first fully completed CERP projects. Picayune Strand is one of the biggest ecological restoration efforts in the Everglades. It restores more than 80,000 acres of habitat onsite with another 80,000 acres of wetlands and estuaries restoration in the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, Rookery Bay National Estuarine Reserve, and Collier-Seminole State Park.

Turning hundreds of miles of old roads and canals in this former Florida swamp swindle wasteland

back into prime Wood Stork and Florida Panther habitat is near completion. The third and final pump station, Miller Pump Station, is scheduled for completion later this year. The entire eastern side of Picayune Strand (Merritt Canal eastward) will be completed this summer with the filling of the eastern Stair-Step canals and removal of the remaining roads.

The last major piece – the Southwestern Protection Levee and Seepage Canal to keep private farmlands from flooding – is stuck in planning. Delays pushed its completion date to 2024 from the original 2021 estimate. Even though 90 percent of restoration work is complete in Picayune, only 30 percent of the ecological benefits are realized until this one feature is completed. Audubon is pushing hard to finalize the design plans sooner and secure \$35 million in federal appropriations to finish the project. Just this winter, birdwatchers saw thousands of wading birds and White Pelicans gathered daily in the restored areas of Picayune. Birds tell us that restoration works in Picayune!

2018 Everglades Restoration Funding

By The Numbers

With many competing priorities for funding, Audubon works hard in Tallahassee and Washington to secure the funds needed for Everglades restoration. A restored River of Grass depends on strong and sustained appropriations each year to get projects from start to finish and avoid costly delays. For 2018-19, the Florida Legislature appropriated \$248.1 million for America's Everglades, going above and beyond the commitment required under the Legacy Florida Act.

On the federal side, Congress appropriated a total of \$138.97 million. Despite progress on planning projects, federal construction funding continues to lag, causing expensive delays. Stronger and sustained construction funding to get Everglades projects through the finish line continues to be one of Audubon's top federal priorities in 2019, along with funding for operation and maintenance of existing restoration infrastructure and preserving important Everglades research. Audubon succeeded at saving two critical water monitoring programs from budget cuts in 2018 and will continue to fight for science in 2019.

2018 State Everglades Appropriations

\$111.1 million for CERP implementation
\$64 million for the EAA Reservoir
\$32 million for the state's Restoration Strategies Plan for water quality improvement in the Everglades
\$31 million for Northern Everglades projects
\$5 million for agricultural nutrient reduction
\$5 million for dispersed water storage

Total State: \$248.1 million

2018 Federal Everglades Appropriations

\$1.7 million for EPA's South Florida Geographic Program to monitor water quality in the Everglades (reinstated from 2018 proposed budget cuts)
\$60.77 million for Department of Interior, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">\$2.5 million for land acquisition for the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge\$6.1 million for U.S. Geological Survey Greater Everglades Priority Ecosystems Science Program (reinstated from 2018 proposed budget cuts)
\$1.7 million for EPA's South Florida Geographic Program to monitor water quality in the Everglades (reinstated from 2018 proposed budget cuts)
\$0 for CERP Operation & Maintenance

Total Federal: \$138.97 million

Audubon Florida Staff, Board, and Chapters travel to D.C. for America's Everglades Summit

Audubon staff and board directors joined Everglades Foundation colleagues and Everglades advocates in our nation's capital to advocate for America's Everglades.

The group urged Congress to increase restoration funding in the 2019 budget and to approve of the EAA Storage Reservoir project expected to be included in the Water Resources Development Act of 2018.



Left to right: National Parks Conservation Association's Cara Capp, Conservancy of Southwest Florida's Marisa Carozzo, Audubon Florida Board director Lois Kelley, Florida Congressman Francis Rooney, and Audubon Florida Executive Director Julie Wraithmell.



Left to right: Audubon Florida Board directors Lida Rodriguez-Taseff and Lois Kelley, Tropical Audubon Society Communications Director Leticia Di Mello Bueno, Audubon Florida Executive Director Julie Wraithmell, National Audubon Society VP for Water Conservation Julie Hill-Gabriel, and Audubon Florida Everglades Policy Director Celeste De Palma.

"Floridians know and love the Everglades, but the iconic 'River of Grass' isn't just an ecological treasure for Florida. It's an American treasure. While attending the Everglades Foundation's America's Everglades Summit, we spoke to government leaders to encourage increased funding for restoration projects and for protection of this important national treasure." - Lois Kelley, Audubon Florida Board Director

Audubon Advocates and Partners Save the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge

After a long campaign by Audubon Florida and partners, the South Florida Water Management District entered into a new lease agreement on the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge this March, effectively saving this important National Wildlife Refuge! The agreement allows the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to continue managing this resource for wildlife. The new agreement renews the 60-year partnership between the State of Florida and the federal government to protect 144,000 acres of northern Everglades habitat in Palm Beach County. We thank the more than 67,000 advocates who took action to protect one of the nation's most beloved and important National Wildlife Refuges!

Audubon's role was so critical to this success that the National Wildlife Refuge Association is recognizing Audubon Florida's Celeste De Palma with a new award at their national gala in Washington, D.C.



Photo: Forest and Kim Starr



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