



Audubon FLORIDA

Naturalist

Spring 2018



American Flamingo

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Jud Laird, Chair
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Dear Audubon Members and Supporters,

I have always enjoyed travel because of the opportunity to explore new cultures, people, and places. Yet these experiences also make me realize just how unique Florida is. We are culturally and ecologically diverse, from Key West to Pensacola. From rolling hills in the north and hundreds of miles of coastline, to the massive subtropical wilderness of America's Everglades – there is nowhere else in the world as special as Florida. It's no wonder birds and birders flock to Florida.

If there's one bird that symbolizes Florida to the world, it's the American Flamingo. Despite being associated with all things Florida, many biologists thought Florida's meager wild flamingo population consisted of visitors or escapees from zoos. But, as you'll discover in this edition, Audubon biologists at our Everglades Science Center have collaborated with other scientists to turn this conventional thinking on its ear: American Flamingos seen in Florida are likely birds recovering the species' historic range.

As if we needed another reason to move forward with Everglades restoration, our science and policy teams tell me that continuing restoration efforts to get the water right will mean a brighter future for American Flamingos and all our wading birds. Our research center overlooks Florida Bay, putting Audubon scientists in the best place to monitor the health of America's Everglades and the effectiveness of restoration projects.

As you probably have heard, 2018 is the Year of the Bird. This year we celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) with partners National Geographic, BirdLife International, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The plume hunters of the previous century decimated Florida's wading bird populations until this legislation was enacted. Since Auduboners secured passage of the landmark MBTA in 1918, Audubon continues to protect Florida's bird populations and the special places they need. Just this year, Audubon helped secure millions for conservation during the lawmaking session in Tallahassee, and that's because of the dedication of members and supporters like you.

While we never need a reason to celebrate birds, we'll continue to need your voices, support, and passion in 2018 to protect all of Florida's special places. Thank you for all that you do for birds; they'll need us for the next 100 years.

Sincerely,

Learn how you can help at www.GiveToAudubonFlorida.org



Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director
Audubon Florida

Dear Friends,

I admit it. I was shamelessly eavesdropping while I recently walked the boardwalk incognito at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples. But I don't apologize for a second because what I overheard made my heart sing. One woman, walking hesitantly along the boardwalk appeared intimidated by the swamp. Too much water, too many alligators, too much death, I thought, as wading birds gorged on the minnows trapped in drying pools. And then, to no one in particular, she whispered to herself, "What a privilege. What a privilege to be able to experience this place." I was humbled to have mistaken her awe for hesitation. I should have recognized it because it was clear on the faces of everyone else on the boardwalk that day too.

That shared awe is at the heart of Audubon's celebration this year, declaring 2018 the Year of the Bird. On this 100th anniversary of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act—the landmark legislation which ended the plume trade and gave rise to Audubon—we are celebrating the use of sound science to inform strong policy to protect the birds and places that inspire us.



Thousands of visitors stroll back in time through the historic cypress swamp each year at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.



Wilson's Plovers depend on places like Little Estero Island Critical Wildlife Area to nest and raise young. Photo: Jean Hall

Because inspire us they do. In the last few months, I saw staid ornithologists giggle with delight at recent revelations from Audubon's Dr. Jerry Lorenz, Pete Frezza and colleagues, who shook up conventional thinking about flamingos in Florida. I've seen the flash of defiance in the eyes of advocates when they learn of our legal fight to stop private landowners from building a boardwalk into the very heart of the state-owned Little Estero Island Critical Wildlife Area. And I've seen the Audubon network—staff, volunteers, partners—accomplish amazing things for Florida and our birds. Not for glory or personal gain, but because their awe for these privileged experiences compels them.

It is a privilege to work alongside the Audubon network in Florida—this dedicated flock of staff and volunteers, donors, and advocates. The body of work we accomplish is impressive, but we know that so too are the needs. I hope you enjoy the updates, accomplishments, and calls to action in the following pages, and thank you for all you continue to do for Audubon Florida, our wildlife, and wildlands.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julie Wraithmell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annual Lawmaking Session in Tallahassee Wraps up With Strong Conservation Funding, Good News for America's Everglades, and Victories Thanks to Audubon Advocates



Lawmakers gathered early this year in Tallahassee for their annual 60-day lawmaking session, and Audubon focused on conservation funding as our top priority. With 2018 being an important election year for many lawmakers, Florida's environment faced eager lawmakers ready to make an impact on the state. We cheered on good ideas and fought back against ideas that threatened Florida's birds and the places they need. This special end-of-session report highlights this year's successes as well as some of the challenges we face due to legislation that passed—and where we go from here.

The 2018 Legislative Session ran into overtime, with both chambers finally passing the budget a few days after the scheduled session end date. During the final hours before passing the budget, amendments to other substantive bills started flying. Audubon action alerts right up until the end raised the alarm on several bad amendments that would be harmful to natural resources and good governance. Thanks to Audubon advocates, many of those were withdrawn or their underlying bills failed to pass.

Also because of the hard work of Audubon staff, advocates, and partners, robust conservation funding remained in the budget and it was signed into law. Together, we secured:

- \$100.8 million in Florida Forever funding (including \$5.8 million for Rural and Family Lands Protection Program),
- \$248 million for Everglades restoration and protection,
- \$50 million for springs protection, and more.

While a lot of legislators helped move this funding along, much of this success is a direct result of Senate Appropriations Chair Rob Bradley's dedication.

Some bills progressed this year but ultimately failed to pass both chambers. Lawmakers proposed to gut tree protections passed by local governments. After input from Audubon, the House proposal was improved but did not pass. The much worse Senate version failed in the Senate. A ban on fracking made progress once again this year in the Senate, but it failed to pick up traction in the House.

We celebrate the investments in land conservation, America's Everglades, and Florida springs, but we still have work to do. To join our action network and stay informed of Florida's top environmental issues, go to FL.Audubon.org/SignUp.

Legislature Appropriates Increased Funding for Conservation

Florida Forever

While bills in the House and the Senate that proposed future funding for Florida Forever failed to pass, the most important thing—funding in the upcoming year—was in the final budget. When the dust cleared, the Legislature appropriated \$100.8 million for the constellation of programs that comprise Florida Forever. This is an important increase from last year's meager land conservation appropriation.

- \$77 million for environmentally endangered lands (like state parks, wildlife management areas and state forests),
- \$5.8 million for Rural and Family Lands easements,
- \$10 million for Florida Communities Trust,
- \$2 million for Working Waterfronts, and
- \$6 million for FRDAP and children's park amenities.

America's Everglades

Continuing the state's commitment to restoring and protecting America's Everglades, the Florida Legislature appropriated \$248.1 million for the upcoming year. With a number of CERP projects already in the construction phase, restoration success depends on strong and sustained appropriations to get projects from start to finish in a timely manner. Audubon is grateful for the state's renewed commitment to America's River of Grass.

- \$111.1 million for implementation of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP),
- \$64 million for the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) reservoir (authorized in 2017's Senate Bill 10),
- \$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, and
- \$5 million for dispersed water storage.

Springs Protection

Both chambers agreed on \$50 million for the coming year for springs protection and restoration. These funds are an important opportunity to not just undertake water quality protection projects, but also acquire strategic parcels or easements in vulnerable springsheds.

Bill Authorizing State to Assume Federal Clean Water Act Permitting Now in Rulemaking

Despite broad opposition from the conservation community, Senate Bill 1402 (2018) passed the House and Senate and was signed into law by Governor Rick Scott. This bad bill was a top priority for Florida's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) as well as legislative leadership. Audubon raised concerns about the lack of detail available to evaluate the proposal as well as the ability of DEP to assume this complex permitting program without any additional staff. Now, DEP is negotiating agreements with the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But we can't do it alone. Public comment processes on the agreements and rulemaking are essential to ensuring Florida's wetlands receive adequate protection. Stay tuned for opportunities in this process to lend your voice to Florida's swamps, seeps, lakes and wet prairies, and all the creatures who depend upon them.



Bald Eagle. Photo: Graham McGeorge

Lend Your Voice to Florida's Wildlife and Wildlands

Thousands of advocates helped Audubon Florida stop bad legislation this year in Tallahassee. 2019 will bring a new Governor, Cabinet, and legislative leadership to Tallahassee, and they'll need to hear from you on the issues that matter.

Be in the know.

Join Audubon's action network at FL.Audubon.org/SignUp.

The Rush to Save the Imperiled Florida Grasshopper Sparrow

Birds Baffle Experts Trying to Stem Decline of Species



Florida Grasshopper Sparrow. Photo: Christina L. Evans

Bright sunshine begins to appear over a yellow-green Florida prairie. Last night's dew on the shrubs and grasses begins to dry in the hot sun. And the faint buzz of insects fills the air. Spring has finally sprung and male Florida Grasshopper Sparrows are up and singing on Florida's dry prairie ecosystem, as they have for millennia. But this year is different.

Florida Grasshopper Sparrows have been in a severe decline, and there could be as few as 10 females remaining in the wild. Researchers are combing the only places Florida Grasshoppers occur—the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area (TLWMA), Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park (KPPSP), Avon Park Air Force Range (APAFR), and a private ranch—to find remaining sparrows.

The specific cause for the decline remains unknown despite years of exhaustive research and management. Here's what we know:

- They need native Florida prairie, which is disappearing.
- They move to freshly-burned areas as soon as the smoke clears.
- They abandon areas that have not been burned for three years.
- They strongly avoid areas within 200 yards of trees.

To stem the decline, land managers have taken aggressive steps to make the habitat more hospitable to the imperiled species. They have burned in spring and fall, every one to three years, in every combination possible. They have cut down trees and protected native cover. Managers at KPPSP and TLWMA have even won their respective agency's "Manager of the Year" awards for their efforts.



Florida Grasshopper Sparrow. Photo: Christina L. Evans

Researchers have also made strong moves to protect the species, including marking most of the remaining sparrows with colored leg bands to track their lives and putting predator fences around nests (raising nest success to much higher levels). Yet the decline continues and now there is evidence that adults have lower annual survival rates than they used to.

In a last-ditch effort to save the species from extinction, a captive breeding program has begun. More than 40 birds are in captivity at two facilities, and we are learning to breed them. There have been setbacks with diseases, but these setbacks might be clues. Are wild birds declining due to disease? That seems likely, but until we identify a specific disease we can't be sure or take specific actions. Two universities are helping search for diseases in the wild and captivity. And an analysis is underway to identify the most imperiled genetic lines, and target who to add to the captive flock and who to protect in the wild.

The good news is we are learning. Audubon has been involved with prairies and sparrows since the 1930s, supporting land acquisitions, funding for management and research, participating in technical meetings, funding some of the research from our Ordway-Whittell Trust Fund, and rallying public support for sparrow conservation.

To learn more about our work to protect and save the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow and other imperiled species, follow us on Facebook and Twitter and sign up for Audubon Florida emails at FL.Audubon.org/SignUp.



Florida prairie habitat is slowly disappearing, making it harder for species like the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow to survive. Photo: Adobe Stock

Pelicans Who Survived Deepwater Horizon Disaster Spotted at Audubon Sanctuary

April 20, 2018 marked the eighth anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster that endangered the economies of coastal communities, saturated marshes and wetlands with sludge, and smothered thousands of birds in oil. Despite millions of gallons of oil flooding into the Gulf of Mexico, two surviving pelicans from the disaster recently gave Audubon biologists new hope for the fate of rescued and treated bird victims.

In 2010, two oiled Brown Pelicans were rescued, cleaned, rehabilitated, and banded in Louisiana. The two survivors were then safely released at Fort De Soto Park in St. Petersburg, Florida. The region is home to dozens of Audubon-protected island sanctuaries that provide refuge to more than 50,000 coastal birds including thousands of Brown Pelicans.

Audubon biologists have spotted the banded pelican survivors in recent years at the Richard T. Paul Alafia Banks Sanctuary, which is leased from and managed in collaboration with The Mosaic Company. Biologists believe both are now using the sanctuary to breed- giving reason for hope for the once endangered species. These two survivors serve as a poignant reminder of just how important Audubon Florida's work is to the region, state, and entire Gulf of Mexico.

The Alafia Bank hosts the largest Brown Pelican colony in the Tampa Bay region and is an important bird nesting island for the entire Gulf. Right now, the Sanctuary is under threat of dangerous invasive trees that are crowding out the native plants that birds need. Audubon Florida secured a matching grant to fund the replacement of the invasive invaders with beneficial native plants. Every dollar Audubon raises is matched \$1-for-\$1, and more than 200 generous donors have supported restoration work so far. If you'd like to support this good restoration work, visit FL.Audubon.org/SaveAlafia. Be sure to stay tuned to our social media for updates!



Banded Brown Pelican spotted at an Audubon sanctuary eight years after being rescued from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Disaster. Photo: Audubon Florida.



Banded Brown Pelican R0Z4 spotted at an Audubon Sanctuary three years after its initial rescue from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Disaster. Photo: Carol Cassels.

Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Leads the Way in Research and Restoration for America's Everglades

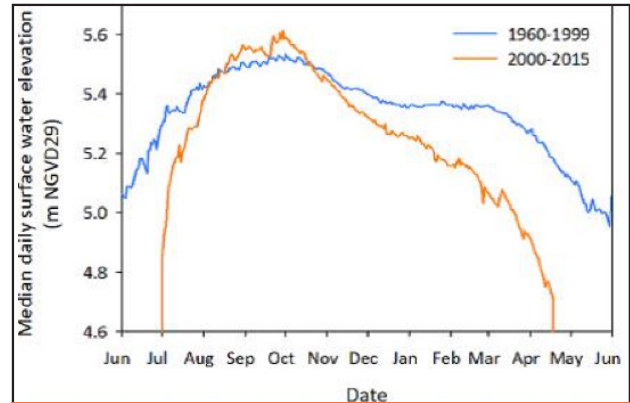
While many people associate Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples, Florida with its cypress swamp boardwalk and extraordinary wildlife viewing, fewer realize that it is an active laboratory. Behind the scenes, Audubon researchers, land managers, educators, and policy advocates work to unravel the threats facing Corkscrew's watershed and prescribe a course of restoration that will benefit the entire Western Everglades.

Audubon's Dr. Shawn Clem led analysis of 60 years of data for the region, pinpointing 2000 as the tipping point after which overdrainage and heavy development in wetlands coincided with chronically low water levels during dry seasons every year since. The watershed's altered hydrology has resulted in wetland and wildlife losses, declines in Wood Stork productivity, catastrophic flooding and wildfires, invasive plant infestations, and dwindling water supply.

In addition to identifying the causes of declines, Audubon is also pioneering innovative solutions. On the ground at Corkscrew, land managers are undertaking an ambitious project to mechanically remove the invasive willow choking wetlands, while working with neighboring landowners upstream to restore the hydrology of Corkscrew's important marshes. When this work succeeds, it will serve as a roadmap for restoration of marshes elsewhere in the Greater Everglades Ecosystem.

Policy staff use Audubon research like Dr. Clem's to fix the underlying systemic problems, advocating for policies that either require or incentivize wetland restoration on public and private lands in the region. Audubon also advances proposals for conservation land acquisition and restoration through Florida Forever. With support from Audubon educators, this information reaches thousands of Audubon members, interns, students, and conservation partners.

Corkscrew is well known as an incubator of sorts for Wood Storks, but it is an equally important incubator for the restoration techniques and policy advancements needed to restore America's Everglades. On your next visit to Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, enjoy exploring the swamp and know that Audubon experts are working to restore and protect this special place so that others may enjoy the same experience for generations to come.



Median Annual Surface Water Levels. Historic water levels (blue) at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary were higher during the dry months, compared to the same months in recent years (orange).



Corkscrew is a historic stronghold for Wood Storks. These slow-walking storks often feed in shallow pools of water, catching trapped fish. Too little or too much water in wetland habitats make it difficult for storks and wading birds to find food for themselves and chicks. Photo: RJ Wiley



Removing willows helps restore vital wetlands at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Photo: Audubon Florida.

Audubon In Action: New Campaign Underway to Restore Key Marshes and Prairies

Once dominated by diverse grasses and sedges, marshes and prairies at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary are under siege. A scourge of woody invaders marches across our freshwater wetlands- threatening this critical habitat for wildlife like the Wood Stork. The principal culprit is Carolina Willow, spreading because of altered hydrology and a lack of fire. Audubon is working to remove these willows and restore these vital wetlands. To learn more, visit Corkscrew.Audubon.org/StopTheWillows.

The Frenzy of Baby Bird Season at Audubon Center for Birds of Prey

Baby Great Horned Owl



There is no sugar-coating it. Baby season is a tough and hectic time at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland, Florida. In February, you can hear staff say, “look how cute, a baby Great Horned Owl just arrived.” However, by June you hear, “do we still have a kennel free for another Red-shouldered Hawk?”

Each spring, the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey spends countless hours helping baby raptors with 20 percent of the annual patient load arriving in May alone. Babies require specialty care including multiple feedings daily, weight checks, food prep, cleaning, sanitizing, and medications.

Audubon’s Raptor Technician Beth Lott has seen her fair share of baby seasons with almost 20 years of experience working in wildlife rehabilitation.



“Baby season at the Center is when young raptors are being pushed out of nests by siblings, weather, actions by people or on their own accord; this time of year may be cute but it’s not pretty. Some of our daily challenges are to keep up with all the feedings and to progress the babies through their care as close to an adult of their species would do naturally,” said Beth.

All of these young birds need our help to survive. With the expertise that Audubon staff provide, these birds have a fighting chance. Of course the best care for babies comes from the parents, and we reunite them with their parents when possible. Center staff work with tree service companies, who donate bucket truck service, tree climbers, and volunteers who can help return a baby to their nest tree.

Care like this requires extra time, volunteers, resources and public involvement.

You can help too. Many of Florida’s raptors are cavity and tree nesters, and disturbing nests by trimming trees in the spring puts them in danger. Until the fall, hold off on trimming trees in your yard. There’s never been a better reason to procrastinate!



Baby Barred Owl



Restoring Our Nest: Center Begins Ambitious Long-Term Recovery Repairs After Hurricane Irma

Construction and a capital campaign are now underway at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey! A much-needed roof replacement for the Trauma Clinic has started, and the Center is launching the Restore Our Nest campaign to rebuild and sustain our facilities through future storms. It’s a tall order to raise \$165,000 to weatherproof, repair and replace roofs, and improve aviaries. But with 15 new patients every week and threats to birds increasing every day, we must continue our work. Visit AudubonCenterForBirdsOfPrey.org to learn more.

More Freshwater (Not Less) Needed to Curb Algal Blooms in Florida Bay

Florida Bay, the vast lagoon between the Florida Keys and the mainland, is home to some of the most unique wildlife and habitat in the world. But this special place is telling us something is wrong. Putrid green algal blooms are appearing in the bay, and data from Audubon's Everglades Science Center attribute the blooms to the lack of freshwater flows reaching Florida Bay. This lack of freshwater causes hypersalinity and a cascading effect that begins with seagrass dieoffs and culminates in algal blooms.

As an estuary, Florida Bay is incredibly sensitive to the quantity of freshwater it receives. In the right conditions, seagrass, fish, and other wildlife thrive in Florida Bay. But without sufficient freshwater, salinity rises and endangers the seagrass, fish, and invertebrates that provide important ecological functions like oxygenating and filtering the water.



Madeira Bay in Florida Bay plagued with algal blooms late last year.
Photo: Steve Davis

Historically, freshwater would freely flow from Lake Okeechobee in Central Florida through America's Everglades and into Florida Bay. Today, however, choked Florida Bay only receives a fraction of this much-needed freshwater- making conditions more conducive for algal bloom development in this sensitive ecosystem.

Reconnecting Florida Bay to Lake Okeechobee is the key to increasing the much-needed flow of clean freshwater that will help restore Florida Bay. Before reaching the bay, Lake Okeechobee's water flows through marshes, swamps, and wetlands throughout the Everglades that clean the water and scrub excess nutrients.

Mild hypersalinity now regularly plagues Florida Bay, making it even more vulnerable to the impacts of storms and droughts. Recently, Hurricane Irma served as a reminder of how fragile this ecosystem is. The storm stripped seagrass from the Gulf of Mexico and literally deposited tons of dead seagrass into Florida Bay. As the seagrass decayed, it released nutrients and depleted the oxygen. This burst of nutrients stimulated algae to explode, and the lack of oxygen compounded the impact by killing the fish and invertebrates that normally filter the water and consume algae. As the blooms spread, they reduced sunlight through the water column, further stressing the remaining seagrass.

Increasingly frequent droughts, lack of freshwater, and extreme storms set off what seems to be an unending vicious cycle of algal blooms in Florida Bay. But there is hope for the 850 square miles of lagoons that make up Florida Bay: Restoring the historic freshwater flow by advancing Everglades restoration. Audubon's strategic priorities for a healthy Florida Bay include:

- Implementing the Central Everglades Project (CEP),
- Bridging Tamiami Trail,
- Folding all of the Southern Everglades projects into one combined operational plan, and
- Advancing water storage south of Lake Okeechobee as laid out in Senate Bill 10 (2017).

Combined, these projects store, clean, and remove barriers to send more freshwater from Lake Okeechobee southward toward Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico while reducing harmful discharges to the east and west coasts. If freshwater from Lake Okeechobee through the Everglades to Florida Bay is restored to better reflect historic flows, the current situation of recurring ecological collapses can be brought to an end.

Learn more about Audubon's work in America's Everglades in our latest edition of the *State of the Everglades* at FL.Audubon.org/EvergladesReport.



Help Wanted: Report Sightings of Banded Black Skimmers to Audubon

The Black Skimmer is hard to miss on Florida’s beaches – whether gracefully skimming the water for food or “barking” to each other when resting on the upper beach. Despite being seen year-round on Florida’s beaches, not much is known about our nesting population of Black Skimmers.

A new Audubon banding study is trying to fill in some of these unknowns. To band the skimmers, trained researchers safely capture three-week-old chicks, and then gently place a plastic band with a unique code on its lower leg. Researchers and the public use the bands to identify individual skimmers in the coming years. Audubon biologists hope to shed light on juvenile and adult survival, breeding site fidelity, and dispersal after the breeding season. The health of the population depends on younger birds surviving to replace the older birds, and tracking movement also helps Audubon identify priority sites essential for this species.

If you would like to help with this project, be on the lookout for banded Black Skimmers whenever you are on the beach. Please keep your distance, and do not enter posted areas to observe bands. They are easy to read with binoculars from afar! Report your sightings on Audubon’s Florida Banded Bird Resightings Facebook page or email us at FLConservation@audubon.org.

Audubon Supports Atlantic Flyway Project to Understand Disturbance Impacts to Imperiled Shorebirds

Shorebird populations have declined over the past few decades from many pressures along coasts. Habitats are lost to development, shrunk from sea level rise, and impacted by human disturbance. While work continues on habitat protection and climate change, better management of human disturbance can help coastal birds right away. Even relatively minor disruptions - like beachgoers causing a colony to flush from their nests - can result in eggs falling victim to predators, chicks overheating in the hot sun, and parents losing critical energy reserves as they struggle to feed chicks.

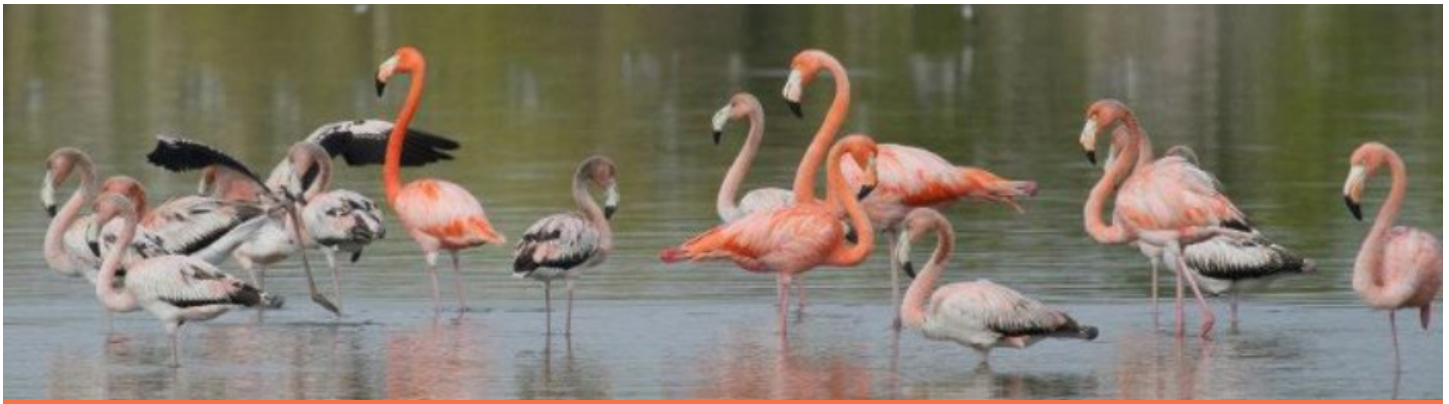
Audubon and our partners in the Atlantic Flyway Shorebird Initiative recently embarked on an innovative, flyway-level project to better understand the impacts of human disturbance to shorebirds. Researchers along the Atlantic Coast and Florida’s Gulf Coast are gathering disturbance data in both nesting and non-nesting shorebirds. This modern form of conservation science considers not only the human role in disturbance but will also help determine strategies to encourage more shorebird-friendly behaviors by people. Acclaimed shorebird researchers at Virginia Tech are collecting and analyzing this data, and we hope to share valuable insights from this project soon.



When parents are flushed from nests by human disturbance, chicks and eggs are vulnerable to predators like Fish Crows. Photo: Lou Newman

In the meantime, here are some tips to ensure both you and the shorebirds safely enjoy Florida’s beaches:

- Take your trash with you. It attracts predators.
- Stay out of posted areas, even if you don’t see birds inside them.
- Observe birds from a distance. If they take flight, you are too close.
- Dispose of fishing line and tackle appropriately.
- Leave Fido at home. Dogs and cats can unintentionally cause nesting birds to flush.
- Do not feed any birds, especially shorebird predators like gulls, crows, and herons.



American Flamingos spotted in Lake Ingraham on Cape Sable, Everglades National Park. Photo: Christopher Boykin

Audubon and Other Researchers Vindicate Flamingo-Loving Floridians

Findings Indicate American Flamingos Seen in Florida are Wild Birds Recovering Their Historic Range

By 1900, as a result of hunting, no nesting American Flamingos remained in Florida. Accordingly, American Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) seen in Florida since that time were a conundrum. Should they be considered a native species returning to their historic range from breeding populations elsewhere? Or are they escapees from captive populations? A group of researchers that includes top scientists from Audubon Florida's Everglades Science Center put that question to rest in a paper this March. Modern searches and analysis by researchers strongly indicate that Flamingos seen today in Florida should be considered a naturally occurring, native species to Florida. Long heralded as an icon of the Sunshine State, many researchers once thought American Flamingos seen in recent decades were simply escaped captive birds. Researchers argue that they are pioneers recolonizing their historic range and should be considered part of Florida's native fauna.

The research group analyzed historical evidence of American Flamingos in Florida from narrative accounts and museum records and contrasted that information to sightings of the pink bird. They concluded that American Flamingos once occurred naturally in large flocks in Florida before disappearing in the early 1900's. Collected data since 1950 add up to 500 observations of American Flamingos in Florida with an increase in frequency and flock size over time.

"The overwhelming record of evidence support our conclusions that Flamingos are part of our native fauna," said Dr. Jerry Lorenz, state director of research for Audubon Florida. "The good news is that many habitats we believe critical to the success of the species are already protected. Everglades National Park along with southern Florida's complex of National Wildlife Refuges are the primary areas that supported Flamingos in the past. Continuing restoration efforts in America's Everglades to get the water right for all of Florida's iconic wading birds will also translate into a bright future for the American Flamingo in Florida."

The special partnership between state and federal agencies to restore America's Everglades is the key to the future of the hundreds of wading birds that depend on this ecosystem. Now it is also the key to the recovery of Florida's long-lost icon, the American Flamingo. Lorenz, encouraged by the new findings said, "State and federal agencies have worked in tandem for years to protect vital coastal wetlands and restore America's Everglades. The findings of this study should help convince policymakers to advance restoration efforts to rehydrate Everglades National Park and Florida Bay and properly fund the management of our National Wildlife Refuges. Wouldn't it be a great economic boon to have Flamingos be a common sight in the Florida Keys and Everglades National Park like they were prior to 1900?!"

The study was conducted by: Stephen Whitman and Frank Ridgley from Zoo Miami, Dr. Jerry Lorenz and Pete Frezza from Audubon's Everglades Science Center, Anne Maduro from Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Judd Patterson from the National Park Service, and Antonio Pernas from Big Cypress National Preserve.



Originally banded in the Yucatan Peninsula, this American Flamingo was seen in Snake Bight, Florida. Photo: Garl Harrold

Central Florida a Hotspot for Events Supporting Audubon's Conservation Work

Wind Beneath Our Wings 2018

In February, the Maitland-based Audubon Center for Birds of Prey hosted its annual Wind Beneath our Wings event benefitting Audubon's efforts to research, rescue, rehabilitate, and release birds of prey. The event previewed the new "Restore the Nest" campaign - an effort to raise \$165,000 for repairs and weaknesses discovered after Hurricane Irma. Last renovated 20 years ago, the Center is in desperate need of structural replacements, roof repairs, aviary improvements, and weatherproofing. Visit AudubonCenterForBirdsOfPrey.org to learn more.



Left to Right: Linda Guthrie, Scott Taylor, and Katie Warner



Left to Right: Nanci Adler, Chuck Schmidt, and Laural Schmidt

A special thanks to the event sponsors including SeaWorld Parks and Resorts, Darden, Dykes and Lisa Everett, JCR Consulting, Winter Park Veterinary Hospital, Breedlove, Dennis & Associates, Inc., Disney's Animal Programs, Orlando Utilities Commission, Mitigation Marketing, Inc., Florida Power & Light, and Publix.

Song of the Earth and Sky

Audubon Florida hosted its inaugural Song of the Earth and Sky event just a month later in March at the Winter Park home of Dick and Mimi Ford. More than 150 community leaders and philanthropists attended to support and learn more about Audubon's mission. A special thanks to Audubon Florida board directors Dykes Everett and Lois Kelley and volunteers Carolyn Bethel, Lisa Everett, and Paula Loftus.



Photo: Jake Smith
Bearded Lens Photography

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Plants for Birds – A Growing Effort!

Enthusiasm for using native plants in Florida landscapes is spreading among Audubon's 45 local chapters in Florida! Twenty of Florida's Audubon chapters serve as local native plant resources and are encouraging their communities and neighbors to use native landscaping. Native plants are better for birds and people, save water, control flooding, use fewer chemicals, reduce yard maintenance, and create native Florida beauty in landscapes. Check out these examples of just a few chapters working to expand bird-friendly native landscapes in their communities.

Pelican Island Audubon is advocating for native plants to help save the Indian River Lagoon. More than 400 attendees participated in a recent two-day native landscaping conference, and local officials have asked for their help in developing a local native plant program. Native plants require less water and fertilizer, making them friendlier to nearby rivers, lakes, and the Indian River Lagoon.

South Florida Audubon is replanting and restoring three existing bird sanctuary butterfly gardens with more bird-friendly plants after many plants were destroyed by Hurricane Irma. Audubon's interactive database at Audubon.org/PlantsForBirds is serving as a guide to select native plants for these gardens. The Garden Club of the Quail Ridge Country Club, local Florida Master Gardeners, and the National Wildlife Habitat Steward volunteers are partnering with South Florida Audubon on this project including replanting and community education.

Drumming up incredible local interest in native plants, **Four Rivers Audubon** in North Central Florida featured a native plant giveaway as part of their 9th Annual Alligator Lake Spring Festival in April. Hundreds gather each year for this community event celebrating the area's springs and nature. More than 200 carefully selected native plants were given away to attendees with installation, care, and benefit details.

In March, **Bay County Audubon** hosted Birds, Bugs and Berries, a well-attended symposium on native plants. Expert birders, native plant enthusiasts, and gardening specialists highlighted the importance of native plants for both birds and the bugs they need. Insects provide an important source of protein for birds, especially young song birds. Bird populations have dramatically declined due to habitat loss and climate change, and native landscapes empower homeowners and business to help both the environment and the birds.



Native to Florida, *Campsis radicans* (trumpet creepers) are a favorite for Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and butterflies. Photo: Will Stuart



Four Rivers Audubon members encouraging their neighbors to plant native plants in at home.

This Northern Mockingbird stands on top of the bright pink flowers that adorn eastern redbuds. Redbuds' nectar attracts hummingbirds while its seeds are a hit with many species.



Photo: Glenda Simmons



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Spring 2018

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Production: NPC Printing, Inc. Editor: Sean Cooley Designer: Reinier Munguia

Cover Photo: Adobe Stock

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Save the Date: Annual Audubon Assembly October 19-20 in West Palm Beach



American Flamingo | Photo: James Fillmore

Visit FL.Audubon.org/Assembly for Updates and Registration Details