



Audubon | FLORIDA

Naturalist

FALL 2023



Little Snowy Plover chick, big world.
Photo: Jamey Binneveld



Heidi McCree, Board Chair

At Audubon, we know how to play the long game. I am proudest of our team when we put pieces in place for a more resilient future for both birds and people, and that has been on display in 2023!

Our long-term monitoring of Bald Eagles as part of the EagleWatch program showcases how we protect nesting raptors after hurricanes (pg. 7), while salinity, temperature, and vegetation data in the Everglades bring context to high water temperatures this summer (pg. 6).

Our investments in relationships and policy mean we celebrated with chapters when both St. Johns and Seminole counties invested in conservation within their borders (pg. 9), while the federal government’s historic funding of Everglades restoration as part of the Inflation Reduction Act creates a brighter future for the River of Grass and all of South Florida (pg. 10).

Across the state, Audubon chapters are using Plants for Birds grants to create homes for current and future generations of Florida native species (pg. 11).

Our commitment to long-term conservation is the result of your commitment to us. I know some of our members have supported Audubon for decades, while others are just beginning to get their feet wet, but it takes all of us to speak up for our feathered friends. Thank you!

Heidi McCree, *Chair, Audubon Florida*



Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director

I know this is an understatement, but it has been a *hot* summer. Record air and water temperatures have seared the landscape across Florida, a test of our environment’s resilience. Everglades restoration proved to be a pivotal factor in protecting seagrasses during temperature spikes, and our science team is watching for the effects of heat on our aquatic ecosystems as we head into the fall (pg. 6).

Our coastal team persevered on the beaches to work with volunteers, landowners, visitors, and locals to protect nesting sea and shorebirds, though heat took a toll there too as the youngest of chicks are not able to successfully regulate their own body temperatures (pg. 5). Speaking of perseverance, my hat is off to the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary team, who successfully completed not one but *two* summer prescribed fires to restore critical wetland habitat—the first summer burn in almost 20 years (pg. 8).

I hope you’ll join me in celebrating Audubon successes this year at our annual Assembly in Tampa Bay (there’s still time to register—find more information on the next page). As always, we are strongest when we flock together!

Julie Wraithmell, *Executive Director, Audubon Florida*

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We have more work ahead of us. Are you receiving our digital updates? If not, subscribe to stay informed by the Audubon team: fl.audubon.org/keep-touch

2023

Audubon Assembly

Conservation in a Changing Landscape

There is still time to register for the
Audubon Florida Assembly!

OCTOBER 26-28

The 2023 Assembly will be held in person at the Sheraton Tampa Brandon hotel. With learning sessions, a keynote presentation, awards, and field trips to some of the birdiest hotspots in the Tampa Bay region, Assembly is a great opportunity to network with Audubon members, staff, and volunteers across the state.

Tickets: \$155

Early Bird Tickets: \$135

Friday Night Banquet Only: \$80

American Oystercatchers.
Photo: Abby McKay/Audubon Florida

Visit fl.audubon.org/assembly
for updates and registration details.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING of the membership of The Florida Audubon Society. Pursuant to the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, notice is hereby given that the Annual Membership Meeting of the Florida Audubon Society will be held on Saturday, October 28 at 1 p.m. The meeting agenda will be to receive a financial report and hear any comments of the membership to the Board of Directors. A Meeting of the Board will follow immediately upon the conclusion of the Membership Meeting. For questions, contact Adrienne Ruhl at Adrienne.Ruhl@audubon.org.



Photo: Holley Short

Hurricane Idalia brought more than 100 American Flamingos to Florida and across the United States. Audubon Florida's research team is tracking the sightings to learn more about these unique pink birds.

[Click here](#) to see Jerry Lorenz, director of research, give an insightful presentation about Hurricane Idalia's flamingos.



A real highlight has been the surge of Snowy Plover chicks from Fort Myers Beach and Little Estero CWA, with 19 chicks fledged this season! Over the previous four years, this number has ranged from 6-14 for all of Southwest Florida. One super female raised four chicks—an unusual feat. ➤

Photo: Jamey Binneveld

Nesting Birds Contend with Heat and Disturbance this Summer

Tropical storms may have spared our beaches until the end of summer, but coastal nesting species still had to contend with record-breaking heat. Hurricane Idalia and subsequent beach and island overwashes effectively ended the nesting season for much of the state.

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Carlos Point in Lee County successfully fledged almost 400 Black Skimmer chicks and more than 300 Least Tern chicks. Additionally, Fort Myers Beach fledged 21 Wilson's Plover chicks, and Lee County as a whole fledged 21 Snowy Plovers. Unfortunately, in Collier County, the historically successful Marco Pass CWA colony completely failed. Though the colony began with approximately 900 Black Skimmer adults, they never nested. A small colony at Second Chance Critical Wildlife Area resulted in 100 Black Skimmer nests, and staff continue to monitor chicks as we head into the fall season. Across Collier County, 32 Wilson's Plover pairs fledged 16 chicks.

PANHANDLE

Audubon biologists monitored nests of several tern species, including Caspian, Royal, Sandwich, Least, and Sooty Terns; as well as Brown Pelicans, American Oystercatchers, Wilson's Plovers, and Snowy Plovers. But this year belonged to the Black Skimmers, with more than 175 fledged across the region. Black Skimmers nested on Flag and Lanark Critical Wildlife Areas, Pensacola Beach, and Navarre Beach. In the absence of overwash from storm events or abnormally high tides, Flag Island had two rounds of skimmer nesting. The Pensacola colony settled on their site after being displaced from their first nest site at Gulf Islands National Seashore, while the Navarre Beach colony settled on a sandy empty lot site after nesting attempts at two other sites in the area.

TAMPA BAY REGION – BEACHES

The team celebrated a triple-chick nest of American Oystercatchers this year at Fort De Soto Park, a testament to the partnerships between the park staff, Audubon, and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) that kept the young birds safe during a busy beach season. An additional successful partnership between Audubon Florida, Sarasota County, and the FWC resulted in 104 Least Tern and 320 Black Skimmer fledges on Lido Key—colonies that accounted for all the Least Terns and more than 75% of Black Skimmers from Audubon-monitored sites. Unfortunately,

high tides and summer storms drenched beaches in overwash in Pinellas County, wiping out many Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover, Least Tern, and Black Skimmer nests. Only two Wilson's Plovers nests in Greater Tampa Bay monitored by Audubon successfully fledged in 2023.

TAMPA BAY REGION – ROOFTOPS

Across 30 active rooftops in Pinellas, Pasco, Hillsborough, and Sarasota counties, staff recorded 20 Least Tern colonies, nine American Oystercatcher pairs, three Black Skimmer colonies, and six Killdeer pairs. With the FWC, Audubon and volunteers installed 2,750 feet of fencing to protect chicks from falling off the roof, as well as 198 chick shelters. While flooding and predation continued to pose problems for the nesting birds, we were delighted to discover a brand-new rooftop colony in Sarasota.

FLORIDA COASTAL ISLANDS SANCTUARIES

The Richard T. Paul Alafia Banks Sanctuary, leased from and managed in collaboration with The Mosaic Company and Port Tampa Bay as a bird sanctuary, provided homes to 6,000 bird pairs across 15 species. White Ibis proved to be the most numerous, but five state-Threatened bird species fledged chicks as well, including Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Tricolored Heron, and Little Blue Heron.

Staff monitored a mixed Wood Stork and wading bird colony in Tampa this year, hosting the annual Colony Watch volunteer training on the site in coordination with the owners. Unfortunately, the colony experienced some bird die-offs of undetermined causes as well as disturbance from a neighbor removing trees during nesting season. In good news though, the manager of the site and our volunteers alerted Audubon to both of these issues, prompting further investigation that will ultimately help the birds.

NORTHEAST FLORIDA

Unfortunately, St. Johns County experienced a difficult nesting season. Least Tern, Wilson's Plover, Black Skimmer, and American Oystercatcher gave it their best shot, but habitats reduced by erosion, plagued by overwash, and under intense pressure from predators could not sustain chicks until fledging. In Duval and Nassau counties, the nesting areas around Nassau Sound produced young of several species: Gull-billed Tern, Least Tern, and around two dozen Black Skimmers! Several Wilson's Plover nests were primarily concentrated on Little Talbot Island—a state park that is central to their success. Huguenot Memorial Park, despite its struggles with erosion and large crowds, produced hundreds of Laughing Gull and Royal Tern chicks. Well over 50 Sandwich Tern chicks fledged this year, too.



Seagrass in Florida Bay.
Photo: Kelly Cox

Florida Keys' Record-high Water Temperatures Would Spell Disaster for Florida Bay Seagrasses Without Fresh Water Delivered Through Everglades Restoration

In late July and into August, the world gasped when South Florida's coastal water temperatures reached the upper 90s °F, shattering records and shocking locals and visitors alike. The Audubon team at the Everglades Science Center has recorded water temperatures in Taylor Slough, part of Everglades National Park, for more than 30 years. The team saw temperatures climb to 96.7 °F on July 12—one of the highest recordings ever taken by Audubon in Florida.

Long-term monitoring data is worth its weight in gold in situations like this. As temperature readings spike, Audubon researchers not only compare the heat with decades of prior data, but also capture emerging trends as a changing climate drives a new normal for South Florida.

“These temperature records tell us that climate change is here, and that we need Everglades restoration now more than ever. Delays in this year's rainy season in South Florida have exacerbated this problem, reducing circulation in nearshore waters. With the return of the rains, we are optimistic that freshwater inputs and increased circulation in the system will help lower these extraordinary temperatures.”

— Kelly Cox, Audubon's Director of Everglades Policy

Audubon's Everglades Science Center team also monitors seagrasses in the area where the high water temperatures are recorded, and reports good news: as of September 15, seagrasses were not experiencing die-offs. Seagrass acts as essential nursery habitat for a variety of species, including fish, turtles, and dolphins. Florida's iconic wading birds depend on fish and other prey that live within seagrass beds.

“Everglades restoration projects already underway have improved water flow into Florida Bay, and as a result we've seen healthier, lower salinity levels this summer,” says Jerry Lorenz, PhD, director of research. “That means the seagrass can better withstand extreme events like this.”

Hot water temperatures are more than uncomfortable—they can be dangerous. Extended hot water temperatures could eventually cause a seagrass die off. Additionally, heat creates conditions for deadly algal blooms, which thrive in warm water containing high levels of nutrients from agricultural and stormwater runoff. Moreover, the temperatures themselves can kill fish and other wildlife, while furthering the bleaching events that threaten to decimate the Florida Keys' remaining coral reefs.

“You can't go back in time and start monitoring when you have a question,” explains Dr. Lorenz. “That's why long-term monitoring datasets like ours are so valuable. We know this heat wave is unprecedented because we have more than 30 years of data that show us. These heat records mean we need to speed up our work to combat climate change and restore the Everglades to make South Florida more resilient in the face of future heat events.”

As a changing climate drives more extreme events, continued local, state, and federal investments in long-term monitoring remain critically important.

Florida's Bald Eagles Rebounded After Hurricane Ian's Destruction, According to EagleWatch Report

Despite nest destruction from Hurricane Ian, resilience proved to be the theme of the 2022-23 Bald Eagle nesting season, according to end-of-season data compiled by the Audubon EagleWatch program.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Ian in late September, EagleWatch volunteers returned to monitoring Bald Eagle nests as soon as possible, even as they faced significant damage to their own homes and communities. Across the state, volunteers documented 148 nests lost to the storm.

Typically, when an eagle pair loses a nest, they simply rebuild in another suitable tree nearby. In the storm's path, however, suitable trees were also lost. With few other options, many eagle pairs rebuilt their nests in spindly trees with bare branches and little foliage. According to EagleWatch data, roughly 70 percent of the eagle pairs that lost their nests rebuilt in the same season.

From those rebuilt nests, more than 100 chicks have fledged. In total, EagleWatch nest monitors recorded 1,071 fledges across Florida.

▼ A pair of eagles works to rebuild a nest after the storm.
Photo: Jack Horton



"The resilience of our eagles always inspires me," says Shawnlei Breeding, EagleWatch program manager. "No matter what challenges they face, they carry on. Their tenacity serves them well in Florida's ever-changing landscape. EagleWatch data helps document how eagles respond to these changes and guide management practices to ensure that they continue to thrive."

The Audubon EagleWatch program began in 1992 with 22 volunteers monitoring nests in three Central Florida counties. Their goal was documenting nests and protecting them from disturbance so that future generations of Floridians might enjoy seeing this amazing raptor. At that time, Bald Eagles were still on the federal list of Threatened and Endangered Species.

With protections, Florida's population of Bald Eagles grew from less than 100 nesting pairs in the 1970s to 600 by 1992, but the species still faced multiple threats and pressures in Florida from the rapidly growing human population. Fast forward 30 years and the program has grown to more than 600 volunteers monitoring 1100+ nests in 53 counties. Thanks to continued legal protections and the monitoring efforts of the EagleWatch Program over the past three decades, Florida's eagle population has made an amazing recovery and is now considered stable, with approximately 2,500 nesting pairs.

Today, volunteers collect important data including active nest locations, number of eaglets hatched, and possible disturbances or threats to nesting activity. In addition to hurricanes, Bald Eagles in Florida face many other challenges, including rodenticide poisoning, vehicle strikes, and habitat loss. Through monitoring, volunteers protect nests from illegal disturbances and assist with rescue for eaglets that have fallen from nests, giving them a second chance at life.

Audubon EagleWatch is based at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland, FL. The Center's Raptor Trauma Clinic treats more than 700 raptors each year, including eagles, hawks, and owls. Earlier this year, the Center released its 700th rehabilitated Bald Eagle since 1979.



◀ At the end of July, Pete Root and Scott Svec on the Corkscrew land stewardship team encountered this communal night roost for Swallow-tailed Kites. Photo: Pete Root/Audubon Florida

These birds are colonial, meaning they travel, sleep, and breed in groups. With long migratory journeys, Swallow-tailed Kites need a variety of natural spaces to survive. They gather to nest in forested areas near water, where prey are abundant. Habitats that offer this combination of resources are becoming harder to find in Florida due to urbanization, altered water flows, and logging. In addition to loss or degradation of their habitat, kites are also threatened by overuse of pesticides that can reduce the availability of food and clean water.

In July, Swallow-tailed Kites begin their annual return to wintering grounds, staging by the thousands in locations like Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. They arrive with the anticipation of finding enough food to build energy reserves before making their way back to South America. They know that in addition to providing safe habitat for breeding, Corkscrew Swamp serves up a sumptuous buffet of insects and other prey items rich in protein.

By expanding green spaces, adopting bird-safe building codes, working with farmers on sustainable forest management, and landscaping with native plants, we can make Florida a better place for Swallow-tailed Kites and people.

See the kites' entire flight path with the Bird Migration Explorer from Audubon's Migratory Bird Initiative and partners at: explorer.audubon.org

Swallow-tailed Kites Staging at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

Florida, surrounded on three sides by water, acts as a funnel for birds migrating across the Caribbean or Gulf of Mexico each winter. For most, these perilous, even herculean, long-distance marathons require tremendous amounts of energy and luck. As Swallow-tailed Kites tell us, certain locations in the Everglades serve as the last chance to refuel before their trans-oceanic migrations.

Named for their deeply forked tail, this iconic, black-and-white acrobat of the sky is a veritable sign of spring for many Floridians. In mid-February, Swallow-tailed Kites begin arriving from their wintering grounds in Brazil and Argentina, moving farther northward to the Panhandle within a few weeks. They nest across Florida and the Southeast from South Carolina to Louisiana.

Swallow-tailed Kites are voracious predators that hunt on the wing. Soaring effortlessly, they use their forked tail to maneuver amidst the tree canopy, using their feet to artfully snatch prey. Their diet includes lizards, snakes, insects, frogs, and nestling birds. They can also grab flying insects out of the air.



▶ This summer, our prescribed fire team at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary carefully conducted two prescribed fires in wet prairie habitat within our restoration units, totaling 47 acres. All prescribed fires are conducted in accordance with permits issued by the Florida Forest Service. Photo: Allyson Webb/Audubon Florida

American Kestrel.
Photo: Kristen Mauzy/
Audubon Photography
Awards



St. Johns County Dedicates \$2 Million to Land Acquisition and Management Program

In more good news, the St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners has taken an important step forward for conservation in this fast-growing county by adding \$2 million to the budget of the recently restarted Land Acquisition and Management Program (LAMP). Originally approved for only \$500,000 in annual funding, this year's increase will build capacity within the program that is eager to move forward. The LAMP secures critical components of green infrastructure that preserve wildlife and our quality of life in St. Johns County. Audubon Florida and St. Johns Regional Audubon supported the program restart and budget increase.

“This is a major win for conservation in St. Johns County. We applaud these efforts and look forward to collaborating with the commission and the LAMP as we ensure the future of our cultural and natural heritage.”
— Chris Farrell, Audubon's Northeast Florida Policy Associate

Seminole Forever Brings Conservation Dollars to Central Florida

Good news! Seminole County passed an ordinance to purchase land for conservation. The Seminole Forever program mirrors the successful, state-level Florida Forever program, using \$5 million from the county budget to fund land acquisition and improvement each year (the money would originate from a combination of the general fund, tourism fund, and bonds). Congratulations to the chapters—Seminole Audubon, Lake Region Audubon, and West Pasco Audubon—for their efforts on these issues!

“The most significant aspect of the ordinance Seminole County adopted is the county's decision to include conservation land acquisition on the list of basic government purposes for ongoing funding,” Charles Lee, Audubon's director of advocacy, explains. “This is not a one-off appropriation or a time-limited program, but rather a decision that dedicates a permanent revenue stream to environmental land purchases until a super-majority of county commissioners votes to change it.”

Audubon will work with elected officials and county staff to increase the program's budget over time.



Alpine Groves Park benefited from LAMP funding.
Photo: Chris Farrell/Audubon Florida



The IRA builds on critical clean energy and climate investments, and includes funds for water and working lands in ways that bolster bird habitats and community resiliency.

Little Blue Heron. Photo: Gordon Atkins/Great Backyard Bird Count

Inflation Reduction Act is Making a Difference for Water Resources, Rural Communities, Birds

This article was co-authored by Julie Hill-Gabriel and Melinda Cep at National Audubon Society.

August marked the one-year anniversary of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the most significant climate and clean energy legislation ever passed in the United States. The IRA includes investments and innovation in clean energy, infrastructure efficiency, electric vehicles, public transit, and grid modernization, all while prioritizing American communities and working families. This historic climate law also provides hope for birds and people in the fight against climate change. Most importantly for birds, two-thirds of which are threatened with extinction from climate change, the IRA included significant investments in natural systems, habitat protections, voluntary conservation, and wetland restoration around the country. From the Great Lakes to the Great Salt Lake, and down to Florida, birds like the Common Loon, Roseate Spoonbill, and Wilson's Phalarope are poised to benefit from the investments in the IRA. We all are.

The Inflation Reduction Act built on critical clean energy and climate investments and included significant funding for water and working lands in ways that bolster bird habitats and community resiliency. Specifically, the IRA included \$4 billion to address drought in the western United States and nearly \$20 billion to support voluntary conservation on ranches and farms across the country. These two sources of funding are critical down payments for addressing habitat issues impacting ecosystems throughout the country. The \$4 billion for drought funding includes crucial support to enable agricultural and municipal water users to voluntarily reduce

water consumption, thus leaving more water in rivers. And, it advances habitat restoration in areas impacted by drought and projects for efficiencies in water conservation.

The \$20 billion in funding for voluntary conservation through the US Department of Agriculture was a huge win for birds, particularly grassland-dependent birds which are threatened by habitat loss. The first round of this funding, \$850 million, was made available earlier this year. After an overwhelming expression of interest, landowners and producers applied directly for this additional funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and eligible parties applied for funding through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

This transformative IRA funding is intended to help producers implement climate and habitat friendly practices on their farms and ranches. It will be spent in communities: paying small businesses for fencing infrastructure, buying grass seed, supporting forest management through a certified forester, and much more. To help maximize the IRA funding's impact, Audubon submitted comments to USDA in support of bird habitat and natural climate solutions through the restoration and protection of working lands—including wetlands, forests, and grasslands. Audubon will continue this important work to ensure that more practices important to birds and climate mitigation are eligible for this funding as the IRA continues to be implemented.

12 Florida Chapters Awarded Grants to Provide Habitat for Birds and People

Since 2019, the Audubon Florida/Florida Power & Light Company (FPL) Plants for Birds grant program has infused excitement and inspired creativity among chapter members statewide. In October 2022, FPL announced its support of 12 Florida chapters with \$25,000 in grants ranging from \$1,025 to \$2,500 each.

Now in its fourth year, the program invited Florida chapters once again to submit their proposals and the winners will be announced at the Audubon Assembly Chapter Celebration.

Plants for Birds grants funded a variety of activities this past season.



➤ Southeast Volusia Audubon Society volunteers applied their talents, sweat, and funds to install a native plant garden, complete with solar bird bath, at a nearby elementary school. This project began in 2020 when they won their first Plants for Birds Grant. Three years later, the project has literally flourished.

➤ Four Rivers Audubon in North Central Florida has promoted native plants for more than 10 years. This year, the Plants for Birds grant funded a new program called "Become a Native Plant Ambassador." The program engaged their Master Gardeners and other plant enthusiasts with tips on how to begin incorporating native plants into the more traditional landscapes they create. Each program participant received a \$50 gift certificate to a native plant nursery and a yard sign to inspire others to do the same.

➤ Peace River Audubon Society volunteers used their grant funds to install native plants at the Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center (CHEC) to improve the habitat behind their bird blind.



➤ The South Florida Audubon Society butterfly garden is a labor of love requiring regular maintenance after the initial installation was completed. This past season, the Plants for Birds grant enabled them to add plant material, mulch, and supplies for the "little library."



➤ Pelican Island Audubon Society in Vero Beach planted their second public garden at the Up Against Poverty of Indian River County headquarters. In addition to the goal of planting 100,000 plants, this community partnership illustrates a long-term vision of an inclusive Audubon.





Looking for Ways to Double Your Impact in 2023?

If you are 70½ or older, you can make a tax-free distribution from your **traditional or Roth IRA** to Audubon Florida.

Here's how it works: you donate up to \$100,000 without incurring income tax on your withdrawal. The process is simple: you direct distributions in the amount of your choosing from your traditional or Roth IRA to Audubon Florida. This can be a one-time or recurring gift. The distributions go directly to Audubon Florida and are not subject to federal income tax.

When making your gift, to ensure it is properly processed and that you are listed as the donor of record and the gift comes to Florida, please have all checks directed to the address below and contact Suzanne Bartlett at 305.371.6399, ext. 123 or Suzanne.Bartlett@audubon.org to let us know to expect your gift.

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▲ This beautiful image of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher made the Top 100 list of the 2023 Audubon Photography Awards!

Photo: Lorraine Snipper
Location: Mullet Key, Fort De Soto Park, Florida

Behind the Shot: "A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was seen, rather unusually, at a county park near me in Central Florida. Off I went the very next morning, determined to see the bird. After several attempts, I noticed a light-colored bird hopping around in the grass. I had trouble keeping it in focus, so I increased my shutter speed and hoped it would fly. Much to my delight, it flew up into a tree with a large katydid. With seconds to spare, I positioned myself for the best light and view. The bird tossed its katydid into the air for a big gulp. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect the flycatcher to provide such a fantastic display with its tail feathers!"
— Lorraine Snipper

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