



Audubon | FLORIDA

August 2019

NATURALIST



Photo: RJ Wiley

Audubon is Everywhere

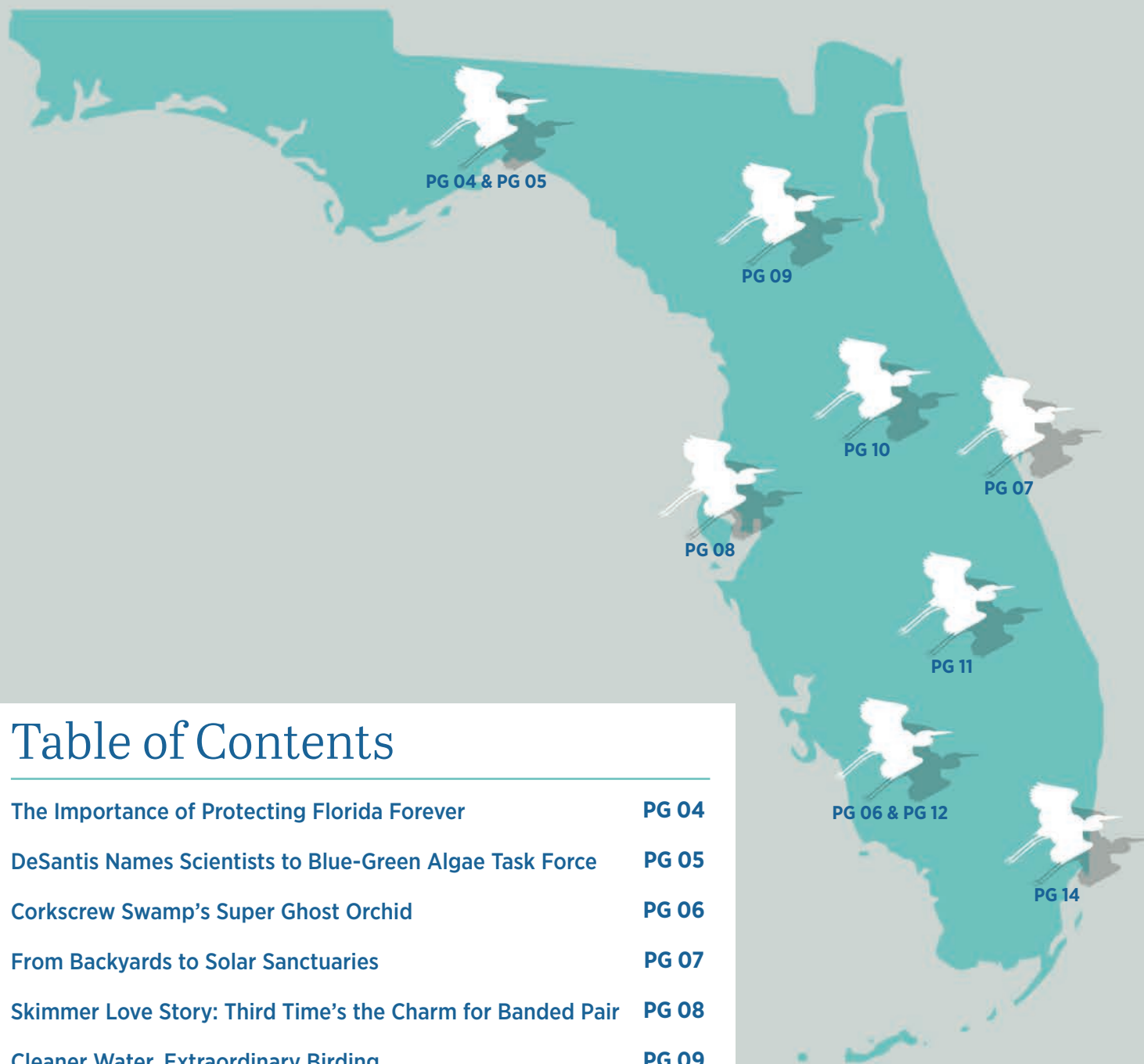


Table of Contents

The Importance of Protecting Florida Forever	PG 04
DeSantis Names Scientists to Blue-Green Algae Task Force	PG 05
Corkscrew Swamp's Super Ghost Orchid	PG 06
From Backyards to Solar Sanctuaries	PG 07
Skimmer Love Story: Third Time's the Charm for Banded Pair	PG 08
Cleaner Water, Extraordinary Birding	PG 09
Returning Injured Raptors to Florida Skies	PG 10
Lake Okeechobee Recovering After Years of High Water	PG 11
Governor DeSantis Visits Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp	PG 12
Audubon Awards	PG 13
Investing in the Next Generation of Conservation Leadership	PG 14



Jud Laird, Chair Florida Audubon Society

Dear Friends,

In Florida, land meets the water along our famous coastlines, our storied inland lakes, and our twisting rivers. In fact, the very flow of water across our landscape creates unique habitat conditions for some of our favorite plant and animal species. It's no surprise then, that the theme this year for the Annual Audubon Assembly is "Water and Land for Florida's Future."

A special combination of water flow and forest creates the ideal habitat for one of Florida's most mysterious residents: the Ghost Orchid. This year, scientists and explorers revealed that multiple species of moths are responsible for its pollination in the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a discovery years in the making. Protecting special areas where land and water meet remains a priority for Audubon Florida, so places like Corkscrew can continue to surprise and inspire us.

Such critical points of confluence also serve as beach nesting grounds for native bird species, restored wetlands for Limpkins and other wading birds, as well as the shoreline habitat of ailing Lake Okeechobee. Our policy and conservation teams are gearing up for the Florida Legislature fall committee meetings, working with our partners and elected officials to garner additional protections for these areas as well as prevent future algal scourges from reaching our bays, bayous, and coastlines.

As the hot summer days begin to ebb into fall, Florida's land and waters host the returning fall migratory birds, as well as those returning to the state capitol to advocate for water, land, and wildlife. Consider a gift to support our important work.

Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director Audubon Florida



Dear Audubon Members and Supporters,

While summer has a reputation for being sleepy and restorative, Audubon's team has been running full tilt. Staff and volunteers have been helping threatened beach- and island-nesting birds successfully fledge their young, despite the crush of human recreation. We've been celebrating the scientific discovery of the mysterious Ghost Orchid's pollinator at Audubon's own Corkscrew Swamp. Our policy team has been setting an urgent pace as they engage the members of Governor DeSantis' Blue-Green Algae Task Force with Audubon's prescriptions for watershed protection. And we're continuing to champion new conservation acquisitions, to protect the treasures of Northeast Florida's marshes, Florida's first magnitude springs, and the iconic Apalachicola River.

What we do together here in Florida is a model across the country, and at the National Audubon Convention in Milwaukee this July, our team and successes were front and center. With more than 30 Florida board members, chapter leaders, and staff present, it was a remarkable opportunity to share skills and strategies across the national network that makes Audubon the most effective conservation organization in the country. We were gratified to also see Florida celebrated in the recognition of Orange Audubon stalwart Deborah Green with National Audubon's William Dutcher Award.

While people cause many of the conservation challenges we face, we believe here at Audubon that people also hold the solutions. It's our people—chapter leaders, volunteers, staff, donors and board—that make us so effective with their talent, commitment, and creativity. Thank you for your role in our successes for Florida and its birds. Audubon is better because of you.

2019 Florida Audubon Society Leadership

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Cover Photo: RJ Wiley

The Importance of Protecting Florida Forever

By Beth Alvi, Director of Policy

Florida Forever is the state's premier land conservation program, acquiring parks and preserves to provide recreational opportunities, habitat for imperiled wildlife, and other benefits like water recharge and carbon sequestration. A successor to previous programs like Save Our Rivers and Preservation 2000, Florida Forever is the continuation of a decades-long effort that has ensured 10 million conservation acres are under state protection. As Florida's population continues to grow, protecting vulnerable resources is more important now than ever. For wildlife, people, working lands, conservation corridors and more, forests and wetlands are valuable investments in our efforts to protect and restore Florida's water quality and watersheds.

To ensure the most strategic parcels are acquired, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) evaluates and prioritizes projects from willing sellers each year, and ranks them based on ecological criteria. The program uses conservation easements — purchasing just the development rights from a property — as well as full acquisition to accomplish its goals and stretch dollars further. In recent years, despite resounding support from voters of 2014's Amendment 1, Florida Forever appropriations from the Legislature have been hard-won and modest. In addition to ensuring the program has funding, however, it is also important that Audubon is engaged in the process by which acquisitions are selected, and then managed for ecological health.

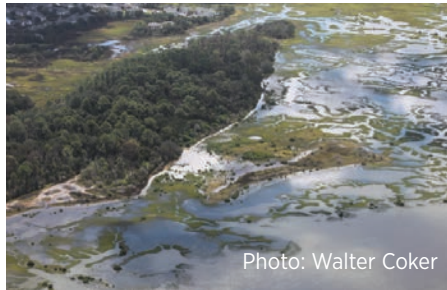


Photo: Walter Coker

Fish Island Acquisition Approved!

Fish Island is a long, forested island situated between the Matanzas River and the developed areas of Anastasia Island. The property includes over one-half mile of shoreline along the salt marshes of the Matanzas River, supporting a coastal forest system that acts as home base for a busy Bald Eagle nest. Preserving this property will retain the marsh's many benefits, including keeping this area resilient and bringing us closer to completing the Northeast Florida Blueway project.

Audubon Florida staff member Chris Farrell and St. Johns County Audubon worked with local supporters to highlight the water quality benefits of this project utilizing financial assistance from a "Water Quality Advocate" grant secured from the National Audubon Society. Conservation of the Fish Island property will prevent degradation of the unique salt marsh habitat and help maintain a healthy Matanzas River.

On July 23, Audubon's Director of Policy Beth Alvi joined supporters from Northeast Florida before the governor and Cabinet to support the acquisition, which was confirmed unanimously!

Florida Forever Projects are large areas comprised of many parcels with many owners. While the acquisition of a project occurs parcel by parcel, it is the *combination* of the project's parcels that are evaluated for their ecological priority. Fish Island is a parcel within the larger, high priority Northeast Florida Blueway project.

Featured Project: Northeast Florida Blueway

The Northeast Florida Blueway project—encompassing Duval, Clay, and St. John's Counties — remains a critical priority project on the Florida Forever list. The intent of this 27,000-acre project is to preserve the wetlands and marshes along both sides of the Intracoastal Waterway, and along the shores of the Tolomato and Matanzas rivers and several tributaries, from the Duval County line south to the Flagler County line. Once complete, the project will connect existing natural areas to form a conservation corridor along the north-south waterway, providing important habitat for wildlife including the Florida black bear, manatee, and Roseate Spoonbill among many others. The area contains 17 types of natural communities supporting at least 70 species listed on the Florida Natural Areas Inventory. The project would also provide landscape-level protection of a prized coastal ecosystem.

The nearby communities of Jacksonville, Ponte Vedra, and St. Augustine are quickly approaching build-out, as Jacksonville is one of the fastest growing cities in the country. According to the U.S. Census Bureau report, Jacksonville ranked seventh in the nation for population growth last year while already earning the distinction of "largest city in Florida." This accelerated growth has reduced natural lands in Duval and the surrounding counties to a fraction of their original extent. Programs such as Florida Forever and Rural and Family Lands Protection Programs steer growth away from important habitat for birds and wildlife to maintain the quality and natural functions of the water and wetland systems.

Photo: Monarch Studio, Scott S. Smith



DeSantis Names Scientists to Blue-Green Algae Task Force

AUDUBON CALLS FOR AMBITIOUS PRESCRIPTION FOR RESTORATION

By Beth Alvi, Director of Policy

Last summer's double-whammy of blue-green algae and red tide catapulted water management to the top of Floridians' concerns. Governor Ron DeSantis made a historic commitment to Florida's environment by signing a sweeping executive order (19-12) on his second day in office to address the water quality issues that culminated in last summer's harmful algal blooms. A core piece of that executive order affirmed that science would continue to guide Florida's restoration efforts: the Chief Science Officer and the Blue-Green Algae Task Force, two new initiatives in the Governor's "Bold Vision" would lead the way to resolving our water quality woes.

What is the Blue-Green Algae Task Force?

The Blue-Green Algae Task Force is made up of scientists and researchers from around the state and charged with making recommendations to clean up Florida's lakes and rivers. Members of this highly qualified group include Florida's Chief Science Officer Dr. Tom Frazer, Dr. Wendy Graham from the University of Florida, Dr. Michael Parsons from Florida Gulf Coast University, Dr. Evelyn Gaiser from Florida International University, Dr. James Sullivan from Florida Atlantic University, and Dr. Valerie Paul from the Smithsonian Marine Station at Fort Pierce.

What will the Task Force Do?

Tasked with recommending solutions for blue-green algae blooms like that suffered by Lake Okeechobee and its estuaries in 2018, the BGATF will prioritize projects that target sources contributing to nutrient pollution in our waterways.

There is no single culprit in this war against nutrient pollution; rather, stormwater run-off, agricultural and urban fertilizer, as well as septic tanks are all sources that must be addressed.

Task Force Progress To-Date

The task force has met twice since its inception in May 2019; the first meeting in June provided the members with an overview of the state's water regulatory and restoration programs, while the second meeting, held in July, focused on the restoration plan for Lake Okeechobee. The state's restoration plan, in addition to implementing nutrient reducing projects, works through existing state and municipal regulatory programs to achieve restoration. The task force now has the difficult job of evaluating information and working up recommendations.



Photo: Julie Hill-Gabriel

“The causes of our blue-green algae problems are well understood. At this point, we need folks who are going to scour the science, look at our regulatory structure, and draft a bold prescription for how to get us out of the problems we are facing right now.”

- Julie Wraithmell,

Audubon Florida Executive Director

Audubon Engages with Task Force

From Audubon's Dr. Paul Gray participating in Governor DeSantis' announcement of the task force members, to Julie Wraithmell testifying at their first official meeting, to Policy Director Beth Alvi meeting with each Task Force member, Audubon is making the most of this important opportunity. Restoring Florida's waters safeguards our economy and way of life.

Many committees have been appointed before to ponder the fortunes of Florida's waterways. For the first time, this task force has the unanimous credibility of scientist members and the authority of the state's chief executive to make strong recommendations.

Audubon is urging the task force to be bold and be prescriptive. The causes of and solutions to Florida's water woes are complex but understood. Prescriptions from the task force should be clear and actionable directions to key actors including the Legislature; the departments of Environmental Protection, Health, and Agriculture and Consumer Services; and Florida's water management districts among others. For gaps in science that have been identified, additional monitoring should be proposed, but the time for action is now.

Corkscrew Swamp's Super Ghost Orchid Key to Solving Pollination Mystery

By Steve Parker, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Communications and Volunteer Engagement Coordinator

By all measures, the famous Ghost Orchid at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary was having another banner season this summer. In mid-July, the orchid entered its third week of blooming and sported eight flowers — and then it burst into the headlines once again.

Not only did explorer Mac Stone and research scientist Peter Houlihan successfully photograph a Giant Sphinx Moth visiting the Ghost Orchid — an image that hadn't been captured before last year — but they also photographed a Fig Sphinx Moth pollinating the Ghost Orchid. And that upended a long-held scientific theory that only the Giant Sphinx Moth has a proboscis long enough to pollinate the Ghost Orchid. The photos produced by Stone and Houlihan showed that other moths could be doing the pollinating.

Early in July 2018, Stone and Houlihan scaled the towering Bald Cypress tree that is home to the Ghost Orchid and placed a custom camera housing with an infrared motion detector in hopes of capturing the nocturnal pollination. On July 27, 2018, they captured the image of the Giant Sphinx Moth visiting the flower and later got the photo of the Fig Sphinx Moth actively engaged in pollination. On July 11, 2019, their findings were made public.

"In 1954, Audubon established the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary to save old-growth cypress forest from exploitation," said Sanctuary Director Lisa Korte. "This protection allows us to continue to make new discoveries today, 65 years later. Every day brings new experiences at Corkscrew, where naturalists and scientists are encouraged to explore and contribute to our understanding of the natural world."

The Ghost Orchid is perched 50 to 60 feet up in an old-growth bald cypress tree 100 feet off the Sanctuary's famous boardwalk, so the blooms usually can't be seen with just the naked eye. The Sanctuary positions a spotting scope to aid visitors in viewing this rare and endangered plant, which is special even among Ghost Orchids due to its size and abundance of blooms.

Binoculars also provide good views of the flowering plant. Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary has binoculars available for rent for \$3. Visitors who have cameras with strong lenses also get great views — and great photographs.

Ghost Orchids are found in Southwest Florida and Cuba. Only about 2,000 are believed to exist. Since its discovery in 2007 by visitors searching for owls, the Ghost Orchid has attracted thousands of visitors worldwide. The orchid is decades old but possibly went undetected until 2007 because it was hidden by a cypress branch that broke off during Hurricane Wilma.



Giant Sphinx Moth. Photo: Mac Stone



The Scibor family from Frankfort Illinois views the "Super" Ghost Orchid on July 11, 2019. From left, Julia, Evan, Tim, Jason and Sara Scibor. Photo by David Korte, Corkscrew volunteer.

Protection of the unique microclimate, water flows, and forest habitat the Ghost Orchids need to thrive remains a critical priority for Audubon Florida as well as the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Through conservation, we can continue to discover the complex ecology that makes our state truly unique.

The Sanctuary posts Ghost Orchid updates on its website (corkscrew.audubon.org) and social media.



6 Audubon Florida | August 2019

Panther Cam

Creatures big and small appear on photos taken by the 23 trail cameras spread out across 13,000 acres at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. But for the research staff and conservation interns who monitor each camera's images at least once a month, seeing the endangered Florida Panther proves the most exciting. Research Technician Lee Martin says panthers are caught on the trail cams about two or three times a month, sometimes during the daytime but mostly after dark. Corkscrew has at least two adults, one juvenile, and three kittens on the prowl. Panthers require vast areas in which to roam and raise their families, and protection of critical habitat at Corkscrew is essential to their continued survival.

Follow @corkscrewswamp on Facebook and Instagram for trail cam Tuesdays to see the latest.



Hooded Warbler. Photo: John Middleton

From Backyards to Solar Sanctuaries

AUDUBON'S PLANTS FOR BIRDS PROGRAM FINDS FERTILE SOIL IN FLORIDA

By Jacqui Sulek, Chapter Conservation Manager

A low buzz permeates the air in the new Space Coast Audubon native plant garden. Busy insects and butterflies flit from flower to flower, while a rustle in the nearby bushes signals the presence of a songbird. With its ribbon-cutting on July 21, this beautiful garden space represents a new chapter in the Audubon Plants for Birds program.

In late 2016, Audubon launched the groundbreaking Audubon Plants for Birds campaign touting the critical need to reintroduce native plants into our landscapes. Not only do native plants require less water and fertilizer than ornamentals, they also support the beneficial Florida insects we need to pollinate our crops and birds need to feed their young. What made the Plants for Birds resources unique? The information readily available at a gardener's fingertips.

Toolkits, webinars, and a robust grants program followed, all funded by the Susan and Coleman Burke Center for Native Plants. "We started Plants for Birds because we understood native plants supported birds better," explains Dr. John Rowden, Director of Community Conservation for the National Audubon Society. Once Susan and Coley Burke — who winter annually in Hobe Sound — heard of the program at a public event they excitedly came on board.

Development, climate change, and sterile landscapes have fueled the decline of countless insect and bird species. To date, 27 Audubon chapters in Florida have signed on to serve as resources to help individuals, schools, businesses, and municipalities.

Two rounds of Burke grants support chapter projects that include restoration of hurricane-ravaged habitats, workshops for homeowners and homeowners associations, installation of school and public gardens, free native plant giveaways, and inspiring collaborations.

Independently, in early 2017, Florida Power & Light Company (FPL) came to Audubon Florida looking for guidance on ways to increase the positive environmental impact of its rapidly expanding list of solar energy centers. With the help of local Audubon chapters, Audubon staff, the Florida Native Plants Society, The Florida Wildflower Foundation, and a number of other environmental organizations, FPL's "Solar Environmental Stewardship" program began to take shape. The design, emphasizing pollinators, birds, and other wildlife, is currently underway at 12 FPL solar energy centers across the state of Florida.

Inspired by Audubon's work this spring, Audubon Florida announced the first FPL/Audubon Florida Plants for Birds grant program. FPL's donation of \$25,000 provides an opportunity to engage Audubon members and new audiences through projects that directly put native plants in the ground. The maximum of each grant will be \$2,500. For more information contact Jacqui Sulek, Audubon Florida Chapter Conservation Manager at jsulek@audubon.org. Proposals are due September 1, 2019.

While urbanization's footprint on the landscape is daunting, communities can make a real difference for birds in the landscaping choices made in our yards, parks, and public spaces.

Skimmer Love Story: Third Time's the Charm for Banded Pair

THEIR SUCCESS MIRRORS A BANNER YEAR FOR COASTAL SEA AND SHOREBIRDS.

By Dr. Marianne Korosy, Director of Bird Conservation, and Nicole Dattero, PR Intern

Surf hits the sand on Pinellas County beaches, the Gulf of Mexico acting as a beacon not only for sun-loving locals but also nesting sea- and shorebirds. Spread out like a black-and-white picnic blanket on the beach, Black Skimmers create nearly invisible scrapes in the sand and raise fluffy chicks every summer.

Audubon coastal biologists and bird steward volunteers protect state-Threatened Black Skimmer colonies nesting on urban Pinellas County beaches each year. Until recently, little information was known about the age, birthplace, and winter whereabouts of the nesting skimmers at these sites. In 2015, Audubon Florida — in partnership with Dr. Beth Forsy of Eckerd College — began putting numbered leg bands on skimmer chicks in an ongoing effort to unravel the mysteries of their annual movements. In 2017, Audubon staff began banding skimmer chicks on Marco Island and later expanded the effort. With many sighting records of banded birds since 2015, we know a lot more about the birds' stories, especially birds A16 and A44.

In 2015, the very first season of bird banding in Pinellas, a female skimmer hatched at St. Pete Beach was given band code A16. Nearby, banders assigned a male skimmer at Indian Shores the band code A44. Just two years later, the pair formed a bond. While skimmers often attempt nesting at two years old, they aren't always successful the first time around. When they failed along Indian Shores in 2017, they parted ways; A44 remained in Pinellas County for the duration of the winter, while A16 opted for Marco Island.

In spring 2018, after months apart, the pair found each other once again. They were initially spotted at Indian Shores, but moved a bit north to the Sand Key colony together to breed. Again, the pair proved unsuccessful — this time due to coyote predation — and moved back to Indian Shores later in the season.

Black Skimmers can make a second attempt at nesting when their first results in no fledged chicks, but when the pair moved to Indian Shores they met with no luck. For a second time, A44 and A16 spent the winter months apart.

In spring 2019, the two birds again relocated each other in urban Pinellas County. Initially, they spent time at Clearwater Beach but moved to Indian Rocks Beach to nest for the season in late May. The pair incubated their three eggs dutifully and by late June, their chicks successfully hatched!

Their success mirrors the success of many colonies across Florida coastlines. After a dismal 2018 nesting season — the result of hurricanes, tropical storms, algal blooms, and other major disturbances — colonies rebounded in 2019.

Snowy Plovers and American Oystercatchers hit hard by Hurricane Michael are fledging more chicks now than in recent years. Least Terns and Black Skimmers are having banner years, fledging hundreds of chicks on rooftops and beaches in Northwest Florida and along the Southwest Florida coast from Pinellas to Collier counties.



Black Skimmers. Photo: Wendy Meehan



Audubon Florida takes pride in the members who make up our staff and volunteers. As we wind down our beach-bird nesting season a big Audubon shout out goes to Jessica Lewis, one of our Anchor Stewards in Southwest Florida! Jessica covers three Florida State Parks: Caladesi Island, Honeymoon Island, and Anclote Key Preserve, and is responsible for collecting and evaluating data on nesting shorebirds while coordinating the bird stewardship program on the three barrier islands in North Pinellas and South Pasco Counties. Her region is only accessible by boat! Jessica values working alongside state park staff who persevere through long hours and extreme heat to preserve Florida's beloved native bird species.



Black Skimmers. Photo: Karen Mason

Karen Mason regularly monitors a Black Skimmer colony in St. Pete Beach, providing information to interested visitors and keeping disturbances away from the chicks. This year, she watched in horror, camera rolling, as a skimmer parent tried to feed its chick a cigarette butt.

News media outlets across the country shared her images, including *Huffington Post*, *Fox News*, the *NY Post*, and *BBC*. Cigarette butts are the most common items found during coastal clean-ups because they do not biodegrade. Many see the image as a wake-up call, while others are reminded again how our actions can negatively affect the vulnerable wildlife that shares our coasts. At Audubon Florida, we strive to protect our state's great natural resources and amazing native species. Thank you to our volunteers who not only protect the colonies, but educate their region, the state, the country, and now the world about our vulnerable shorebirds and seabirds.

Cleaner Water, Extraordinary Birding

GAINESVILLE'S HOT SWEETWATER WETLANDS PARK

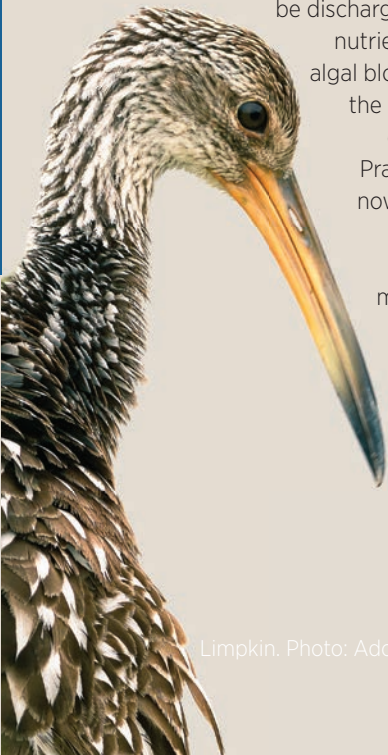
By Debra Segal, Alachua Audubon Society President

The loud, wailing KeEEEur of the Limpkin greets visitors in the marshes of Gainesville's newest birding hotspot, Sweetwater Wetlands Park. At the wetland's edge, long-legged chicks watch hungrily as their parent dislodges an apple snail from its shell, oblivious to the gaggle of admirers with binoculars and cameras.

A boardwalk and 3.5 miles of raised berms allow visitors to view 125 acres of marsh teeming with a diverse assemblage of wildlife. Birds are the most visible, with 248 species tallied, including regular crowd pleasers like Limpkins, Everglade Snail Kites, and Purple Gallinules. Wild horses from adjacent Paynes Prairie often graze the tender grasses, and alligators — from newborn to mammoth size — populate the wetlands. Given the abundance of both reptilian “gators” and the nearby University of Florida variety, it's no coincidence that the outline of Sweetwater Wetlands Park is shaped like an alligator head.

Since opening in 2015, Sweetwater Wetlands Park has gained widespread recognition for the many benefits it delivers to the community and environment. Students of all grades frequent the wetland park to study topics ranging from plants and animals to water quality and urban planning. Outdoor enthusiasts from around the state support Gainesville's ecotourism economy as they converge at Sweetwater. Residents have been gifted an environmental park that has quickly become a regional treasure, and even community leaders and university faculty showcase Sweetwater to sought-after job candidates to promote Gainesville's outstanding environmental qualities.

What visitors may not realize, however, is that Sweetwater Wetlands Park is a state-of-the-art, water-quality enhancement system that cost-effectively removes over 125,000 pounds of nitrogen annually from wastewater and stormwater. In many places, the wastewater and stormwater effluent would be discharged into rivers or other water bodies, where the nutrients (nitrate and phosphorus) it carries can fuel algal blooms. Instead, Gainesville Regional Utilities and the City of Gainesville Department of Public Works converted a highly degraded section of Paynes Prairie into this carefully engineered wetland, that now strips the water of nutrients before it reaches Paynes Prairie. Effluent slowly filters through Sweetwater's three constructed cells, where microscopic organisms in the marsh convert the polluting nitrate to inert nitrogen gas through a sustainable process called denitrification. Although it's designed primarily to remove excess nitrogen, Sweetwater Wetlands also removes phosphorus, trace metals, organic compounds, and other pollutants.



Limpkin. Photo: Adobe Stock



Photo: Aero Photo and Wharton-Smith Inc.



Photo: Daniel K. Rohan

Constructed treatment wetlands like Sweetwater are highly effective at cleaning our water, operate at a fraction of the cost of conventional treatment facilities, create habitat for wildlife, and are a tremendous economic asset to their communities as ecotourism destinations.

Cleaner water, more birds, AND more ecotourists spending money in your community — what's not to like?

Alachua Audubon Society partners with the City of Gainesville to lead guided bird walks at Sweetwater every Wednesday at 8:30 a.m., September through May. They also provide a bird identification brochure for park visitors, and donated loaner optics for attendees on the bird walks. Sweetwater Wetlands Park is located in Gainesville at 325 SW Williston Road. It is open daily from 7:00 a.m. to sunset. Admission is \$5 per car or \$2 for walk-ins.

To each visitor, the Limpkin sighting represents a unique experience: an engaging photograph, a greater appreciation of nature, pride in what the City of Gainesville has created. Sweetwater Wetlands demonstrates how human communities and nature can work together to produce cleaner water, enhance wildlife habitat, and create a much-loved recreational and educational facility.

Debra Segal is an environmental scientist who helped design and permit Sweetwater Wetlands Park. She is president of the Alachua Audubon Society and a volunteer for the Howard T. Odum Florida Springs Institute.

**Visit this birding hotspot during the
2019 Audubon Assembly this October in Gainesville!**

Returning Injured Raptors to Florida Skies

AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE CENTER FOR BIRDS OF PREY RAPTOR TRAUMA CLINIC

By Katie Warner, Director of the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey

On the shores of Lake Sybelia, the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey opens its doors to injured owls, eagles, hawks, falcons, and other birds of prey from across the state of Florida. Every year, the Audubon Raptor Trauma Clinic admits nearly 700 injured and orphaned birds of prey. But how do they get here? Why are they injured? How can we help them?

Arrival

Patients arrive with concerned citizens, animal control services, other rehabilitation facilitators, FWC officers, and volunteers trained in bird rescue. In 2018, the clinic received birds from 30 Florida counties. Once a bird is admitted to the Raptor Trauma Clinic, they are evaluated and treated for trauma, as most patients are extremely stressed due to their injuries. While trauma is expected with 40% of admissions, common injuries are caused by vehicle strikes, falls from nests, poisons, territory fights, and electrocutions. Baby season is our busiest time for bird care, and during May alone the center admits 20% of its annual patient load.

Care at the Clinic

Treatment varies depending on the injury and the species, and includes x-rays, lab work, and even surgery. Babies that jump too early from the nest may have a short stay at the clinic as staff work to quickly reunite them with their families. On the other hand, burns from electrocution can severely damage feathers which may take months to molt and grow back. The clinic's lab plays an important role in diagnoses of disease and raptor research, as staff perform bloodwork analysis, examine stool samples, and test blood for lead poisoning. Working alongside partner veterinarians from Winter Park Veterinary Hospital, the Center for Birds of Prey has even begun using cold laser therapy and acupuncture to accelerate healing. Once a patient is stable enough for rehabilitation, they are transferred to outdoor structures to gain strength and stamina for release back into the wild.

Keeping Birds Healthy

To care for the raptors, the Center for Birds of Prey must raise funds to treat each species and injury; for example, the average cost to rehabilitate a Bald Eagle is \$3,000, and includes food, medicines, x-rays, surgery, and housing. The cost of care continues to increase each year, and our team relies on donors and partners to support our work.

Volunteers remain an essential component to achieving our mission to treat, rehabilitate, and release these special birds back into the wild. We are lucky to have volunteer tree climbers to help with baby returns, volunteer rescue teams, and individuals that care enough to get these raptors help.

**Thanks to support from the community, Audubon Center for Birds of Prey is able to release hundreds of raptors each year; since 1979 over 620 Bald Eagles have been returned to the skies. Did you know you can visit the Center for Birds of Prey?
1101 Audubon Way, Maitland, FL 32751**



To Keep Birds Safe, You Can:

Reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides

Remove the use of pesticides to protect waterways; many raptors eat fish as part of their main diet.

Properly dispose of trash while driving

Litter attracts rodents to roadways, which in turn attracts raptors. Many are injured due to vehicles.

Properly dispose of fishing line

Raptors injure themselves when entangled.

Learn more at cbop.audubon.org

Lake Okeechobee Recovering After Years of High Water

By Dr. Paul Gray, Everglades Coordinator, and Doug Gaston, Northern Everglades Policy Analyst

Plants growing in Lake Okeechobee — both emergent marshes as well as submerged grasses — are a critical part of this ecosystem. In addition to providing habitat for fish and wildlife, these plants also help to take up nutrients that fuel algae blooms in the lake and the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries.

After successive years of high water levels on Lake Okeechobee — which resulted in the loss of nearly 40,000 acres of submerged aquatic vegetation — a recent tour of the lake demonstrated that, with a little help, the underwater plants can make a comeback. Aquatic growth has surged throughout the lake, giving Audubon Florida a sense of optimism that newly emerging vegetation will be able to grow tall and strong enough to withstand the higher water levels that should come with Florida's rainy season.

What made the difference? Favorable weather for one, but importantly, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers took note of the decimated condition of the vegetation in the lake's marsh areas. At the urging of Audubon Florida's science and policy team, the Corps scheduled releases to achieve favorable water levels. The lake's submerged aquatic vegetation provides the same nutrient absorption and water filtration services as stormwater treatment areas, which themselves cost billions of taxpayer dollars to construct and maintain. The underwater plants are free! A healthy submerged aquatic vegetation community not only improves water quality, but also provides critical marsh habitat for birds and fish. Downstream ecosystems continue to benefit from improvements in overall water quality.

Under normal conditions, the lake ecosystem can support a healthy marsh community when water levels fluctuate between 12 and 15 feet from dry to wet seasons. But the last few years have been anything but normal, with lake levels exceeding 16 feet in six of the last seven years.



To add insult to injury, in 2017 Hurricane Irma barreled across Florida and raised lake levels by three and a half feet in just one month, virtually wiping out the remaining aquatic community. The result? Churned, muddy water quality, the loss of important ecological services, and adverse impacts to wildlife, especially the world-famous, largemouthed bass fishery that relies on submerged aquatic vegetation to thrive.

By adapting lake management practices and allowing lake levels to recede to 11 feet in depth this year, the Army Corps gave Okeechobee a chance to recover: the lower lake level enabled sunlight to penetrate through the water column to seeds on the lake bottom, and they germinated and grew.



This summer, the lake once again filled with a beautiful abundance of marsh plants. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the picture of regenerating patches of lilies and eel grass is worth billions.

Managing the lake as an ecosystem is the most cost-effective way to maximize the many benefits and services these thriving plant communities provide. The Army Corps is revising its rule book on how to manage water levels, and must retain the regulatory flexibility

to both adjust water levels for the benefit of the environment and wildlife, and make overall lake health a high priority. Audubon is here to help ensure that happens.

Governor DeSantis Visits Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp

TO CELEBRATE RECORD LEGISLATIVE APPROPRIATIONS FOR WATER QUALITY AND EVERGLADES



Photo: FDOT

In June, Audubon was pleased to host Governor Ron DeSantis at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, with a press event celebrating the legislative fulfillment of key priorities outlined in his Executive Order 19-12. He was joined by First Lady Casey DeSantis, Florida Senate Appropriations Chair Rob Bradley, Senate Rules Chair Lizbeth Benacquisto, DEP Secretary Noah Valenstein, and a veritable who's who of Southwest Florida legislators and agency leaders. The 2019 Florida Legislature appropriated landmark funding to water quality and wetlands restoration projects, including \$400 million for Everglades restoration, \$50 million for springs restoration, and more.

"Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary was the perfect place for this celebration," said Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director of Audubon Florida. "It is the gateway to the Western Everglades and an embodiment of the strong science, wetland restoration, and public engagement that will be needed to preserve Florida's water resources."

"I am pleased that we have accomplished this goal with the Bold Vision for a Brighter Future budget that includes ... record investments in our Everglades and water resources," said DeSantis.

Southwest Florida has been plagued in recent years by harmful algal blooms, storm flooding, and catastrophic wildfires. Research at Corkscrew's Western Everglades Research Center is illuminating the loss of wetlands and wetland functions driving all three phenomena.



Photo: FDOT

Audubon Florida Update

BY THE NUMBERS: THIS ISSUE OF THE NATURALIST

82 SHORE AND SEABIRD GROUND NESTING SITES
MONITORED BY AUDUBON FLORIDA



\$400 MILLION FOR EVERGLADES RESTORATION IN 2019
APPROPRIATED FUNDING



700+ BIRDS ADMITTED TO THE RAPTOR TRAUMA CLINIC
IN 2018





Recognized for Sustainable Practices

MYAKKA-AREA RANCHER JIM STRICKLAND

Each year, Audubon Florida honors a rancher who has demonstrated exemplary environmentally sustainable ranching practices and makes efforts to conserve native wildlife habitat. This year's "Sustainable Rancher of the Year" award was presented at the Florida Cattlemen's Association annual convention to Jim Strickland, a rancher with six decades of experience in the industry.

Strickland grew up ranching with his father along the west coast of Florida in the 1950s and 1960s. He took over the family cattle operations at the age of 17 when his father passed away.

Strickland is the owner of Strickland Ranch and managing partner of Big Red Cattle Company and Blackbeard's Ranch, located just east of the Sarasota-Bradenton Metro Area. The ranch provides an important buffer to Myakka River State Park and protects the headwaters to two significant slough systems that drain into the river, thereby maintaining water quality and quantity downstream in the Myakka River and Charlotte Harbor Estuary.

Since garnering his first conservation easement in Florida 20 years ago, Strickland has been working to protect Blackbeard's Ranch and restore its natural systems.

He has since obtained a 1,500-acre Wetland Reserve Easement and has placed the property on the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program and Florida Forever lists, seeking further protection of the ranch through multiple easements.

In addition to his hands-on ranch management, Jim Strickland is Vice Chairman and co-founder of the "Florida Conservation Group," where he works to bring together ranchers from around the state to advocate for land conservation and incentive programs. When he is not at a ranch, he can often be found in the state Capitol, talking to legislators about cattle and conservation.



Ranchers Recognize Audubon's Dr. Paul Gray

Audubon staffers Charles Lee and Paul Gray attended the 2019 Florida Cattlemen's Association convention on Marco Island to present the "Sustainable Rancher of the Year" award, but a surprise was in store: the Cattlemen named Dr. Paul Gray their "2019 Conservation Friend." He was chosen for this award to honor his successful promotion and implementation of environmental conservation programs with the private owners of working lands.

"We are grateful to be able to work with the cattlemen on projects that are beneficial to the people and wildlife of Florida," Gray said.

Originally from St. Joseph, Missouri, just north of Kansas City, Gray has always loved the outdoors, especially hunting and fishing on his uncle's farm. Gray earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri, a master's degree from Texas Tech University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Florida. His graduate school research was conducted with ranches and dairy farms in Okeechobee.

Gray began his Audubon career as manager of the 7,300-acre Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary. Now, as Everglades Science Coordinator, Gray provides science support for Audubon policy teams on issues ranging from water quality, water management, agricultural best management practices, and ecosystem and bird conservation issues focused around Lake Okeechobee.

Investing in the Next Generation of Conservation Leadership

Audubon's successful Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) is growing! CLI is a unique, co-mentoring experience connecting some of the brightest college students in Florida with Audubon leaders. Each year, a group of 25 students and 25 mentors convene at the Audubon Assembly to strengthen leadership skills, explore future career opportunities, and learn about the various opportunities to engage with Audubon.

Launching later this year, the 2019 program will offer year-long mentorship and opportunities throughout the state. After listening to student feedback, Audubon's leadership, with the support of partners Darden Sustainability, Jessie Ball duPont Fund, and National Audubon Society's Maggie Walker Incentive Fund, are launching an expanded version of CLI in order to provide students a more impactful experience. In addition, the new program will increase the number of opportunities for more students to engage with Audubon around the state, including the addition of dedicated CLI programming at the Center for Birds of Prey and Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. It will also connect students in Florida with other students and leadership development opportunities across the country through the new nationwide Audubon on Campus program, which is modeled in part after CLI.

"What Audubon Florida has built in CLI is truly unique, and having been fortunate enough to move around and experience other youth engagement programs in diverse conservation organizations, that is not empty praise," says Steffanie Munguia, a CLI alum and incoming Pan Flyway Regional Director. "I truly believe we are equipping the next generation of conservation leaders with the tools, motivation, and confidence they need to go out and make an impact, whether through Audubon or any of the thousands of other conservation-related organizations out there. I've said it before and I'll say it over and over again: investing in our young people is always money well-spent."

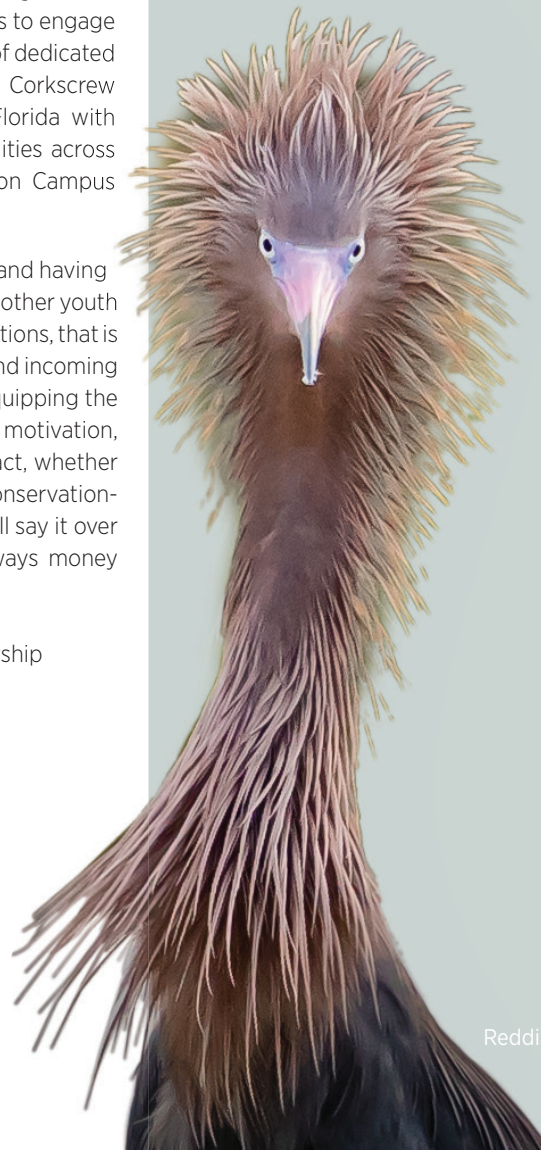
For more information on the 2019 Conservation Leadership Initiative, visit fl.audubon.org/CLI



Steffanie Munguia
CLI alum



Audubon Florida is grateful for the leadership and support of Darden Sustainability, the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, and National Audubon Society for providing the funding to launch this program. National Audubon Society's Maggie Walker Incentive Fund has challenged us to match their funding 1:1 in order to receive the full \$75,000 grant. If you or your company are interested in investing in the next generation of conservation leadership, please contact Suzanne Bartlett, sbartlett@audubon.org.



Reddish Egret. Photo: Steve Allen

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2019 Annual Audubon Assembly

24-26 OCTOBER

GAINESVILLE

Water and Land for Florida's Future:
Science-based Strategies for Clean Water
and Healthy Watersheds

Visit [FL.Audubon.org/Assembly](https://www.flaudubon.org/assembly)
for updates and registration details.

Photo: Scott S. Smith

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An IRA Charitable Rollover allows individuals age 70 ½ and older to make outright, tax-free donations up to \$100,000 to Audubon Florida directly from their IRA. This allows you to meet your Minimum Required Distribution (MRD) with a charitable donation from your IRA to Audubon!

For more information, contact Audubon Florida Development Director Suzanne Bartlett at 305-371-3699, ext. 123 or sbartlett@audubon.org today.



Roseate Spoonbill. Photo: Mac Stone



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