

Audubon Assembly



2024 Conservation Action Agenda

Roseate Spoonbill.
Photo: Niccole Neely/Audubon Photography Awards

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GUIDANCE ON THE 2024 CONSERVATION ACTION AGENDA

Each year, according to tradition and practice, Audubon Florida leaders gather at the Audubon Assembly to express our annual conservation action agenda through a group of state and regional resolutions that address our public policy priorities. The agenda provides members, chapter leaders, directors, staff, and the public, summary statements of our policy and conservation positions. We believe we are the only statewide conservation organization that uses such an open process for setting a policy agenda. Conservation priorities are broadly framed problem/solution statements in the form of resolutions. They do not express every nuance of an issue and instead provide guidance through the year for state and regional work. The conservation action agenda is approved by vote at the annual Audubon Assembly and subsequently ratified by the Audubon Florida Board of Directors.

Regional Conservation and Statewide Policy Priorities

Audubon's Florida chapters are organized into seven geographic and ecological regions and meet as Regional Conservation Committees (RCCs). Chapter leaders, supported by policy staff, recommend conservation priorities that prioritize regional concerns and reflect the RCCs' commitment to work together on them. State policy priorities are recommended by Audubon Florida's Board Public Policy Committee and staff to frame our approach to important issues and campaigns and to leverage our resources to the greatest effect. Statewide priorities are long-standing priorities that continue across many years, but are updated to reflect accomplishments, new opportunities, and evolving strategies each year.



STATE CONSERVATION PRIORITY: COASTAL CONSERVATION

Florida's significance as part of the Atlantic Flyway is most evident in our coastal areas. Shorebirds and seabirds stop over during hemispheric migrations and raptors follow the dune lines as they work their way south. Neotropical songbird migrants, facing the daunting odds of long overwater flights, use coastal habitats as their last southbound jumping-off points and first northbound landfalls. The geology of Florida's coasts is always in flux and Florida's birdlife is too.

Florida's coasts are home to a remarkable diversity of habitats, birds, and other wildlife. Marshes, beaches and shoals, barrier islands and inlets, seagrass meadows, maritime hammocks, coastal scrub, and mangroves constitute a complex and rich mosaic of living coastal systems that have evolved in response to climate and geophysical events. Many coastal bird species are now state or federally listed, designated as species of greatest conservation need, or considered priority species by National Audubon Society.

Coastal ecosystems also contribute to Florida's economic vitality and quality of life yet coastal habitats are jeopardized by a range of human activities, including beach management and grooming, continued development, coastal armoring, dredging and filling, recreational disturbance, and rising sea levels.

Nearshore environments supporting shorebirds, seabirds, wading birds, and waterfowl are threatened by excessive nutrient loads in surface water runoff from urban and agricultural fertilizer applications, stormwater, septic tank drainage, and periodic wastewater treatment plant failures that discharge to estuarine systems on both the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. These high nutrient loads contribute to cyanobacteria blooms in coastal estuaries and to the persistence and spread of red tide outbreaks in Gulf waters for which there are no short-term corrections. Coastal waterbird die-offs are increasingly common from both known and unknown causes and require increased resource investment to analyze and resolve.

Because of the extraordinary value and tremendous vulnerability of coastal birds and their habitats, Audubon Florida has long ranked coastal conservation among its highest priorities. National Audubon Society has also elevated coastal habitats as a strategic priority in the *Flight Plan* and *Conservation Blueprints*, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation prioritizes coastal conservation and recovery of focal shorebird populations through the Atlantic Flyway Shorebird Initiative.

Additionally, Audubon Florida advocates for natural climate solutions in the face of climate change and sea level rise together with adaptation and mitigation strategies,

especially for coastal habitats like saltmarsh, the beach-dune system, and maritime hammock. We have been leaders in Florida on the restoration of the Gulf of Mexico after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster.

Florida's ecological connection to the other Gulf States was underscored by the shared adversity of the Deepwater Horizon disaster and has contributed to our continued efforts to work together on recovering the Gulf's waterbird populations and habitats. Audubon's Gulf of Mexico network helped pass the federal RESTORE Act to commit penalty funds from the spill to Gulf restoration and recovery of coastal waterbird populations.

Audubon is well positioned to lead science, education, public involvement, and policy efforts by engaging staff, chapters, partners, and volunteers in the restoration and conservation of Florida's coastal habitats and their waterbird populations. Audubon engages in coastal conservation through our geographically distributed staff expertise, volunteer steward leadership, local Audubon organizations, and our many partner agencies and organizations. Site-based habitat and species management throughout Florida produce tangible results. In addition to on-the-ground improvements, the resulting data inform our policy work by identifying immediate threats to priority geographies and species.

Deep and diverse expertise in these issues combined with a large cadre of committed volunteers makes it possible to provide leadership to the Florida Shorebird Alliance—a partnership of Audubon Florida, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida State Parks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, municipalities, and other strategic organizations. Our broad grassroots base positions us well to advocate at local levels for sea level rise mitigation strategies that can benefit vulnerable coastal habitats. These areas of expertise also provide us with the perspective to guide new funding opportunities, such as the federal Inflation Reduction Act, to meaningful stewardship and habitat restoration projects and even implementation of some of those projects—as we have done with penalty money from the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Monitoring of priority coastal bird populations and coastal habitat changes informs adaptive strategies as birds and people face sea level rise. Long-term coastal resource conservation and management work provide a foundation of data and perspective that gives a long view to support our recommendations.

Therefore, be it resolved:

Audubon Florida, deploying professional staff and expertise and using information derived from sound science, will call on the volunteer leadership of local Audubon societies (chapters), members, and diverse grassroots networks, and will work with diverse conservation allies, business and community leaders, public officials, and agencies to:

Employ Sound Science to Guide Conservation

- Connect a diversity of people to nature using coastal birdlife to engage them in protection of Florida's special coastal places through partnerships such as Audubon's Atlantic Flyway Initiative's Coasts program and the Florida Shorebird Alliance.
- Recruit, train, and deploy a broadly diverse group of volunteers in a variety of stewardship capacities at Gulf Coast and Northeast Florida beach-nesting, rooftop-nesting, and wading bird rookery sites to actively conserve Audubon priority coastal birds.
- Improve the management of coastal habitat in priority geographies through bird stewarding programs and partnerships with Audubon chapters and other local communities.
- Partner with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to convene spring and fall shorebird partnership meetings on the Gulf Coast and in Northeast Florida to identify and address conservation successes and challenges.
- Actively engage in nesting site disturbance abatement with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and through stewardship initiatives incorporating volunteers and Florida Shorebird Alliance partners.
- Actively seek funding opportunities for coastal habitat creation, enhancement, and restoration projects that provide additional habitat for coastal waterbirds as their habitats shift due to sea level rise.
- Implement migratory and wintering coastal bird population data collection focused on Red Knot, Piping Plover, and migratory shorebird feeding and roosting flocks at key Gulf Coast sites to better conserve non-breeding bird hotspots.
- Help assess the impacts to birds and habitat from post-nesting season storm events like Hurricanes Irma, Michael, and Ian, and in-season storm events like Hurricanes Elsa and Fred to identify priorities for recovery or restoration efforts.

Advocate for Birds and Other Wildlife

- Advocate for wise land management, sustainable recreational use, and the acquisition of coastal conservation lands for habitat now, as well as in a future of higher sea levels.
- Advocate for water quality management rules and policies that will reduce nutrient loads in coastal waters (from wastewater, urban and agricultural fertilizer applications, and stormwater sources) to decrease the frequency, duration, and intensity of cyanobacteria and red tide outbreaks as well as the spread of novel bacterial pathogens affecting wild birds.
- Promote planned shoreline retreat for vulnerable human communities rather than armoring in priority coastal geographies, in the face of climate change.
- Promote habitat protection strategies that will provide for upland migration of coastal habitats and wildlife ahead of sea level rise.
- Encourage planning authorities of coastal local governments to consider sea level rise in decisions about zoning, affordable housing, planned development, and future infrastructure.

- Advocate for the value of coastal habitats as protection from the effects of climate change. (e.g., carbon sequestration and wave attenuation value of marshes and seagrass meadows).
- Ensure adequate resources to enforce Critical Wildlife Area protections through collaboration with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission by advocating for increased officer patrol protocols at key nesting sites.
- Expand awareness of and protections for seabirds and shorebirds by enlisting local sheriff's offices and police departments to increase patrols at relevant county and city beach nesting bird areas.
- Remain vigilant regarding attempts to open Florida's nearshore waters and the eastern Gulf of Mexico to oil and gas exploration, drilling, and production, and promote clean energy alternatives.
- Encourage use of RESTORE Act, hurricane recovery funding, and new funding sources like the Inflation Reduction Act for ecosystem restoration and resilience rather than harmful development schemes or coastal armoring.
- Collaborate with Audubon's Gulf policy team and hurricane recovery team to secure funding for restoration projects that benefit birds and their habitats.
- Advocate to preserve and enforce bedrock bird protection legislation such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Endangered Species Act.



STATE POLICY PRIORITY: WATER

Water defines Florida's natural ecosystems. Seasonally abundant rainfall seeps into aquifers and over floodplains, with billions of gallons of fresh water flowing through springs and rivers toward highly productive marshes and seagrass beds along the coast. Florida's aquatic systems and unique position in the Atlantic Flyway make it a critical resource for resident and migratory birds.

The alteration of Florida's landscape has drastically reduced its ability to store the plentiful water that the state receives. This has resulted in over-drained wetlands and depleted aquifers, while simultaneously delivering harmful amounts of nutrient-laden water to our springs, rivers, lakes, and eventually, coastal ecosystems. Climate change represents an existential threat to Florida's environment, economy, and way of life. Its effects on Florida's water resources include sea level rise, extreme heat, and stronger storms exacerbating the effects of Florida's rainy and dry season extremes. Red tide and blue-green algae events, resulting in fish kills and dangerous health risks for Floridians, are exacerbated as warming temperatures and increasing nutrient pollution discharges create a perfect storm. People, industry, and nature are without sufficient water during dry periods and droughts, often leading to catastrophic wildfires threatening human and wildlife communities. Florida's birdlife, including the iconic wading birds of the Everglades, has suffered significant harm from the loss of water available to natural systems. We must address these problems at the source.

Increasingly high demands for water throughout Florida, combined with dwindling natural storage capacity, have created an intense, and unfortunate struggle for water between people and the environment. Agricultural, industrial, and public uses all compete for the water needed to maintain healthy springs, rivers, and wetlands.

Surface waters throughout the state are listed as impaired and Florida's waterways and ecological communities are harmed through drainage and pollution from agricultural, industrial, and urban sources. Farm and urban fertilizers, combined with human and animal waste, have elevated nutrient loads in springs, lakes, rivers, and coastlines. Years of overuse and inaction have left a daunting legacy of nutrient-rich sediments accumulated within our aquatic systems. The combined effects of drainage, pollution, and overuse of water threaten the sustainability of Florida's natural systems, the state's economy, and quality of life.

Access to clean, safe water for consumption and recreation is a basic human right. Underserved communities are often faced with more than their

fair share of water pollution challenges. These same communities are also more likely to be exposed to unsafe drinking water and flooding.

Therefore, be it resolved:

Audubon Florida, deploying professional staff and expertise and using information derived from sound science, will call on the volunteer leadership of local Audubon societies (chapters), members, and diverse grassroots networks, and will work with diverse conservation allies, business and community leaders, public officials, and agencies to:

Protect Water at the Source – Aquifers, Wetlands, Rivers, Lakes, and Springs

- Engage with Water Management Districts (WMDs) as key stakeholders in healthy water systems in the State of Florida:
 - Encourage WMDs to identify and reserve water needed for the health of natural systems on a priority basis, including water made available by and for restoration projects.
 - Encourage WMDs to set protective limits for flows and levels in aquifers and water bodies and implement effective recovery strategies where these are not met.
 - Advocate for sufficient funding, including avoidance of rolled-back millage rates, so that WMDs can perform water supply duties including water conservation, ecosystem restoration, alternative water supply, water storage projects, and water quality monitoring programs.
- Encourage expansion and improvement of floodplain, springshed, and water recharge protection through public land acquisition, conservation easements, and restoration programs.
- Promote restoration projects that improve freshwater flows to and expand the spatial extent of wetlands as a preferred method for achieving restoration goals,
- Integrate the science and observations of climate change-driven ecological impacts into regulatory, restoration, and research-based water resource efforts.
- Assist water managers in creating operational plans that are protective of natural systems and deliver the benefits expected from restoration projects.
- Support programs and projects that ensure efficiency and resilience in Florida's water management systems.
- Use birds as a visible and meaningful metric of health of priority ecosystems.
- Work to improve wetland protections at state and local levels to ensure no loss and seek enhanced protection and oversight of permitting associated with the state's assumption of section 404 of the Clean Water Act governing dredge and fill activities.
- Work with private landowners to encourage improved habitat and watershed connectivity through payment for environmental services, wetland restoration, and conservation easements in priority areas like the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed, the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge, and the proposed Southwest Florida Conservation Area and National Wildlife Refuge.

- Prioritize work to improve ecological conditions in important aquatic resources throughout the state such as the Springs Coast, Indian River Lagoon, Big Bend, the Apalachicola River and Bay, the Green Swamp ecosystem, the Greater Everglades ecosystem, and Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

Advocate for Sustainable Water Supplies for Natural and Built Systems

- Encourage all levels of government to consider the increased likelihood of extreme weather events in their planning efforts.
- Advocate for water conservation programs to include water-use reduction, minimizing surficial aquifer and surface water supply sources, and use of alternative water supplies as conditions in water supply consumptive use permits.
- Ensure that state reviewers meet their obligation to evaluate all new Consumptive Use Permits by Florida's rigorous public interest test.
- Advocate for improved independence and efficiency in agricultural water use when updating current water management infrastructure to: maintain high-quality agricultural water supply at a reasonable cost, balance the need for water deliveries to natural systems, improve irrigation efficiency, and develop improved retention, water reuse, and recycling practices.
- Advocate for the reduction of turf grass with conversion to native plants, in order to reduce the use of water for landscape irrigation.
- Advocate for stronger efficiency standards for all water uses in tandem with sustainable usage limits in order to protect aquifers and aquatic habitats.
- Promote development and funding of water conservation efforts, including education and incentives.
- Promote sustainable alternative water supply projects, including those using effectively treated reclaimed and stormwater, which improve conditions in natural systems.
- Encourage decision-makers to support projects that have a positive effect on water availability for natural systems.

Advocate for Water Quality Improvements

- Campaign for stronger state and local stormwater and wastewater treatment standards that will protect ecological health.
- Support requirements, especially in impaired basins, for:
 - Connections to central sewer and the use of enhanced nitrogen-removing septic systems where appropriate,
 - Agricultural stormwater permit requirements to reduce harmful offsite discharges,
 - Limits on fertilizer use to the standard of "no harm" to water resources,
 - Elimination of land application of sewage biosolids or other non-fertilizer nutrient sources that harm water quality, and
 - Incentivization of innovative technology to dispose of biosolids.
- Encourage adequately treated reclaimed water use in ways that benefit or protect the water quality of natural systems.

- Assist agencies in the revision and/or creation of BMAPs that focus on source controls, utilize effective strategies and projects to reduce nutrient impacts on receiving water bodies, and include a higher level of oversight of both permits and permitted facilities.
- Work to improve enforcement of state water laws to achieve water quality improvements throughout the state.
- Seek to improve agricultural water use and management through the improvement of the substance, funding, enrollment in, and enforcement of agricultural best management practices.
- Improve urban storm-water management through incentives and rules.

Continue Our Long-standing Work to Protect and Restore America's Everglades

- Secure consistent funding at the state and federal levels to advance and expedite the *Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan* and other key Everglades restoration programs in order to increase freshwater storage, maximize freshwater flows, and achieve maximum ecosystem benefits as quickly as possible.
- At a minimum, honor the Legacy Florida Act's commitment of at least \$200 million annually towards Everglades' restoration projects and programs, and advocate for match-funding from the federal government. Recurrent funding is critical to keep momentum on ongoing Everglades restoration.
- Expedite the completion of the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir and advance the Central Everglades Project to direct more water to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.
- Engage agencies to ensure water quality milestones from the *Restoration Strategies for Clean Water for the Everglades* plan are met on schedule and that the consent decree overseeing Everglades phosphorus standards remains in place.
- Make water quality a priority—strengthen efforts at the local, state, and federal levels to reduce excessive nutrients from entering Lake Okeechobee and the Northern Estuaries, and advocate for water management decisions that prioritize the restoration of ecological functions for the long-term health of Lake Okeechobee and the Northern Estuaries. Promote plans to increase water storage north of Lake Okeechobee in order to reach these goals.
- Advocate for Lake Okeechobee management practices that will ensure balanced outcomes for all users of the Lake, including operational flexibility to ensure the maximization of water sent to the Everglades and Caloosahatchee Estuary to restore hydrology; the minimization of harmful discharges to the estuaries to prevent extreme lake levels; and effective recovery plans for these systems after damaging events.
- Advocate for robust post-project monitoring of Everglades restoration projects in order to measure restoration success.
- Continue efforts to improve our knowledge of the status and ecology of Roseate Spoonbills, Wood Storks, Southern Bald Eagles, and the Everglade Snail Kite—important indicator species—that are being used as indicators to assess and refine Everglades restoration.

- Educate people about the ecological benefits of Everglades restoration through Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and Audubon's EagleWatch programs.
- Bring elected officials into the Everglades ecosystem by offering educational tours of Lake Okeechobee, Florida Bay, and Corkscrew Swamp with Audubon's science and policy staff.

Advocate for Equitable Water Policies that Ensure All People Have Access to Clean, Safe, and Affordable Water Supplies

- Research and assess where new policy can support environmental justice.
- Seek opportunities to engage in dialogue with diverse communities in order to shape policy that is equitable.
- Assure that no community is disproportionately harmed economically or otherwise when water resource benefits are distributed.
- Advocate that local, state, and federal environmental programs and agency decisions are administered fairly and without any form of discrimination.

STATE POLICY PRIORITY: CLIMATE

Earth's climate is changing. Average temperatures are rising, rainfall patterns are shifting, and extreme climate events—like more powerful hurricanes, heavy rainstorms, and record high temperatures—are already occurring. Many of these observed changes are linked to the rising levels of heat-trapping carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (GHGs) in our atmosphere, caused by human activities.

Solving human-induced climate change requires industrial and institutional changes. Heat-trapping gases already in the atmosphere have set us on a path to a hotter future with even more climate-related impacts. The magnitude of climate change beyond the next few decades depends primarily on the amount of heat-trapping gases that human activities continue to emit globally, now and in the future.

A changing climate negatively affects ecosystems and the benefits they provide to society, overwhelming their capacity to adapt to and mitigate some of the impacts of extreme events like fires, floods, and severe storms. Observed alterations in the timing of critical biological events, such as spring bud burst and substantial range shifts of many species, illustrate the already occurring impacts to biodiversity. Accelerated climate change creates an increased risk of species extinction. Events such as droughts, floods, wildfires, and pest outbreaks associated with and exacerbated by climate change are already disrupting and destroying ecosystems. These changes limit the capacity of ecosystems to continue to play critical roles in reducing the impacts of these extreme events on flora, fauna, infrastructure, and human communities.

Bird wintering ranges have shifted, and some birds have altered their migration habits to adapt to changes in temperature or other environmental conditions. Long-term studies have found that bird species in North America have shifted their wintering grounds northward by an average of more than forty miles since 1966, with several species shifting by hundreds of miles.

Florida is especially vulnerable to sea level rise, hurricanes, increased average temperatures, and other intense weather patterns. Prolonged droughts and intense storms will reduce nesting season productivity for many bird species. Wildlife and natural systems will not adapt easily, or quickly, to the drastic changes in temperatures, seasons, and rainfall patterns.

Globally and within the state, climate change is already having a disproportionately larger effect on people of color, women, working families with low-wage jobs, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations. Studies have shown that these groups overwhelmingly carry the brunt of environmental stressors like increasing temperatures,

climate-driven migration and decreasing water and food security. Building resilient societies, economies, and infrastructure with an increased focus on environmental justice is critical to ensuring a more equitable and livable future.

Florida is just beginning to address issues of climate resiliency such as shoreline migration and intrusion of saltwater on drinking water sources. In addition to resiliency, Florida lags in developing and adopting mitigation actions to reduce our emissions as local governments are leading the charge on conversion to renewable energy generation, fuel-efficient electric or hybrid vehicle fleets, improved public transportation, regional coordination, and other actions.

Since the state is so vulnerable to the effects of climate change, Florida could and should be a leader in policies and actions that reduce GHG emissions. Efforts to absorb carbon, mitigate for and adapt to rising sea levels and increased storm activity, improve water supply security, and develop energy efficiency plans can limit the effects of climate change in Florida.

Therefore, be it resolved:

Audubon Florida, deploying professional staff and expertise and using information derived from sound science, will call on the volunteer leadership of local Audubon societies (chapters), members, and diverse grassroots networks, and will work with diverse conservation allies, business and community leaders, public officials, and agencies to:

Advocate for the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Encouraging Local and State Governments to Target Actions That Will Significantly Reduce Carbon Dioxide Pollution

- Commit to GHG emission inventories of government operations and communities.
- Use these inventories to identify and adopt policies that would result in significant emission reductions.
- Advocate for corporate responsibility for emissions and sequestration of carbon.

Encourage Renewables

- Advocate for state policies that encourage, and do not discourage, electricity production from renewable sources.
- Oppose drilling for oil and gas off Florida's coasts and on public lands.
- Oppose fracking and acid matrix stimulation for oil and gas extraction until rules are adopted that avoid excessive use of water, prevent harm to water resources and air quality, and prevent methane emissions.
- Support responsible siting of solar energy facilities in partnership with local governments responsible for land use regulation.
- Encourage investments in solar energy generation, energy storage/battery technology, and improved energy efficiency.

Increase Energy Efficiency

- Advocate for national, state, and local government incentives and grants for investments and assistance to improve energy efficiency in low-income communities.
- Advocate for incentives that facilitate energy efficiency upgrades, like weatherization, for homes and workplaces.
- Encourage conservation of and efficient water use, as water supply and treatment require large amounts of electric power.
- Support green building standards to reduce electric power demand, for example, by encouraging local governments to require green building certification such as LEED or Florida Green Building Coalition standards for all new construction.

Improve Transit

- Encourage municipalities to adopt policies that facilitate a transition to electric vehicles for municipal fleets and for the public, such as “electric vehicle ready city” standards for new construction.
- Oppose transportation projects that increase dependence on single passenger vehicle use and support alternatives, including expanded public transportation.

Promote Ecologically Sound Natural Infrastructure Projects

- Encourage/conduct research and monitoring to document and report on habitats, birds, and other wildlife to inform coastal and statewide resiliency programs.
- Advocate for increased collaboration of Florida Resilient Coastlines program with state Water Management Districts and Regional Climate Compacts to implement projects focused on improving natural infrastructure as a vehicle to mitigate the effects of climate change.
- Educate the public and policymakers about impacts of a changing climate on birds and other wildlife, habitats, and water resources.
- Encourage local governments to protect tree canopy and engage residents in tree-planting to address rising temperatures.
- Encourage the use of Adaptation Action Areas to promote the protection of coastal and other habitats of importance for birds and other wildlife.
- Prioritize the protection of shorelines using natural infrastructure and oppose ecologically harmful and expensive adaptation strategies, including beach armoring, seawalls, and other practices that marginalize or eliminate habitat.

- Support conservation land acquisition of corridors that allow for coastal habitats to migrate upslope ahead of sea level rise and land acquisition of habitat that mitigates flooding and stormwater issues.
- Support policies and programs that assist in development of carbon sequestration projects, such as blue carbon, forestry, and ranching.
- Support adaptation strategies such as Everglades restoration to make coastal and inland habitats more resilient.
- Support coastal retreat policies that help relocate residents and businesses away from dynamic coastal areas.
- Address saltwater intrusion threats to Florida's aquifers through protective legislation, regulation, and funding.

Promote Statewide and Regional Collaboration

- Advocate for staffing and expansion of the scope of Florida's Chief Resilience Officer to accomplish the goals of the office.
- Promote regional partnerships amongst governments, organizations, and businesses to analyze and mitigate climate change impacts.
- Facilitate regional collaboration on resiliency projects to optimize funding opportunities through the state's Resilient Florida grant program.
- Support scientific decision-making when evaluating potential impacts to coastal areas by encouraging adoption of regional sea level rise projections.

Partner With Underserved Communities and Representative Organizations to Ensure Equitable Resilience Planning, Funding Distribution, Policies, and Outcomes

- Promote collaboration among the various state-led resiliency planning efforts, including but not limited to the South Florida Water Management District's Sea Level Rise and Flood Resiliency Plan and Florida Department of Transportation's Resilience Action Plan.
- Advocate for state coordination on federal projects and feasibility studies underway (Central and Southern Florida System, Miami Back Bay, and Collier County Coastal Storm Risk Management).



STATE CONSERVATION PRIORITY: WORKING LANDS

Florida is home to sixty-nine distinct ecosystems, each having evolved to host thousands of plant and animal species, including some that are rare and endemic. Native birds help maintain healthy ecosystems. As development, intensive agriculture, and human activity reduce the extent and functions of habitats, extra effort is required to protect Florida's native birds and the ecosystems upon which they depend.

Audubon and partner organizations have designated a network of Important Bird Areas throughout the western hemisphere. Audubon Florida is committed to developing and promoting important bird area conservation strategies within the state that support its bird populations as well as the habitats upon which their persistence depends.

Although human activities have altered much of natural Florida, federal, state, county, and local governments have protected and restored considerable acreage as parks and other conservation lands. Of Florida's 35 million acres, 31% has been protected as conservation land. In addition to public land, many millions of acres of ecologically important bird and wildlife habitat are on privately owned ranches and forest land. Forests, farmlands, and natural areas, including wetlands, also provide essential natural benefits such as drinking water protection, flood hazard prevention, and carbon storage. State and local budget cuts have taken a toll on efforts to protect conservation lands and agencies are under pressure to surplus public lands. Public conservation land is also subject to negative impacts from linear facilities, such as highways, which may be proposed crossing through conservation land.

Private lands serving as important bird and wildlife habitat are also subject to development pressure and potential conversion from ranches, forests, and scrublands to sites for urban development and linear facilities. Florida's ranches and working forests yield food and timber, support local economies, safeguard clean water, and form some of our nation's most beautiful landscapes.

Florida's Important Bird Areas benefit from active constituencies of habitat and bird stewards whose observations and advocacy are essential to good management of public lands and to building public and private landowner support of these ecologically important areas especially in a future of changing climate conditions.

Therefore, be it resolved:

Audubon Florida, deploying professional staff and expertise and using information derived from sound science, will call on the volunteer leadership of local Audubon societies (chapters), members, and diverse grassroots networks, and will work with diverse conservation allies, business and community leaders, public officials, and agencies to:

- Support state laws and encourage local land use decisions and programs that protect conservation lands and provide resources for managing those lands to restore and maintain wildlife and habitats.
- Support increased state funding for the expansion of conservation easement purchase programs including less-than-fee Florida Forever acquisitions and the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program.
- Promote protection of the Florida Wildlife Corridor as a compelling reason to expand the Florida Forever and Rural and Family Lands Programs.
- Partner with private landowners on habitat conservation, water storage, mitigation, and carbon sequestration initiatives.
- Educate decision-makers about the climate adaptation and mitigation benefits of climate-informed private land management, particularly forests, ranches, and farms.
- Continue to grow and improve the effectiveness and diversity of volunteer participation in the Audubon Florida Jay Watch and EagleWatch program efforts.
- Continue to grow and improve the quality of data and data management for Audubon Florida Jay Watch and EagleWatch programs to provide historical datasets that can be used to detect the effects of changing climates on focal bird species.
- Seek guidance from chapters and partners to focus resources on the most appropriate places such as IBAs, proposed conservation and restoration projects, and places that Audubon members and others consider special based on their own observations, experiences, and observed ecological attributes.
- Work to protect conservation lands from loss by surplus determinations.
- Seek to develop practical consensus measures to prevent or minimize damage to conservation lands due to highway projects and other linear facilities.
 - Influence decisions on the location and design of new highways and highway expansion projects to require maximum avoidance of conservation lands and to require transportation agency purchase of new conservation lands in conjunction with major highway projects.
 - Follow up on the former M-Cores Task Force process; engage with FDOT, Expressway Authorities, and regulatory agencies to influence the detailed routes that may be proposed to reduce or eliminate their negative environmental impacts, with particular attention to the Northern Turnpike Extension project and proposed expansion of US-19 in the Big Bend area.
 - Actively encourage and build support for expansion of existing major highways as the preferred alternative to avoid new roads through natural areas.

- Engage Audubon chapters and other citizen groups to take action to protect specific natural places, such as working with private landowners to achieve good stewardship by supporting incentives to commit property to conservation, including purchase of conservation easements and similar programs that allow land to remain in agricultural use while protecting important habitat features.
- Engage partners from communities of color to ensure equity and inclusivity are considered by decisionmakers and in solutions proposed by Audubon for land development or linear facilities projects that have a history of disproportionately burdening those communities.



STATE CONSERVATION PRIORITY: BIRD FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Florida is home to a remarkable diversity of habitats, plants, birds, and other wildlife. Natural ecosystems contribute to Florida's economic vitality and quality of life; yet human causes, including climate change and increased urbanization, are putting increasing pressure on the natural resources and bird populations have decreased by 30% over the past 50 years.

Florida's significance as part of the Atlantic Flyway is evident throughout the state. More than five hundred species of birds occur in Florida, including year-round residents, seasonal nesters, and those passing through. Neotropical songbird migrants, facing the daunting odds of long, overwater flights, use Florida as the last southbound jumping off point and first northbound landfall. In short, in Florida, ample food, clean water, and shelter are critical to the survival of most species of birds.

At the same time, warm winter temperatures lure humans—both visitors and a rapidly growing population. While federal, state, county, and local governments have protected and restored considerable acreage as parks and other conservation lands over the past century, urbanization continues to fragment and transform ecologically productive land with roads, buildings, sterile home landscapes, and exotic plants. Human-created hazards—such as windows, reflective walls of glass on tall buildings, pesticides, and domestic predators—decrease the function of urban areas for birds. We can begin to mitigate these impacts with the choices we make for our communities.

Native plants are the foundation of the food chain and provide shelter and safe spaces for birds to raise their young. By selecting the appropriate native plants for our yards and public landscapes we can provide vital habitat for birds within our communities as they adapt to a changing climate. Audubon's Plants for Birds program gives everyone the tools to have a positive impact right where they live.

The reflective quality of glass windows in our homes and buildings results in bird strikes. Bright city lights can distract and confuse birds migrating at night leading to exhaustion. Combined, these two urban features result in hundreds of millions of bird deaths each year. Concerted "Window Strikes" and "Lights Out" campaigns begin to address this threat.

As development reduces natural nesting opportunities, cavities, trees, snags, and burrows, providing artificial alternatives becomes increasingly important. Nest boxes and bird houses, nesting platforms, and manufactured burrows can offset the nesting challenges birds face within urban and suburban communities.

Audubon's grassroots network is well versed in outreach and education. Their events and programs connect and inspire all ages to enjoy birds, to understand the challenges they face in an increasingly urbanized world, and to advocate for the laws that protect them. "Where birds thrive, people prosper."

Chapter programs and projects also present an opportunity to engage new, more diverse audiences to broaden Audubon's community and achieve our ambitious goals for equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging.

Audubon Florida, along with partner organizations and the 45 Audubon chapters, is positioned and committed to developing and promoting Bird Friendly Communities throughout the state.

Therefore, be it resolved:

Audubon Florida, deploying professional staff and expertise and using information derived from sound science, will call on the volunteer leadership of local Audubon societies (chapters), members, and diverse grassroots networks, and will work with diverse conservation allies, business and community leaders, public officials, and agencies to:

Promote and Support the Plants for Birds Program

- Encourage Florida's 45 chapters to partner with like-minded organizations on plant sales, speakers, and projects that mobilize communities to promote the use of native plants in all landscapes.
- Promote the use of Audubon Florida/FPL Plants for Birds grants and National Audubon Collaborative Grants to maximize the visibility and value of native Florida plants in the landscape.
- Promote the use of native plants to both public and private entities such as utilities, homeowners' associations, and other large land users.
- Evaluate elements of solar sites (Solar Energy Centers) for inclusion in the Florida Power & Light Company *Solar Stewardship Program*.

Minimize Building Strikes and Lighting Distractions (Bird Friendly Buildings)

- Share information on National Audubon Society's "Lights out Program" and other opportunities to reduce disorientation and building strikes especially during migration.
- Promote National Audubon Society educational materials on and solutions to window strikes, a major cause of avian mortality.
- Promote peer-to-peer learning as chapters implement new approaches within their communities.

Provide Good Homes for Birds (Avian Architecture)

- Coordinate with the EagleWatch program through the Center for Birds of Prey and other partners to replace Osprey platforms and track damage to eagle nests destroyed during weather events.

- Encourage grassroots-supported bluebird trails and building of nest boxes, platforms, Burrowing Owl starter burrows, and arrays for Purple Martins colonies through a variety of grant programs.
- Encourage installation and monitoring of Southeast American Kestrel nesting boxes.

Increase and Engage Audubon Membership through Outreach, Education, Conservation, and Advocacy

- Promote Audubon Adventures Plants for Birds edition (both English and Spanish) for use in the classroom and afterschool programs.
- Support the Audubon on Campus program and continue developing future leaders through the Conservation Leadership Initiative.
- Provide speakers and share presentations on relevant topics.
- Implement Bird Friendly Community projects that will engage new and diverse audiences while building chapter capacity for conservation and advocacy.



Audubon FLORIDA

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITY: SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Audubon has a long history in the Western Everglades region, beginning with the hiring of wardens to protect wading bird colonies from plume hunters, later creating the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary (now a vital partner for these chapters), and helping to secure federal and state public lands. Audubon Florida and its five affiliated Southwest Florida organizations are committed to working together to protect and restore the Southwest Florida watersheds and downstream coastal ecosystems in the face of rapid human population growth and increasing anthropogenic climate change impacts.

Among the climate impacts, increasing temperature and poor water quality that feeds harmful algal blooms remain major threats in this region. This climate issue also intersects regional wetland protection, restoration, stormwater, and pollution prevention policies.

Coinciding with and quite related to climate impacts is the crisis of species declines and extinctions. Audubon organizations see these amongst avian species, but their food base of insects and plants are just as concerning. It might seem like the individual and our local communities are powerless to address these declines, but this is not so.

Regarding the vitally important issue of equity, diversity, and inclusion, Audubon and its chapters recognize the underrepresentation of diverse communities in our leadership, membership, programs, and staff. This lack of diversity, including not only in race, but also age and socioeconomic status, is a challenge to be addressed for everyone's collective benefit. Our regional work could benefit immensely from collaboratively working with disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The five local Audubon organizations in the Southwest Florida region, using sound science, professional policy guidance, and in complement to Audubon Florida's statewide conservation priorities, will mobilize volunteer and staff leadership, members, allies, community leaders, elected officials, and government agencies to cooperatively advance four regional priorities.

Reduce Harmful Algal Blooms

- Reduce harmful algal blooms in Southwest Florida through nutrient source control, watershed restoration, wetland preservation, and protection of connected coastal and inland habitats from Lake Okeechobee, Caloosahatchee River, Peace River/Charlotte Harbor, and Big Cypress and Corkscrew Swamps to their downstream estuaries and beaches.

- Support Audubon calls for advocacy relating to issues such as improvement of stormwater treatment infrastructure and removal of septic systems in densely populated areas.
- Additionally, Southwest Florida chapters may elect to engage in some or all of a variety of supportive activities on several levels — individual homes, neighborhoods, streets, municipalities, and counties. Examples could include community science such as collection of water quality data, establishing rain gardens and cisterns, providing support for Low Impact Design strategies, and supporting seagrass restoration.

Conservation/Enhancement of Wildlife Habitat and Land of Environmental Value

- Support Audubon calls to advocate for the purchase of environmentally sensitive land, conservation easements, and similar measures especially in Southwest Florida. Chapters may also wish to support local initiatives such as Plants for Birds Campaigns, native tree planting, urban wildlife habitat creation, turf grass conversion to native plants, and reduction of risk to birds from the built environment.

Enhanced Regional and Local Sea Level Rise/Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Planning and Implementation

- Encourage local government participation in the Southwest Florida Regional Resiliency Coalition.
- Assure governments fairly evaluate the University of Florida/Florida Gulf Coast University ACUNE+ and other models of sea level rise and climate impacts in planning actions required to protect human and wildlife communities at risk in Southwest Florida.
- Promote local and regional measures to lower greenhouse gas emissions and increase resiliency through nature-based strategies such as watershed restoration (e.g., Horse Pen Strand and Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods purchase and restoration), offshore and oyster reef creation, coastal bird and habitat stewardship, or mangrove and sea grass restoration.

Increased Diversity of Chapter Membership and Leadership, and Support for Environmental Justice in All Our Communities

- In cooperation with diverse communities, support efforts to reduce negative environmental outcomes which differentially afflict under-represented groups.
- Assure that such activities as Plants for Birds, urban wildlife support, environmental education programs, and native tree plantings benefit all communities.
- Increase membership and leadership diversity by implementing above strategies.



REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITY: EVERGLADES

The lower southeastern coast of Florida, known for its beautiful beaches, productive estuaries, unique wildlife, and proximity to the Everglades, attracts many people. Out of the three national parks in the region, Everglades and Biscayne National Parks have the highest population density adjacent to their borders. These unique conditions create a distinct set of conservation challenges when trying to accommodate human needs while protecting and restoring the Everglades, coastal ecosystems such as Biscayne Bay, Florida Bay, Lake Worth Lagoon, the Southeast Florida reef system, and other wildlife habitat in Southeast Florida.

Restoring the Everglades, other freshwater and marine habitats, and terrestrial landscapes in the region provides critical life support and ecological services for people and wildlife, such as recharging and conserving water supplies, absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, mitigating the impacts of sea level rise and extreme weather events, providing world-class tourism crucial to the South Florida economy, and preserving areas of wilderness for current and future generations to enjoy.

The lower southeastern coast of Florida and the Everglades are home to more than 350 species of birds including the iconic Roseate Spoonbill, the endangered Wood Stork, and Snail Kite within our wetlands, and the Mangrove Cuckoo, a Florida specialty bird, in our coastal habitats. As a result of the draining of wetlands for flood control, agriculture, and residential development, in addition to the misuse and pollution of both fresh and marine water resources, many species are now jeopardized. Preserving current populations and enabling the return of wading bird supercolonies and other indicator species that once symbolized the Everglades are the best measures of conservation success.

The following goals reflect a shared commitment across the four chapters encompassed within the Everglades Regional Conservation Committee (RCC). Together, the RCC will work toward these goals.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The Audubon chapters in the Everglades region, in alignment with Audubon Florida and the Atlantic Flyway, and using information derived from sound science, to mobilize volunteer leadership, members, conservation allies, community leaders, public officials, and governmental agencies to implement regional priorities, such as:

Everglades Restoration

- Create restoration talking points for tour leaders to use during birding trips to Everglades sites and in other relevant programming to educate the public.

private sector, and government entities on the benefits of Everglades restoration, particularly in relation to conservation and water quality, to expedite and improve implementation throughout the entire Greater Everglades Ecosystem.

- Participate in the Everglades Coalition (EVCO) to support advocacy efforts to fund, restore, and protect the Greater Everglades Ecosystem.
- Monitor projects at the county and municipal levels to ensure that Everglades restoration goals are being met, support projects that meet our objectives, oppose those that may impede restoration progress, and advocate for smart growth practices.

Bird and Wildlife Conservation

- Facilitate and encourage community involvement in bird monitoring programs such as coastal shorebird monitoring, hawk watches, the Christmas Bird Count, banding stations, and other community science projects to enhance the understanding of birds in Southeast Florida ecosystems and to support implementation of regional conservation projects.
- Protect, restore, and create habitat. Encourage the expansion of wildlife habitat in Southeast Florida's dense urban corridor through promotion of the Plants for Birds and Living Shoreline programs. Support the creation and maintenance of natural habitats while perpetuating information about their importance with a particular emphasis on pollinator education.
- Advocate for the protection of target species and habitats when threatened by development, pollution, or other risks through efforts like Project Perch, the Purple Martin Landlord Program, and the Lights Out Program.

Climate Change

- Educate chapter members, community members, and decision makers on current and potential future impacts of climate change on built and natural environments, such as freshwater supplies, sea level rise, storm frequency and intensity, habitat degradation, and shifts in bird and other wildlife behavioral and distributional patterns. Incorporate climate change initiatives in current and future programs.
- Advocate for mitigation and adaptation policies that promote regional resiliency to climate change as outlined in the Southeast Florida Climate Compact, particularly in adopting new technologies and methodologies such as renewable energy sources, energy efficiency measures, and the use of nature-based solutions.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

- Continue ongoing organizational efforts to define and reshape the beliefs, practices, and policies that guide our pursuit of antiracism and social justice.

- Create opportunities for diverse audiences to engage with chapters by connecting with underserved communities through existing frameworks, utilizing inclusive language in outreach and promotional materials, and offering programs accessible to people with potential barriers to participation (e.g., language, mobility, financial, cultural, etc.). Expand ongoing efforts to offer bilingual and translated programming and mobility-accessible field trips.



Audubon FLORIDA

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITY: INDIAN RIVER LAGOON

The Indian River Lagoon (IRL) is a singular treasure. Its health begins in the lands surrounding it. Over-drainage and nutrient pollution start in our watersheds, end up in our waters, and harm biodiversity and our quality of life. Recent widespread loss of sea grasses, algal blooms, and starving manatees are not acceptable.

The Indian River Lagoon Regional Conservation Committee's 2024 conservation priorities continue four efforts from last year: increase funding for conservation initiatives throughout the region, seek long-term solutions for protecting water quality, continue public education on the values of native landscaping, and increase equity and inclusion of all people with Audubon. Clean water is a unifying thread through all our priorities. The priorities also improve resilience toward an issue of unique importance to the region—sea level rise due to climate change. Chapters will advocate, educate, and perform outreach among all sectors of our community, from our neighbors, the public-at-large, agency staff, and elected officials, through personal meetings, by attending public meetings, sharing information through individual and form letters, social media, and the press, making presentations, and by any other means to effectively convey our messages.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The Audubon chapters in the Indian River Lagoon Region, in alignment with Audubon Florida and the Atlantic Flyway, using information derived from sound science, and motivated by community compassion, will mobilize volunteer leadership, members, conservation allies, community leaders, public officials, and governmental agencies to:

Support Local, Regional, and State Initiatives to Increase Funding for Land Conservation Initiatives

- Florida has a treasure of state lands that have ongoing management, maintenance backlogs, and expansion and buffering needs. IRL chapters will work with local governments to explore local bond initiatives for land acquisition and conservation. Developing local funding stimulates cost share on projects, multiplying overall funding concomitantly.
- IRL chapters also will work with regional state legislators to restore and sustain funding for Florida Forever and associated programs at the \$300 million per-year level, and work with Water Management Districts to sustain millage rates and direct funding toward land and water conservation projects on public and private lands.

Develop a Culture of Clean Water. It is Essential to Our Economy and the Quality of All Life. Toward This End, We Will:

- Work to phase out land application of all biosolids, diverting them toward energy and other useful purposes.
- Support and strengthen fertilizer ordinances, requiring summer bans on fertilizing and increased enforcement.
- Improve urban and agricultural Best Management Practices, including riparian buffers.
- Support septic-to-sewer conversions throughout the region and require inspections.
- Support LOSOM goal of greatly reducing Lake Okeechobee discharges to the St. Lucie.

Require Native Landscaping for Wildlife and Water Benefits

- Develop local ordinances to stop the sale of all invasive plants and wildlife on the CISMA list.
- Landscaping with native plants creates better habitat for wildlife, including resident and migrating birds and pollinators. Native plants thrive with natural water and soil conditions resulting in water conservation, reduced need for polluting chemicals to sustain them, and increased climate resilience through that adaptability.
- New emphasis will be placed on supporting native landscaping in all new developments and re-developments and reducing turf to 20%.
- With increasing urbanization the amount of beneficial habitat that can be created in urbanized areas is also increasing. IRL chapters will work to educate decision makers, homeowner's associations, garden clubs, and other groups of citizens on the benefits of native landscaping and how to implement best management practices.
- Chapters are encouraged to include links for native plant benefits on their social media.
- Chapters are encouraged to give away native plants and seeds.
- Chapters are encouraged to request local plant ordinances for improved and unimproved properties toward developing a model ordinance (FNPS ordinance; tree protection; reduce exotic palms).
- Increase the number of commercial locations where true native plants are available.

Promote Equity and Inclusion in Chapter Activities

- Audubon and our nation have a reinvigorated focus on historical and ongoing discrimination and inequity based on race, gender identity, religion, and other group identifications. Audubon traditionally has been welcoming to all people, but passive acceptance has not created enough interaction with diverse communities. IRL area chapters will actively solicit involvement from these communities in programs, field trips, and other activities (COVID guidelines permitting). It is important to emphasize that we cannot merely invite diverse groups to join us, but that we also must join them in their community activities, on a two-way street of fostering closer relationships.



Audubon FLORIDA

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITY: CENTRAL FLORIDA

The Central Florida Regional Conservation Committee includes much of the remaining conservation corridor through the central peninsula. While continuing our regional priorities of partnering with landowners and property managers and protecting water quality and water resources, the following goals reflect our shared focus in 2024.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The Audubon chapters in the Central Florida Region, in alignment with Audubon Florida and the Atlantic Flyway, using information derived from sound science, will mobilize volunteer leadership, members, conservation allies, community leaders, public officials, and governmental agencies to:

Promote Lake Apopka Restoration, Visitor Access, and New Audubon Nature Center

- Focus joint resources and efforts to assure continued progress on restoration of the Lake Apopka North Shore marshes and increase appropriate public access to the marshes for birdwatching, nature study, and compatible recreation activities.
- Work with Audubon Florida and Orange Audubon to promote the long-term goal of building and operating a new Audubon center to showcase Lake Apopka as Florida's most important inland bird habitat, the headwater of the Harris Chain of Lakes, and an important Central Florida reclaimed water/stormwater management infrastructure component.

Monitor and Act on Local and State Government Land Use Decisions Impacting Wildlife Habitat

- Advocate for full funding for Florida Forever and the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program to secure money to purchase identified conservation property (such as those listed below) by meeting with legislators to build support for specific properties rather than lobbying solely for the umbrella programs. Land use plans must ensure the integrity of both the Floridan Aquifer and the Florida Wildlife Corridor.
1. Lenholt Farm: A vital property which links Ocala National Forest and the extensive state holdings along the Wekiva River
 2. Conlin Lake X/Kirchman Tract: An 11,000-acre, pristine property at the headwaters of the Econlockhatchee and Kissimmee Rivers watershed
 3. Conservation easements on Kissimmee Valley ranchlands where owners are interested and willing to participate
 4. Yarborough Ranch: A 1,313-acre property that provides a critical linkage for the Florida Wildlife Corridor, filling the gap in the Little Big Econ State Forest and Kilbee Ranch Conservation Easement complex

5. Green Swamp: Considered Florida's hydrologic heart with its related uplands a critical part of the central portion of Florida's Wildlife Corridor running through Polk, Lake, Sumter, Hernando, and Pasco counties

Equity, Inclusion, Diversity, and Belonging

- Just as biodiversity strengthens natural systems, the diversity of human experience strengthens our conservation efforts for the benefit of nature and all human beings. Each chapter will continue to develop and implement action plans to increase diversity and inclusion of its board and its membership that reflects the diversity of their local community.



Audubon FLORIDA

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITY: FLORIDA GULF COAST

Audubon Florida's Gulf Coast region stretches from northern Charlotte County to Citrus County and includes 11 Audubon Chapters: Venice Area Audubon, Sarasota Audubon, Manatee Audubon, Eagle Audubon, St. Petersburg Audubon, Clearwater Audubon, Tampa Audubon, Pasco Audubon, Hernando Audubon, Citrus County Audubon, and Cedar Keys Audubon. Florida's Gulf Coast includes a rich assemblage of habitats that support a great diversity of birds, fish, and plant species. Many essential wildlife habitats are being degraded, altered, and fragmented and rural landscapes are experiencing increased urbanization due to the burgeoning human population.

The effects of climate change, sea level rise and harmful algal blooms, and fluctuating precipitation patterns threaten offshore, coastal, and inland ecosystems and the birds that depend upon them throughout the region. Populations of many species of colonial waterbirds, beach-nesting birds, migratory shorebirds, songbirds including the Florida Scrub-Jay, and even Burrowing Owls, have declined in their historic ranges and require significant intervention and management efforts to prevent further population declines and local extirpation.

Seasonal freshwater flows from springs, streams, and rivers in adjacent uplands and wetlands are vital to the area's diverse and productive estuaries. Estuarine ecosystems throughout Florida's Gulf Coast region suffer from degradations or alterations of upstream habitats due to pollution, flood control, strip mining, development, and consumptive water use projects.

Audubon staff and chapter volunteers have worked to protect shorebird and wading bird nesting habitats. The Suncoast Shorebird Partnership now stretches from the Tampa Bay area into Charlotte County and is part of the larger, multi-partner Florida Shorebird Alliance. Least Tern rooftop-nesting monitors and banding garner statewide and national recognition.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The Audubon chapters in the Gulf Coast Region of Florida, in alignment with Audubon Florida and the National Audubon's Atlantic Flyway program, and using information derived from sound science, will work together to increase Audubon's influence on conservation decisions in this region using the following strategies:

Take an Active Role in Local and Regional Habitat Protection, Improve Functionality of Natural Systems, and Continue to Raise the Audubon Profile as a Stakeholder

- Use chapter field trips, Christmas Bird Counts, Great Backward Bird Counts, hooked bird campaigns, shorebird stewardship, bird population surveys, and community science programs to recruit volunteers and generate and submit datasets using programs like eBird as relationship-building tools and the foundation for advocacy, conservation, and education.
- Identify and support advocates to speak at local and regional public meetings regarding issues facing coastal and other environmentally sensitive areas, engaging cordially and in a proactive manner.
- Seek opportunities to serve on advisory boards, publicly acknowledge/celebrate successes, participate in land management reviews, and build relationships with local agency staff.
- Promote bird-friendly programs such as Plants for Birds, Lights Out, Green Building, and other best practices.

Weave Climate Change into Existing Work Through Education and Communications

- Promote climate change education both within and beyond the chapter network.
- Collaborate with local partners to develop climate resilient solutions, such as restoring natural coastlines to respond to the effects of sea level rise and changing climate patterns such as droughts and floods.
- Underscore the benefits of natural areas, wetlands, living shorelines and native plant landscaping as natural and nature-based climate solutions.

Expand the Effectiveness of Audubon as a Conservation Organization by Engaging New Audiences and Perspectives

- Elevate the “Engagement, Diversity, and Inclusion and Belonging” (EDIB) conversation within chapter leadership and members.
- Communicate a commitment to EDIB and share resources such as statements, articles, and stories among chapters and our members.
- Consider ways to use local connection to target community needs that chapters may be able to address.

Support Youth Education and Involvement

- Recruit mentors to participate in the Audubon Florida Conservation Leadership Initiative.
- Support the Young Birders’ Clubs and other school-age environmental groups and activities in our counties.
- Offer scholarships.
- Implement internship programs.



REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITY: NORTHWEST FLORIDA

Florida's Panhandle and the Big Bend coastal areas are among the most beautiful, least developed, and ecologically productive regions of the state. This region includes spectacular beaches, four major bay/estuary systems, marshes, and floodplains that are home to some of the most diverse wildlife in North America, including resident and migratory birds. Beaches also provide habitat for endangered beach mice and nesting areas for up to five species of sea turtles. Northwest Florida's coastal economy is largely based on being a destination for beach and water-based recreation and tourism. State and local parks and Gulf Islands National Seashore are routinely listed among the world's finest beaches. The region also has a rich fishery that supports both recreational and commercial fishing. Oysters, shrimp, and other fisheries are historic and important parts of local economies.

The Panhandle also hosts several important military bases, which are not only important economically, but also harbor thousands of acres of wildlife and forests. Several of the bases rely on extensive areas along the Gulf of Mexico that are used as ranges; these would be compromised by commercial activities such as energy extraction.

Oil and natural gas exploration and recovery have long been banned in state waters although allowed in some federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico and other Gulf States' nearshore waters. However, this did not protect us from the effects of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster. Of all the regions in the state, Northwest Florida was the most impacted by this disaster—be it from oil physically reaching the shore, the effect of human relief preparations on habitat, or the eventual cleanup process.

In the wake of this event, our remaining coastal wildlife habitat are more important than ever. Long term effects of the spill are uncertain. While helping to monitor these effects, we also pledge to address the known pressures on these species in an attempt to offset what could be lasting impacts of the Deepwater Horizon event.

History tells us that the Panhandle is vulnerable to catastrophic damage from hurricanes. It is very likely that future storms impacting the Panhandle will be more intense and frequent due to climate change.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The Audubon chapters in the Northwest Florida region, in alignment with Audubon Florida and the Atlantic Flyway, using information derived from sound science, will mobilize volunteer leadership, members, conservation allies, community leaders, public officials, and governmental agencies to:

Build the Case for Strategic Land Conservation and Sustainability in the Panhandle Using a Variety of Tools Including Written and Public Comments, e-Bird, Field Trips, Programs, etc.

- Mutually support chapters across the Panhandle on conservation activities and projects that engage the collective power of an inclusive community invested in environmental equity and justice.
- Initiate integrated planning among Panhandle chapters to develop viable support plans for maintenance of chapter conservation activities.
- Protect and sustain the Panhandle's biodiversity by supporting the DOD sponsored Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape program, partnering with established and evolving Panhandle Estuary programs, and by supporting other programs of interest to Audubon Florida Conservation mission.
- Continue to support the acquisition and management of critical conservation lands with particular emphasis on Florida Forever projects.



REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITY: NORTHEAST FLORIDA

From Nassau to Flagler along the coast, and Marion to Hamilton counties inland, the Northeast region covers sixteen counties and is served by seven Audubon chapters and two Audubon staff – one based on the coast, one inland. The region harbors unique water resources, a variety of ecosystems, and climate strongholds that support resident wildlife and the birds of the Atlantic Flyway.

The beaches and dunes of the region's coastal strand are the last significant nesting sites for shorebirds and seabirds on the East Coast of Florida. Extensive coastal marshes are essential nurseries for fish and invertebrates, while coastal scrub and maritime hammocks are home to resident bird species and provide essential breeding and foraging areas for migrating birds. Birds of conservation concern include the Least Tern, American Oystercatcher, Black Skimmer, Gull-billed Tern, Piping Plover, Red Knot, Worthington's Marsh Wren, Clapper Rail, Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, Burrowing Owl, Bald Eagle, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Painted Bunting.

Special places in Northeast Florida include some of the largest magnitude springs in the world with outflows feeding rivers such as the Ichetucknee, Ocklawaha, St. Johns, Silver, and Suwannee. Large sandhill lakes provide for recharge of the Floridan aquifer. These systems are severely impacted by excessive nutrients and over-pumping of the aquifer. Mining, surface-water withdrawals, and dredging pose additional threats in the region. Local communities, dependent on nature-based economies, are suffering from the degradation of these water resources.

Special places such as the Ocala and Osceola national forests, state forests, parks, and preserves are home to bird species of conservation concern such as the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Florida Scrub-jay, Southeastern American Kestrel, Bachman's Sparrow, and Northern Bobwhite. Adequate monitoring and habitat management measures are critical for long-term protection of wildlife in these areas as pressures from human activity continue to increase.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The Audubon chapters in the Northeast Florida Region, in alignment with Audubon Florida and the Atlantic Flyway program, and using information derived from sound science, will work together to strengthen Audubon's role as a conservation leader in Northeast Florida using the following strategies:

Share Resources, Ideas, Successes, and Failures among Chapters to Facilitate Achievement of Conservation Goals

- Use conservation messages in social media and chapter activities.
- Educate resource managers and the public in the use of eBird.
- Share resources within our leadership community to become better climate communicators.
- Promote the value of treatment wetlands.

Engage Partners to Achieve Regional Conservation Goals

- Engage in climate change education and resiliency planning, and support for alternative energy such as solar.
- Support restoration of the Ocklawaha River system.
- Create native, bird-friendly communities.
- Work towards state and local policies that improve bird conservation.
- Improve management of conservation lands.

Participate in Monitoring and Stewardship Programs

- Continue participation and capacity building in: EagleWatch, Jay Watch, kestrel box monitoring, Lights Out Northeast Florida, the Prairie Creek Preserve Bird Banding Lab, and local shorebird partnerships.
- Develop volunteer programs and participate in the FWRI Wading Bird Survey.

Engage with Underrepresented Groups

- Reach out to local leaders of underrepresented groups to understand their concerns about conservation and environmental problems.
- Develop programs and events that encourage participation by diverse groups.
- Invite local leaders of underrepresented groups to participate in chapter leadership, advocacy work, and field activities.
- Continue to collaborate with schools and libraries to spread conservation messages and foster an appreciation for the natural world.