



Audubon | FLORIDA

Naturalist

Fall 2020



Photo: Luke Franke



Jud Laird, Chair

Florida Audubon Society

Here at Audubon Florida, we are working to break down boundaries. As we prepare for a virtual assembly, our participants and speakers will no longer be limited by geography. Interested members from around the state and

around the country can tune in to virtual field trips, panel discussions, and the keynote address, trading notes and questions with those driven to improve and protect our environment. We may be far apart, but our resolves are closer together than ever before.

We look forward to the fall legislative committee season with renewed drive. The past six months have reminded us how important the natural world is not only for our environment and our economy, but for our own health and well-being as well. We have clean water, renewable energy, and conservation clearly in our mind's eye, and we will draw on the ground-breaking work of our science teams to tackle restoration and climate change. As advocates, volunteers, and donors, we hope you will continue to fly with us.

Jud Laird, Chair, Audubon Florida



Julie Wraithmell, Exec. Director

Audubon Florida

Every fall, I pay special attention to the Black Skimmers along Florida's coastline. Black and white seabirds with big, orange bills, Florida's winter beaches not only support the skimmers that bred here, but also skimmers from up and down the

Eastern Seaboard. We work hard at Audubon Florida to promote conservation, improve water quality, and protect birds in the Sunshine State, but the Black Skimmers also remind me that we are just one part of a larger ecosystem, and what we do here affects birds across the country.

As we continue to adapt to the coronavirus epidemic, we have bridged city, county, and state lines to unite the voices of advocates and policymakers. At the federal level, congress passed legislation that will protect our land and water, while Audubon continues to push for renewable energy and natural infrastructure within Florida. Natural solutions have already paid dividends; the Kissimmee River restoration has renewed the landscape for both birds and people, and coastal protections have led the way for a successful summer sea and shorebird nesting season.

I look forward to seeing our migrants return in the spring. Until then, I draw strength from our members, volunteers, and staff who continue to work towards a more resilient future for wildlife, for the environment, and for Floridians.

Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director, Audubon Florida

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Julie Wraithmell

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2020 Audubon Virtual Assembly

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**Reimagining Audubon Florida:
A Call for Inclusive Conservation**



Photo: Vivek Khanzodé, Audubon
Photography Awards

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for updates and registration details.**

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING of the membership of The Florida Audubon Society. Pursuant to the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, notice is hereby given that the Annual Membership Meeting of the Florida Audubon Society will be held virtually from 9:30 a.m. – 12 p.m. on Thursday, October 29, 2020, in conjunction with the annual Assembly of Audubon of Florida being held there October 20-24, 2020. The meeting agenda will be to receive a financial report and hear any comments of the membership to the Board of Directors. A Meeting of the Board will follow immediately upon the conclusion of the Membership Meeting. For questions, contact Adrienne Ruhl at Adrienne.Ruhl@audubon.org.

Coastal Bird Nesting Successful Despite Challenges for Birds and People

Audubon Florida's Coastal Program staff and volunteers spend each summer protecting nesting birds along Florida's expansive coastline. Earlier this year, Tropical Storm Cristobal impacted the entire Gulf Coast, wiping out nearly half of the nesting colonies. Renesting began

immediately after the storm, and the last Black Skimmer and Brown Pelican chicks won't fledge until September or October. Even with this setback, added to the coronavirus pandemic restrictions, Audubon's Coastal Team persevered and helped the birds with some big wins.

2020 Coastal Bird Nesting Successes

Rooftop nesting sites produced 10 successful colonies in the Panhandle and 17 successful colonies in southwest Florida. In addition to Least Terns, five rooftop sites fledged Black Skimmers and six American Oystercatcher chicks fledged from Tampa Bay region rooftops.

Thanks to improved monitoring and adaptive management of predation, Northeast Florida saw successful Least Tern nesting at Amelia Island State Park after years of unproductivity. Increases in Least Tern and Wilson's Plover fledging was also seen at several sites in the region, along with continued success of American Oystercatchers nesting around Nassau Sound.

Northwest Florida's urban beaches — Pensacola, Navarre, and Panama City — fledged 47 Black Skimmer chicks. Destin fledged over 125 Least Tern chicks! The more remote nest sites had a greater variety of nesting species, including Black Skimmer, Least Tern, Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, Royal Tern, Caspian Tern, Gull-billed Tern, and Brown Pelican. Black Skimmers successfully fledged at Tyndall Air Force Base for the first time in recent memory.

Second Chance Critical Wildlife Area in Southwest Florida fledged 110 Least Tern chicks with Black Skimmers still nesting at press time. Black Skimmer banding at Marco Island and several west-central Florida sites continued with interesting insights into movement and survival of these populations.

Southwest Florida colonies produced more than 400 Black Skimmer chicks. American Oystercatchers successfully fledged five chicks at Shell Key in Pinellas County — also more than in recent years. Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries staff documented over 15,000 nesting pairs of wading birds of 30 species, including Roseate Spoonbill, Reddish Egret, American Oystercatcher, and Brown Pelican.



Snowy Plover.
Photo: Jean Hall

Federal Policy Update

Congress and the courts had a busy summer, and Audubon worked directly with elected officials on crucial environmental wins.

Court Strikes Down Trump Administration Policy That Let Companies Kill Birds

No law degree is required to get the gist of the ruling U.S. District Judge Valerie Caproni handed down in August. Sure, the decision is marbled with the typical Latin and legalese. But beginning with its opening nod to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Caproni's ruling in the Southern District of New York makes it plain that the Interior Department's interpretation of the century-old Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) isn't merely flawed—it's flat-out wrong.

The decision strikes down a 2017 legal opinion issued by Daniel Jorjani, Interior's top lawyer, which claimed the MBTA did not prohibit "incidental take," a term for the unintentional but foreseeable and avoidable injury or killing of birds, often through industrial activity. For decades, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has used the threat of potential prosecution under the MBTA to convince companies to take steps to prevent killing birds, such as covering oil waste pits or marking power lines to make them more visible to birds in flight.

Learn More: fl.audubon.org/MBTA

Audubon Celebrates House Approval of the 2020 Water Resources Development Act

This bill removes roadblocks to the construction of the Audubon-backed Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Storage Reservoir project, critical for both America's Everglades and South Florida's waterways.

"Congress authorized the EAA Reservoir in 2018, but unbelievable as it might be, the Corps of Engineers misinterpreted directions and the project got stuck in red tape. This year, Congress is doubling-down on its intent. Thanks to the bipartisan effort by Congresswoman Mucarsel-Powell and Congressman Mast, this provision makes it unequivocally clear that construction on the critical EAA Reservoir project must begin immediately. No more delays for America's Everglades. All systems are a go," said Beth Alvi, Director of Policy for Audubon Florida.

The 2020 bill also authorizes the Loxahatchee Watershed Restoration Project, a component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, as well as modifications to the C-43 Reservoir and C-111 South Dade restoration projects. There will be a new monthly report from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers detailing water flows within the Everglades watershed, as well as an evaluation of the effects of closing gates to prevent toxic algal discharges out of Lake Okeechobee.

Additional Audubon priorities include: 1) a provision directing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to consider natural features when building storm and flood control infrastructure, and 2) a reformulation of the Corps' cost-benefit analysis formula, which currently undervalues nature and nature-based features.

Learn More: fl.audubon.org/WRDA



Red-shouldered Hawk.
Photo: Cheryl Black

The Great American Outdoors Act Benefits Birds, People, and Parks in Every State

President Trump has signed the [Great American Outdoors Act](#), providing permanent, mandatory funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at the authorized amount of \$900 million annually at no additional cost to taxpayers. The program will help national parks, local parks, public lands, and athletic fields in every county across the country. The bill was passed by the Senate in June in a 73-25 vote.

The federal government has struggled to keep up with repairs for buildings and infrastructure even as visitation has increased. The bill creates a new fund (\$1.9 billion annually for five years) to address these deferred maintenance projects at the National Park Service, Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian Education schools. These public lands and spaces provide critical bird habitat, protect endangered species, support the capture of carbon emissions, and connect people with birds across the country.

State-Level Policy

Miami-Dade County Must Consider Green Infrastructure to Boost Resilience

Miami-Dade County is vulnerable to climate change impacts, including sea-level rise, flooding, and storm surge. In order to protect the county, the Army Corps of Engineers has proposed a \$4.6 billion plan, the Miami-Dade Back Bay Coastal Storm Risk Management Study, to reduce storm surge risks from stronger hurricanes and more extreme rainfall events.

Audubon Florida and Tropical Audubon Society each shared comments on the project, joining a chorus of voices — including local organizations, the county itself, and scores of concerned residents, businesses, and elected officials — that called for increased investment in natural infrastructure, more holistic planning, and a sharper eye on equity issues. The plan relies heavily on gray infrastructure, like seawalls, floodwalls, gates, and pumps. However, natural and nature-based solutions, including living shorelines, coral reefs, coastal wetlands, mangroves, dunes, and barrier islands, create living systems that can dynamically respond to ever-changing climate impacts.

Natural solutions also improve air and water quality, and enhance habitats for birds, fish, and other wildlife, while increasing recreational opportunities and land values, recharging groundwater, and sequestering carbon pollution. Additionally, the plan should be coordinated with Everglades restoration and other ecosystem restoration and water management projects in South Florida. Taxpayers who have invested billions of dollars in Everglades Restoration must not be short-changed due to a lack of cooperation and coordination among the implementing agencies in charge of Everglades Restoration and those planning the Miami Back Bay Study.

Finally, the plan must ensure decisions are made equitably. Miami has a high percentage of people living below the federal poverty threshold. Climate hazards have disproportionate impacts on poor and vulnerable populations and can aggravate existing socioeconomic disparities. There must be a more robust analysis of how the plan may protect some residents while leaving others behind. In Florida, we must continue to be at the vanguard of climate adaptation and mitigation.



Eastern Meadowlark.
Photo: John Wolaver

Florida Aims to Become Solar Leader

Climate change and the need to take action is of growing importance to many Floridians. It comes as no surprise that the Sunshine State is projected to have the most installed solar capacity in the Southeastern United States by 2021.

Utility companies continue to scale up and play their part in building solar projects. Earlier this year, the Florida Public Service Commission approved Florida Power & Light Company's SolarTogether program that doubles the amount of community solar in the United States and includes an incentive program for low-income residents. Additionally, Duke Energy Florida filed a newly proposed program with the Florida Public Service Commission called the Clean Energy Connection program. If approved, this program will provide Duke Energy Florida customers with about 750 megawatts of new, cost-effective solar power. The Florida Public Service Commission is holding workshops on net metering, a billing and energy production policy that allows customer-owned renewable generation to offset energy consumption and costs.

In 2019, Florida only averaged 220 solar watts per customer. The state is now projected to soar to an average of 826 solar watts per customer by 2023. So far, market economics and customer demand have driven the increase in installed and forecasted solar in Florida. Consideration for innovative policies from the state legislature will enhance Florida's meteoric rise in renewable energy use while making strides towards combating climate change.

Public Meetings for New Turnpikes Taskforces Go Virtual

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) task force meetings went online over the summer, resulting in virtual presentations and public comments. In the wake of budget shortfalls and shifting priorities, the municipalities and counties involved have voiced their opposition for the corridors and possible routes through their communities.

The 2019 Legislature passed M-CORES legislation promoting the construction of three new turnpikes. As originally conceived, these three new expressways would have had devastating impacts on Florida conservation lands, ecosystems, and wildlife.

Audubon representatives have been appointed to three task forces studying the future roads, and we strongly encourage the Department of Transportation (DOT) to adhere to the following recommendations:

- Insist that DOT be required, using funds from the roadbuilding budget, to acquire additional environmentally important lands that enhance existing conservation areas through previous land programs such as Florida Forever.
- Assure that new construction avoids all federal, state, and local conservation lands, conservation easements, water resources, and similar protected areas to the greatest extent practicable.
- Require DOT to upgrade existing roads rather than building new turnpikes in most cases. Where new lanes are needed to reduce congestion, they should replace existing roads, or be located adjacent to existing roads or other major corridors that already cross the landscape, such as major electric power transmission lines.
- Include ample wildlife crossings, elevated on trestle bridging, to cross through important wildlife corridors.



Jeff Liechty

Congratulations, Jeff!

Congratulations to Jeff Liechty! He has worked as Audubon Florida's Suncoast Rooftop Biologist since 2017, and has been promoted to a brand new role as Assistant Sanctuary Manager at the Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries! We are so excited to have Jeff bring his vast bird knowledge to work with Sanctuary Manager Mark Rachal.

Task forces must complete recommendations by November 15.

The next task force meetings will be held during the week of October 19. For up-to-date information on the task forces, and to learn how you can make comments in this process, go to <https://floridamcores.com>

Let's Grow One Million Bird-Friendly Plants Together!

Florida Power & Light Company's Solar Stewardship Program continues to find new and innovative ways to build renewable energy facilities while increasing the value of these landscapes for birds, pollinators and wildlife. Last year, 11 chapters benefited from grants ranging from \$1700 to \$2500. While the coronavirus pandemic created unforeseen challenges, most of the

awardees accomplished some or all of their goals. The next round of the grant program was announced in August 2020. We look forward to the next generation of projects.

Many of the projects pictured here were completed before the pandemic began. For others, face coverings and social distancing outdoors made for safe interaction.



Thank you Hernando Audubon, Native Plants Society, and Master Gardeners for all the newly installed native plants for birds and butterflies at the Challenger School.



The Elsie Quirk Public Library is proud to be certified by Peace River Audubon as a Bird and Butterfly Sanctuary.



This "Seeds of Change" sign is the culmination of Apalachee Audubon's community effort to enhance Lake Elberta for birds and people.



33 volunteers showed up to install St. Lucie Audubon's Plant for Birds Garden at the Becker Preserve.

Audubon Everglades Recognized for its Environmental Education Program

Protecting the habitat birds need today and in the future is part of the Audubon mission, and impossible to achieve without community education and engagement. One Audubon Florida chapter has taken that goal to the next level.

Since 2017, the Audubon Society of the Everglades has offered a Conservation Stewardship Training Course. Conceived, coordinated, and administered by Audubon Everglades Board Members and Conservation Co-chairs Scott Zucker and Mary Young, the course

provides an unparalleled opportunity to explore five fragile natural ecosystems within South Florida and the Greater Everglades. The course was selected as the "Environmental Education Program of the Year" for 2019 by FAU Pine Jog Environmental Education Center.

Expert instructors engage participants from Palm Beach County and beyond in this 7-week environmental education experience. The course includes field exploration as a vital complement to classroom study.

Throughout the class, students are encouraged to develop personal plans of action for engaging their communities in support of environmental conservation. More than 125 students have participated since the program started.

FAU Pine Jog's Environmental Leaders Awards recognize exceptional environmental leaders in Palm Beach County and the surrounding region each year. The annual award recognizes a formal or non-formal environmental education program that incorporates the five elements of best-practice environmental education: awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills, and participation.



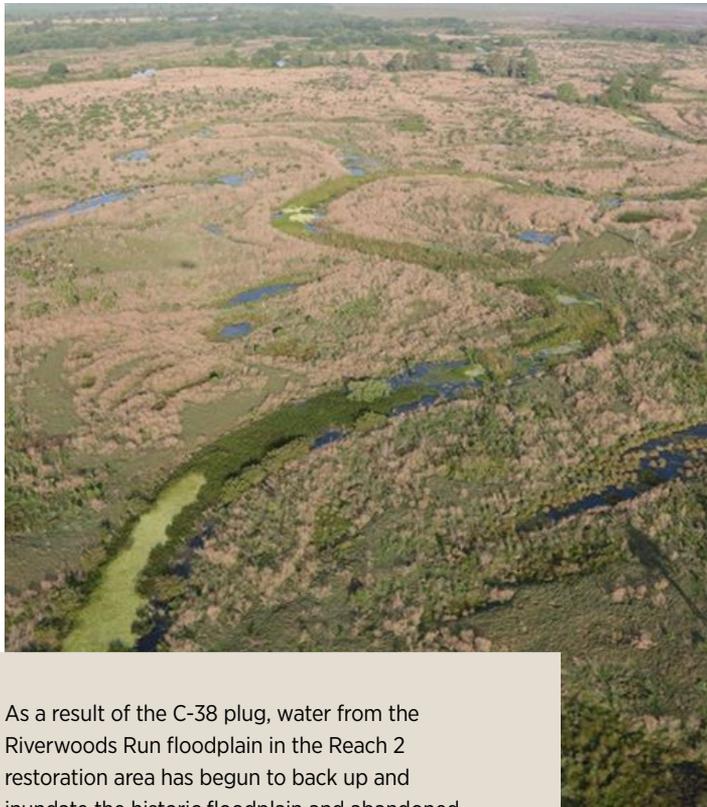
A group shot of participants from the cohort of the course.

Kissimmee River Restoration Project: A Blueprint for Restoration of the Lake Okeechobee Watershed

The Kissimmee River once meandered over a hundred miles through central Florida before emptying into Lake Okeechobee. Seasonal rains inundated the two-mile wide river floodplain, providing critical wetland habitat for birds, fish, and wildlife.

Unfortunately, as part of the mid-20th century effort to drain the Everglades, Florida asked the United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to dredge and straighten the Kissimmee into a canal. This misguided effort drained the river floodplain with devastating impacts to the wetlands, fish, and wildlife it supported. The accelerated delivery of nutrient-laden water to Lake Okeechobee spawned chronic harmful algal blooms, drowned lake marshes, and caused disastrous releases to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

Now, fifty years and almost a billion dollars later, the Kissimmee River Restoration Project, a 50-50 partnership between the South Florida Water



As a result of the C-38 plug, water from the Riverwoods Run floodplain in the Reach 2 restoration area has begun to back up and inundate the historic floodplain and abandoned oxbows, which haven't seen a flood-pulse in over 50 years. Photo by Brent Anderson, South Florida Water Management District

Management District and the Corps, is tantalizingly close to completion. When finished, nearly 44 miles of river channel, 40 square miles of surrounding floodplain, and 30 square miles of wetlands around the Kissimmee Lakes will be restored to as close to their original state as possible. The restored wetlands will be a boon to fish and wildlife and will store and cleanse water before it reaches the lake. Such ecosystem benefits are essential to Everglades restoration and provide natural solutions to Florida's water problems.

South Florida's water woes are linked to the all-too-successful efforts to drain the Everglades. In addition to causing ecological damage, draining the Everglades exacerbated Florida's two main water problems: floods and drought. Beginning in 1949, the Corps constructed a highly engineered system of canals, levees, and water control structures called the Central and South Florida system to control flooding. But the system also makes droughts worse, resulting in water shortages in a water-rich state. Uncontrolled population growth in the greater Orlando area and the Palm Beach-to-Miami metroplex, as well as irrigation for vast acres of farmland, place additional stress on water resources.

Although the Kissimmee River Restoration footprint covers less than 3% of the Lake Okeechobee watershed, the project may provide a blueprint for solving water problems north of the lake. Substantially more capacity to store and clean water is needed to reduce harmful algal blooms, reduce the need for estuary discharges, and create optimum conditions for ecosystems that help fuel Florida's tourist economy.

Audubon supports traditional "big box" approaches such as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) and state nutrient control programs such as the Basin Management Action Plans, as well as agricultural Best Management Practices, but these are not enough. Because most of the Lake Okeechobee watershed is privately owned; conservation easements and other programs that incentivize landowners to store water must be a bigger part of the overall solution.

There is no silver bullet, but Audubon believes we can restore abundant, clean water for Florida's environment and people. The storage and water quality benefits provided by the Kissimmee River Restoration Project hold the key to understanding how.

Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Research Receives International Acclaim

In 2019, research conducted at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary made international headlines when visiting researchers' camera traps captured the pollination of a ghost orchid and up-ended long-standing hypotheses about the identity of this rare orchid's pollinators. Now, the peer-reviewed paper describing that research has made a prestigious list of the most downloaded research papers from Scientific Reports.

It was ranked 46 on a list of the top 100 ecology publications of 2019. Scientific Reports, a Nature Research journal, publishes peer-reviewed research papers written about diverse topics both natural and clinical from around the world. With more than 300,000 citations in 2018, it is the 11th most cited journal worldwide and is widely respected. The paper was published following many months of observations of the famed "Super" Ghost Orchid by National Geographic Explorers and scientists Peter Houlihan and Mac Stone.

According to Sanctuary research director Shawn Clem, Ph.D., "this project was a testament to the value of Audubon's partnerships and the potential for Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's visiting researcher program to bolster conservation of the swamp, the Western Everglades, and the world's biodiversity."



Peter Houlihan photographs "Super" Ghost Orchid. Photo: Mac Stone



The paper published on Ghost Orchid pollination was one of the most downloaded papers in 2019.

In September, Stone, Houlihan, and Clem joined Sanctuary Director of Public Programs Sally Stein to host a webinar for thousands of viewers about the orchid and the findings from the scientific paper. The webinar highlighted the increased risk for ghost orchids as a result of water loss from regional land use changes and the opportunity for wetland restoration projects within the Greater Everglades to help maintain and restore the habitat necessary for ghost orchids and other Everglades species.

[Click Here to Watch the Webinar](#)

Meet Steve Nellis, Chair of the Advisory Board for Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary



Photo: RJ Wiley

Steve Nellis began volunteering with Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in 2003, working on the maintenance team to keep the Sanctuary up and running at full capacity. He has become a jack of all trades, from mowing grass to boardwalk repair to prescribed burns to mentoring new staff. As the chair of the advisory board, he plays a key role in planning for the Sanctuary's future.

"The Western Everglades is under siege from development," he explains, "Protected natural lands like the Sanctuary are vitally important for us to hold

in order to safeguard the natural resources and biodiversity that makes Southwest Florida special."

He views his work with the Sanctuary as a hallmark of good citizenship, and as a member of the Advisory Board, he is helping the Sanctuary meet critical goals.



In this photo taken May 18, heavy equipment was in the process of removing rampant willow heads that were taking over the marsh. By July 23 (right), herbaceous wetland plants flourished.

Before



After

Celebrating a Restoration Milestone at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

The marsh and prairie restoration project, which officially got underway in 2018 after a five-year pilot program, exceeded the goal set for this summer. A variety of challenges — including a global pandemic — were overcome to reach this milestone of partially restoring 670 acres, taking us closer to our goal of restoring 1,000 acres by 2023.

The three-phase restoration process consists of mechanically shredding woody vegetation, followed by spot treatment of woody and invasive plant regrowth and, finally, conducting a successful prescribed burn.

The primary target for mechanical vegetation shredding and treatment is coastal plain willow, *Salix caroliniana*. While this species is native, it becomes invasive under certain conditions, which include the absence of fire. Willow is a woody shrub with roots that reach deeper below ground than the grassy vegetation that it replaces. Once these woody invaders are removed, fire-tolerant herbaceous wetland plants like sand cordgrass, maidencane, and sawgrass flourish.

During the spring and summer of 2020, the land management team mechanically shredded roughly 100 acres, and treated over 200 acres for any regrowth or invasive plants. A section of the Steve and Merrilee Nellis plot — and a total of 18 acres — are now fully restored after prescribed fire was successfully reintroduced into these restoration units.

Once restored, these marshes and prairies can again function as biologically-diverse wetland systems that remove nutrients from surface waters before they reach our estuaries. Moreover, the restored wetlands reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires in our community, hold floodwaters during severe weather events while recharging our aquifer, and provide habitat to the diverse community of songbirds, wading birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals that call Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary home.

The project is a major undertaking at the Sanctuary, but it is increasingly important as more than 80% of wetlands in Southwest Florida have been altered or destroyed. Restoring 1,000 acres is an ambitious goal, as each restored acre carries a price tag of approximately \$2,000. Fortunately, many generous donors have recognized the importance of this restoration work and have chosen to invest in its success.



Ultimately, the very beauty and diversity of life that attracts so many to Florida could become a thing of the past.

Ann DeBaldo

Q: When did you fall in love with Native Florida?

A: I was born in Florida (Stuart, Martin County) at a time when so much was still wild, native, and undeveloped/ unspoiled. The joke was that I could safely ride my bicycle the wrong way up US-1 because there was so little traffic. The development onslaught had not yet begun. My grandmother was a bird watcher and whenever she visited, she brought binoculars and her Audubon guide, and with both in hand, we braved the hot sun and mosquitoes as she taught me to identify and to name the birds of Florida.

Q: When did you first visit Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary? How did you become involved?

A: I first visited Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary as a college student after hiking the Fakahatchee Strand. We had driven across the lovely old Tamiami Trail and my friends and I were interested in identifying native orchids and especially the beautiful birds in the Big Cypress Swamp. My favorite was always the Snowy Egret. We hoped to see the elusive Florida panther but alas, no. At that time, the Sanctuary was not accessible as it is today and so it was hard to know precisely where it started or ended. The whole area was a beautiful swamp and marsh studded with pine hammocks and cypress trees large and small.

I visited Corkscrew off and on over the years (I was a professor in global public health at USF in Tampa and traveled internationally a lot) and was thrilled when the boardwalk was developed that allowed an “up close and personal” view of Florida nature without getting one’s shoes wet! And now the lovely visitor center provides an important educational experience to visitors. But it was always the beauty of the dark swamp waters and the bald cypress towering overhead, the booming



gator calls during mating season, and the gorgeous birds, which kept calling me back. Last fall I was able to visit during the blooming season of the incredibly beautiful and elusive ghost orchid. I really appreciate the care that is taken to not only protect it, but to allow visitors a closeup view through a telescopic lens set so thoughtfully placed along the boardwalk. Every visit reminds me of the delights of previous visits, all the way back to college days and it always feels like coming home.

Q: What inspired you to leave a bequest to Corkscrew Swamp?

A: I have been thinking about leaving a legacy that will benefit the preservation of “Natural Old Florida” as I call it. I am very concerned about the level of over-development and over-utilization of resources that are threatening the survival of many species, birds, plants, and animals alike. Ultimately, the very beauty and diversity of life that attracts so many to Florida could become a thing of the past.

During my visit to Corkscrew last fall, I decided to make a list of initiatives that are working hard and successfully to preserve what remains of Natural Old Florida, and it warmed my heart to choose the Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary to be amongst the first. The long track record of science-based research supporting the preservation work at the Sanctuary is impressive. Removal of invasive plants, preservation of the incredible diversity of habitats and the last remaining old growth bald cypress on the planet, not to mention the work to keep intact a vital Wood Stork colony, are moving forward. And the value of the educational opportunities the Sanctuary provides to visitors is incalculable. What one doesn’t know about, one usually doesn’t feel obligated to protect.

I can’t imagine a better place to leave a legacy than to Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

Are you interested in making a legacy gift?
Contact Suzanne Bartlett for more information at
suzanne.bartlett@audubon.org



Mangroves provide critical erosion protections along Florida shorelines.

The Cities of Sanibel and Marco Island Join Charlotte County in Regional Resiliency Compact

Together, we can tackle climate change. Regional compacts align the efforts of municipalities to conduct vulnerability assessments and greenhouse gas inventories while building resiliency for the future.

Climate change threatens not only the native species we love, but the Southwest Florida economy as well. The formation of a Southwest Florida Regional Resiliency Compact will result in a regional action plan that will address issues like water quality, coastal resilience, and renewable energy. By supporting the Compact, municipalities and counties can amplify their abilities to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change and collectively advocate for resources to meet these challenges.

We applaud the efforts of Marco Island, Sanibel, and Charlotte County as they take a major stride forward in entering the compact. Audubon will continue to work with regional compacts across the state to adopt policies that both reduce carbon emissions while building resiliency.



Great Egret

Audubon Supports the Blue Carbon for Our Planet Act

Blue carbon is stored in our aquatic ecosystems, within seagrass beds, tidal marshes, mangrove forests, and more. These habitats not only sequester carbon and prevent emissions to the atmosphere, they also play a critical role in protecting Florida coastlines from storm surge and erosion. Audubon Florida is working with our partners to publish a series of op-eds that urge Florida to become a leader in blue carbon by co-sponsoring the Blue Carbon for Our Planet Act, which not only pushes for additional research into blue carbon, but also provides funds for restoration and protecting of existing seagrass, marshes, and mangroves.

Sign Up for Our Climate Round-Up

Progress is finally being made as we work across state lines to tackle climate change. But how to keep track of all the climate news? [Join our Climate Round-Up Newsletter](#). Once a week, we will send you a curated list of climate updates, not only from Audubon, but from local, national, and international news media.

Have You Seen Our Updated Model Ordinance Toolkit?

We've been busy! If you are looking to make change in your local community, check out our updated Model Ordinance Toolkit and learn from cities, counties, and states that have already taken strong steps to curb emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change.

Learn More: fl.audubon.org/toolkit



American White Pelicans and
Double-crested Cormorants
Photo: Georgia Shemitz



Anhinga
Photo: Georgia Shemitz

Restoring the Ocklawaha River Would Benefit Native Species and Local Economies

The historic Ocklawaha River, running more than 70 miles from Lake Griffin to the St. Johns River, was a unique part of natural Florida, connecting distant ecosystems and fueling passion, art, and admiration. The river suffered great harm when a dam and canals were built as part of the ill-fated Cross Florida Barge Canal project. Families living along the Ocklawaha watched the crusher-crawlers and excavation equipment ruin their paradise. Cypress forests were destroyed and migratory animals like striped bass and manatees were blocked from the upstream portions of the river. For many people — and wildlife populations — the negative impacts are still felt today.

The construction of the dam created the Rodman Reservoir. Over the decades, the reservoir developed into an artificial lake system, attracting many sport fishing enthusiasts. Like the St. Johns River to the east, it is regarded as a prime bass fishing location.

The reservoir, however, is not a natural system and requires a great deal of maintenance to allow recreational use. The reservoir frequently supports high densities of invasive aquatic species like hydrilla and water lettuce, which are managed through a combination of drawdowns and herbicides. Additionally, the reservoir's existence depends on the ongoing maintenance of the Kirkpatrick Dam, which has no official purpose following the deauthorization of the Cross Florida Barge Canal project in 1991.

Today, there are people who lament the destruction of the free-flowing Ocklawaha and hope to see it return, as well as those who enjoy fishing the reservoir and want to see the current water levels maintained.

While sympathetic to those who hold the latter viewpoint, Audubon believes the environmental, recreational, and economic benefits from a restored and free-flowing Ocklawaha River represent the best use of this land within the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway.

Restoration of the Ocklawaha River presents a truly unique opportunity to return significant environmental features lost from Florida's landscape. The heart of the project is the restoration of a free-flowing river through the removal of much of the earthen dam. A flowing, unobstructed river eliminates much of the invasive plant problem while allowing the return of many migratory fish species to the upstream reaches and tributaries — plus, manatees would once again be regular visitors to Silver Springs. Lower water levels would also allow restoration of thousands of acres of floodplain habitat including an impressive stand of cypress forest.

Restoration would also diversify recreational opportunities in the region and provide an economic lift, while complimenting the ongoing restoration efforts by the state in Lake George, as well as Lochloosa, Orange, and Crescent Lakes. A restored Ocklawaha River would provide unique fishing opportunities, nature tourism, and continuous travel from the St. Johns River to beautiful springs. Many environmental and economic benefits of restoration are summarized in the recent [Green and Gold Report](#) from the Free the Ocklawaha River Coalition.

In its original state, the Ocklawaha River was a magnificent, inspiring, and important piece of Florida's great natural history. Though it has suffered from an ill-conceived and ultimately unsuccessful canal project, the land is still in public ownership and we have the opportunity to restore this treasure for the people of Florida, our visitors, and future generations.



Mary Figg hiking with her granddaughter Kenley.

Alternative Ways of Giving: Mary Figg

Growing up in a small, Florida town, birds were constants in my life. I had several regulars, including Blue Jays, mockingbirds, and cardinals, and was also taken by the occasional owl, Chuck-will's-widow, and quail. If the elegant flight and rich songs did not grab my attention, the juveniles with their clumsy curiosity certainly won my heart. The fun is learning about habitat, nesting, calls; all those elements that are the secret lives of birds. Several years ago, I attended Audubon "bird camp" at Hog Island, Maine, and I have since been privileged to take birding trips in South America, Texas, and California.

Q: How did you become involved with Audubon and the Coastal Island Sanctuaries?

A: During the 80s, Rich Paul, manager of the Coastal Island Sanctuaries, generously gave me a tour of several Tampa Bay sites. Impressed by Paul's passion and devotion, I became a regular donor. As a state legislator, I sponsored several measures that improved the water quality in the Bays, measures that positively affected the work of the Sanctuaries.

Over the years, I have kept in touch with Coastal Island Sanctuaries staff, excited by the news of their new projects. Like many people, I wanted to make a lasting gift for work that I considered vital to Florida, especially the Tampa Bay area. I had observed that under the Florida sun, maintaining nesting sites and habitat is often grueling work, and new equipment is a luxury in the non-profit world. When I recently increased my contributions to Audubon, I chose to invest in replacing well-worn equipment that could free staff from the constant chore of repairs, allowing for an increase in efficiency. Always satisfying for donors, like me, is seeing what the gift has delivered. I also chose to make this gift by giving appreciated stock. By donating stock, instead of cash, I did not have to pay capital gains tax, and since Audubon is non-profit, neither does the organization.

Q: What do you hope Audubon achieves in the near and long term future?

A: Audubon Florida has, in consultation with its members, created a plan for preserving the lands under its jurisdiction. Having completed its strategy, Audubon is already working on mitigation for rising sea level and other climate-related challenges for the Coastal Sanctuaries.

My hope is that more major donors will understand this increased threat and be willing to make important gifts to allow Audubon to successfully carry out its plans. With a wise and generous donor base, Audubon will succeed in its mission.

In Some of South Florida's Most Remote Habitats, Audubon Deploys High Tech Solutions

The Audubon Everglades Science Center (ESC) manages 14 research sites along the Southern Everglades, eleven of which include technology used to monitor fish, other prey species, and other environmental conditions. Over the past several months, Audubon staff have been equipping these sites with newly updated hydrostations to monitor both water quality and quantity.

The hydrostations, which include dataloggers and sensors to monitor water quality, are being installed in weatherproof enclosures to withstand hurricanes. To keep everything running, staff utilize batteries, solar panels, and lightning protectors. The enclosure is ground wired to protect from 99% of lightning strikes (unfortunately protecting from a direct hit is near impossible).

Each datalogger is set-up to pull data every hour, enabling our team to collect data that not only helps assess how physical water conditions are affecting the wildlife of the Everglades, but also how natural weather phenomena and water management operations upstream are impacting hydrologic conditions downstream.



Brian Fedak working on a hydrostation.

We thank The Clinton Family Fund, Devon Creek Foundation, Everglades National Park, Florida Keys Environmental Fund – Charlie Causey, Ron Magill Conservation Endowment at Zoo Miami Foundation, South Florida National Parks Trust, and others for their support. These upgrades allow our team to remain on the cutting edge of scientific research and study in Florida Bay.

Roseate Spoonbill Tracking is Taking Flight

The Everglades Science Center has been collecting data on the Roseate Spoonbill for more than 80 years. This indicator species provides valuable information on the entire Everglades ecosystem, and unfortunately their numbers are declining. Over the last year, ESC staff captured ten adult spoonbills nesting in Florida Bay and attached cellular tracking devices. This technology will enhance ongoing efforts to understand the effects of climate change, sea level rise, and Everglades restoration efforts on these charismatic Florida birds.

Two generous board members, Lois Kelley and Carol Timmis, each sponsored the deployment of a satellite tracker on a Roseate Spoonbill to help Jerry Lorenz, Ph.D. and his team trace the birds' movements. "Dunken" was named by the 7 and 8-year-old grandchildren of Lois and Bill Kelley for the bird's unique foraging habits. On March 12, 2020, Dunken was captured and outfitted with a tracking device in Florida Bay, and as of May the tracker recorded its location near Hobe Sound

"Rosie O'Marsh," named by Carol Timmis, was outfitted on February 18, 2020 near the same site in Florida Bay, and is moving north (tracked exploring Jacksonville in June).

"We are overjoyed when the spoonbills arrive in our marshes and equally disappointed when they leave," explains Carol. "A striking bird of various hues of pink, there's no mistaking her! But where do they fly off to? Are nesting habits changing? We want to know!" She continues, "New patterns of behavior — as indicators of the health of the Everglades ecosystem — are essential information. Science is on the move and so are our spoonbills."

Audubon agrees and the Everglades Science Center continues to analyze key indicators to spotlight trends in Florida Bay. Supporters of Audubon's innovative tracking program also include The Batchelor Foundation, Darden Restaurants, Ocean Reef Conservation Association, and The Wolfson Philanthropic Fund at The Miami Foundation.

If you are interested in sponsoring a Roseate Spoonbill contact Victoria Johnston at victoria.johnston@audubon.org.

Q&A with Scott Taylor, Chair of the Advisory Board for Center for Birds of Prey

Recently, we had an opportunity to chat with Audubon Florida board member, and chair of the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey (CBOP), Scott Taylor. Scott and his wife Elaine have been longtime supporters of Audubon's work and he decided to get involved locally by offering his videography skills to help the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey. His passion for videography has helped many non-profits in the Central Florida region spread the word about their missions and raise critical operating support. Center Director Katie Warner, says, "We are grateful for Scott's involvement and leadership to the Center's Advisory Board. He has helped spearhead the Center's 'Restore the Nest' campaign and fundraising efforts with our annual event. Most of all we value his commitment to conservation and wildlife and our Center for Birds of Prey team."

We couldn't agree more. Here's what Scott had to say about his involvement with the support of Audubon Center for Birds of Prey.



Q: You're involved in many charities in Central Florida, and around the world. What made you decide to give to Audubon?

A: My history here goes back to 2001 when, while fighting a development in the Wekiva Basin, I was aided by with the likes of Charles Lee, Director of Advocacy, from Audubon, TNC, Defenders of Wildlife, Sierra Club, and Friends of the Wekiva River. I started to support the efforts of Charles Lee early on.

Q: What led you to become more involved and volunteer for the CBOP advisory board?

A: After I joined the Audubon board, I managed to visit CBOP and asked if I could be of any help in doing videos. This offer was accepted and thus began my love affair with CBOP. I came to be involved with videos, bird releases, and the annual fundraiser in February.

CBOP is a 3+ acre heaven that really adds lift to Audubon's mission of improving our environment's ecosystem. Every effort there adds twice or three times the benefit beyond our doors.

Q: What has been your favorite part of working with the advisory board members and the team at the Center?

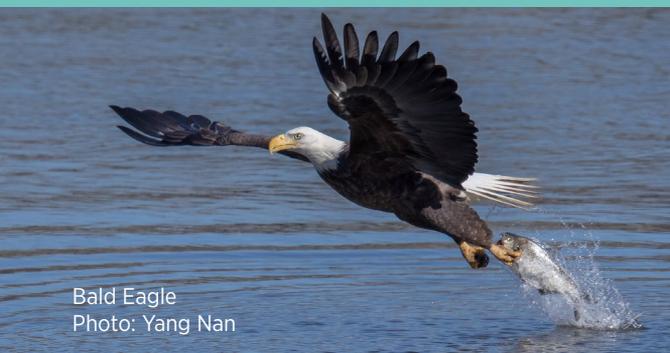
A: Both our advisory board members and the team have their hearts in our mission. Some of our advisory board volunteer at the Center and will chip in at the drop of the hat for every need. Our team has overachieved during COVID-19, taking care of our patients without the benefit of our volunteers who are tremendous. Who wouldn't want to be connected with the Center?

Q: What are you most proud of accomplishing in your role as chair?

A: I thinking the work with the last few fundraisers (Wind Beneath Our Wings) was the most satisfying.

Q: What do you hope Audubon achieves in the near future? In the long term?

A: Survival through COVID-19 and retaining the level of importance among our general population. For the long term I hope we can slow the forces that would damage our sensitive ecosystems.



Bald Eagle
Photo: Yang Nan

A Unique EagleWatch Season

Despite the additional precautions taken as a result of COVID-19, EagleWatch volunteers monitored more than 800 Bald Eagle Nests in 2020 — nearly 100 more than in 2019. In all, volunteers recorded 800 fledged eagles, for a fledging rate of about 90%. As an indication of a growing phenomenon, 21% of the nests monitored by EagleWatch volunteers were built on or in artificial structures.

Expanded CLI Program Enters Second Year

Last October, the Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) welcomed 25 Florida college students and 25 Audubon mentors into the first year of the expanded program, running from October 2019-August 2020. The program began as planned, matching students with their local Audubon leaders at the Audubon Assembly in Gainesville, FL. From October through March, students and mentors attended birding festivals, workshops, and field trips, immersing our young leaders in their Audubon chapters. Then came COVID-19.

Field trips, volunteer projects, and networking events came to a screeching halt with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. As the world adjusted to stay-at-home life, so did CLI. Students and mentors attended online workshops and webinars, immersing themselves in critical skills like resume writing and climate advocacy. Some were still able to find ways to stay involved in local conservation projects. Caitlin Westerfield, for example, helped with West Pasco's new bird blind project at Starkey Park. Although the experiences of this year's cohort played out quite differently than we expected, students still ended their CLI year feeling inspired, and plan to stay involved in their local chapters and the CLI program.



"I thoroughly enjoyed CLI and would love to continue participating in events and volunteer opportunities with Orange Audubon and maybe help start a campus chapter at Rollins."

— Jeremy Laplace, 2019 CLI Student (Rollins College)



Audubon Florida Assembly 2019.
Photo: Luke Franke

The CLI 2020-2021 Cohort application period just ended, which recruited students from more Florida colleges than ever before. One thing we are doing differently this year is beginning the program virtually, with plans to incorporate in-person events as it becomes safe to do so, while also creating deeper partnerships and comradery among cohort members.

While many things are up in the air this fall due to COVID-19, one thing is for certain: our next generation of conservation leaders are out there, ready to get involved with Audubon or other conservation organizations. During the application period we were flooded with inquiries from young leaders that weren't eligible for the program, such as graduate students and recent grads who are looking for opportunities available through Audubon. We look forward to working with our Audubon Florida staff and Florida chapters to find new ways to welcome our young leaders.

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 \$25,000 grant. If you or your company are interested in investing in the next generation of conservation leadership, please contact Suzanne Bartlett, suzanne.bartlett@audubon.org.



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