We are in nesting season, a busy time of year for the Audubon Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries and an even busier time to be a bird parent. Chicks demand a lot of high-quality food to develop, and they are vulnerable before they can fly, so rapid growth is important. High quality habitat and healthy ecosystems with abundant food are essential for bird parents to be able to successfully feed these insatiable digestive machines. Did you know that seabirds and wading birds often fly miles away from their nests to find suitable foraging habitat? In many species both parents cooperate to guard and feed chicks, taking turns foraging and bringing back food to meet the high demand. In fact, studies have shown that many species feed their young different food than the adults themselves consume because chicks require quality food for rapid development. Parents often select size-appropriate, easily consumed prey items that are nutritionally dense when feeding chicks. On our coastal sanctuaries, staff and volunteers post nesting colonies to reduce disturbance. Every time a sea or shorebird flushes, they burn valuable energy they should be using for finding food or protecting their young. If you see birds nesting and resting, give them their space!

RESTORING NATIVE PLANT COMMUNITIES
Removal of invasive vegetation is complete at Whiskey Stump and Green Keys (the original Hillsborough Bay nesting island), and the Alafia Bank’s Bird and Sunken islands. This effort has largely focused on the highly invasive Brazilian pepper and lead tree. Treatment of invasive species will be followed by planting natives such as buttonwood and Florida privet. We will create a diverse habitat that will be more resilient in the face of rising sea levels and temperatures. Restored habitat will not only provide nesting substrate for our herons, egrets, spoonbills, and pelicans, so they can raise the next generation, but will be a refuge for wintering and migrating birds that use the islands for resting and foraging. “By removing these exotics we are giving native species a chance to establish themselves in their rightful place,” says Jeff Liechty, Assistant Sanctuary Manager for Audubon Florida. “These are special islands for Tampa Bay’s birds, and we should be treating them as such. Restoring native plant communities to these islands is an important element in preserving the whole ecosystem.”
RE-SIGHTING & RELEASE OF ENTANGLED SPOONBILL
Boating and fishing are among the most popular recreational activities that people enjoy in Tampa Bay, and FCIS staff frequently encounter birds entangled in fishing line after it is too late to help them. Some, however, can be saved. This was the case when Mark Rachal, biologist with Audubon Florida and the manager of the Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries, recently rescued a Roseate Spoonbill in distress near the Alafia Banks Critical Wildlife Area.

Carefully picking up the bird, Rachal was able to cut the braided fishing line off, and then inspect the bird’s legs. Even though the line was cinched tightly around one of the legs, there did not seem to be much of an abrasion or swelling of the toes, and the bird felt very strong as it struggled to escape human hands. Rachal decided to release it and it flew off immediately.

What made this rescue even more compelling was the colored band that Rachal saw on the bird’s left leg: Red horizontal US. He knew that under the direction of Audubon Florida’s Director of Research, Jerry Lorenz, PhD, staff banded the bird as a chick at the Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary back in May 2008. This individual has been making their home in Tampa Bay for 13 years! It is one of the oldest living Roseate Spoonbills on record. Last year, he spotted a different banded Roseate Spoonbill: Red vertical 43. That bird, a 16-year-old spoonbill seen roosting on the Sanctuary’s newly installed breakwater, was also banded at the Alafia Bank in 2004! We continue to learn a lot about Florida’s stunning pink birds thanks to Audubon’s banding and monitoring program that has been taking place at Everglades Science Center.

BY THE NUMBERS

10,000 breeding pairs (29 species) protected on Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries.

50 islands protected, managed, and being monitored in the Tampa Bay area by our team.

4 completed restoration projects and an additional 8 underway.