

Appendix A. Brief history of Audubon's Lake Okeechobee program

At the end of the 19th Century, the United States was recognizing the devastating impacts of unregulated harvest of our wildlife resources, particularly birds. Frank Chapman's 1903 book, "Bird-life: a guide to the study of our common birds" noted, "...the Snowy Heron and White Egret, are adorned during the nesting season with the beautiful "aigrette" plumes which are apparently so necessary a part of woman's headgear that they will go out of fashion only when the birds go out of existence...Still, we have no law to prevent it." Of the Passenger Pigeon he stated, "Less than fifty years ago it was exceedingly abundant, but....the birds were pursued so relentlessly that they have been practically exterminated." Throughout his book, Chapman makes the case that birds are usually beneficial to humans and should be protected. Chapman and other leading ornithologists of the day were very important in early state Audubon Societies, and the Bird Protection Committee of the American Ornithological Union (AOU), that were inducing legislatures around the country to pass the "AOU Model Law" protecting birds.

William Dutcher, chair of the committee on bird protection of the American Ornithological Union, and soon-to-be first president of the National Association of Audubon Societies, helped urge Florida to pass the model law in 1901. Florida itself provided no wardens to enforce the law (Orr 1992), thus it was Audubon who paid the salaries of the first wardens in Florida (Graham 1990). Four wardens were originally hired, two being subsequently slain in the line of duty (Howell 1932, McIver 2003).

Audubon's Okeechobee work apparently began in the 1930s. Howell (1932) lists an Okeechobee Rookery in Fisheating Creek that was maintained by Audubon in 1930, but full-time protection of Lake Okeechobee and its watershed did not start until 1936 when Marvin Chandler became the first Okeechobee warden. The Chandler family was one of the founding families of the Okeechobee area, settling in the 1870s (Van Landingham and Heatherington 1978). Charlie Chandler, an alligator trapper encountered in Bassinger in 1889 by the travelers in the "Voyage of the Minnehaha," (Dodson 1973) was Marvin's great uncle (Noel Chandler, pers. comm.).

Marvin was the first in a series of Chandlers to work on Okeechobee over the next 50 years. Chandler had been a "cow hunter" on the Kissimmee Prairie after serving in World War I. Florida had open range until the 1940's (Florida Cattlemen's Association 1999) and the Florida cow men called themselves cow hunters—not cowboys. Marvin's initial charge was to enforce wildlife laws and he was duly deputized by the government to carry a badge and a gun and paid by the Audubon Society.

On December 28, 1938, the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund (i.e., the Florida governor and cabinet) designated two areas on Lake Okeechobee as Wildlife Sanctuaries, giving the "National Association of Audubon Societies for the Protection of Wild Birds and Animals" (now the National Audubon Society) the right to operate them as such. The "Observation Shoal Sanctuary" covers about 7,400 acres (2,816 ha) around Observation Shoal in the lake. The 21,210 acre (8,484 ha) "Okeechobee Sanctuary" essentially covers the western marsh from the Kissimmee River southward to the Harney

Pond Canal. The resolution for the two Sanctuaries was renewed on November 14, 1949. The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (now the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) retained the right to regulate hunting and fishing activities and both activities are permitted on the Sanctuaries in accordance with State laws.

In the early days, Marvin still had to deal with some plume hunters, egg collectors, and hobby collectors. In addition, Marvin was the main game warden watching for poachers violating established game laws. At times, he enlisted the help of his brothers and extended family to watch various areas and even had 24-hour watch over critical rookeries during nesting (Cruikshank 1948). One can only guess the challenges of being "the first game warden" in the Lake Okeechobee area in the 1930s. As Lawrence Will put it, "The Audubon Society had first got the state to pass a law against killing these plume birds, but shucks, that was nothing but a joke to the hunters. No game warden dared follow those plume hunters to the secret and near inaccessible rookeries. It was as much as his life was worth" (Will 1977). Two Audubon wardens were killed in south Florida, Guy Bradley (near Flamingo) and Columbus McLeod (at Charlotte Harbor) (McIver 2003); Marvin fared better.

Outlaws were not Marvin's only challenge; an entire society needed education on bird conservation issues. Marvin's daughter Patricia relates a story of when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited Lake Okeechobee. Mrs. Roosevelt wore a hat with a snowy egret plume in it, which upset Marvin so much he apparently was unfriendly to Mrs. Roosevelt. Marvin and his supervisor, Alexander Sprunt, subsequently had a disagreement about Marvin's treatment of the First Lady and Marvin, perhaps displaying the strong principles required to do a lonely job like that, ended up breaking his boss's camera. Patricia mused, "I guess he was valued by his boss because he didn't lose his job."

Not only did Marvin patrol and protect the Lake Okeechobee Sanctuaries, he spread his protection to private ranches on the surrounding Kissimmee Prairie, gaining the cooperation of his neighbors who saw his presence as an extra deterrent to cattle rustlers (Graham 1990). One of his greatest challenges on the lake and prairies was against egg collectors, who sought prize eggs from Florida specialty birds such as Crested Caracaras, Sandhill Cranes, Burrowing Owls, Limpkins, Glossy Ibis, Chuck-will's-widow, Anhinga and others (Anderson 2000). Since you cannot be everywhere at once, one of the early strategies was climbing Caracara nest trees to stamp the eggs "Property of the National Audubon Society" which apparently ruined their black market value (Snyder 2004). An entry from one of Marvin's logs recorded he visited a cow hunter camp to enlist their help to watch for "yankees" bothering the birds—Marvin said "to a man" the cow hunters were interested in keeping these Yankees away.

A wonderful article in National Geographic Magazine entitled "South Florida's Amazing Everglades" was published in January 1940, and has photos of Marvin and narrative on his work. Another written reference to Marvin is in Helen Cruickshank's "Flight into Sunshine" (The Macmillan Company, New York) written in 1948. Helen's husband Allan lectured widely on birds for Audubon and wrote field guides (e.g., Cruickshank

1953), but Helen was a naturalist and writer in her own right. She wrote a marvelous narrative of their adventures when Marvin took her and Allan on Lake Okeechobee, and the prairies, during a Florida-wide trip photographing birds.

When Marvin passed away from tuberculosis in 1945, his nephew Glenn Chandler became the warden. Glenn proved just as persistent as his Uncle Marvin. A director of Eastern Airlines, and of the Brooklyn Dodgers, got into a habit of bringing his baseball players over from spring training in Vero Beach for the fun of shooting Sandhill Cranes and other birds near Dead Pine Island (on the future Audubon Sanctuary). Glenn warned him to stop. He did not and Glenn arrested him and his players. Attempts to get Glenn fired were unsuccessful and the birds were safe again (Graham 1990).

After nineteen years, in 1965, Glenn retired and his brother Roderick (Rod) became warden. In the Chandler tradition, Rod's notes reveal that Glenn still worked with him, although "retired." An account of visiting Lake Okeechobee written by Edwin Way Teale in 1951 ("North with the spring" published by Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, pages 28-38) gives a description of a tour of the lake by Rod Chandler, about a dozen years before he was "employed" by Audubon (they counted 2,307 Glossy Ibis, "virtually the entire population of this continent."). Teale also ran into Dick Pough in Okeechobee city who also was on a birding expedition to the area. Pough was writing Audubon bird guides during that period (e.g., Pough 1946, 1953, 1957), went on to become a principal founder of The Nature Conservancy, and was instrumental in getting Audubon's Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary bought in 1980 (Blair 1989).

When Rod took over, a strong network of Game and Fish Wildlife Officers meant Audubon no longer had to be the main wildlife enforcement presence. Rod did not carry a gun as Marvin and Glenn had, but he still patrolled wading bird colonies and conducted studies on birds. In the 1960's there already was concern over the Snail Kite: famous denizen of the Okeechobee Sanctuaries. Rod noticed that the Kite nests often blew down when built in reedy vegetation (especially nests in cattails), with lethal results for the eggs and young. So Rod initiated a program of putting baskets under these nests, which increased nest success (Sykes and Chandler 1974, Rodgers 1998).

The Chandlers were not academically trained, but were conducting studies on the Snail Kites. Rod regularly monitored nesting activity on Lake Okeechobee and other areas during the kite nesting season, checking number of nests, eggs, young, following the Kites and nests through the nesting season. When academic researchers showed up, the Chandlers worked with them, helping train several young biologists. A June 11, 1983 letter from Rod Chandler to Steve Beissinger (then a graduate student at the University of Michigan and now a professor in California and a National Audubon Society Board member in the 2000's) talks about a Kite that Rod recognized. On March 15, 1978, Rod was on Lake Okeechobee and noticed, "a real bright colored male kite on the nest. When it flew up....it was hard to keep my eyes off it. It was such a pretty bright colored kite, I have seen a lot of them, but never one that pretty." This Kite was banded (and had hatched out of one of the nest baskets). Four months later, on July 6, Rod was in Water Conservation Area #3 with Beissinger's Professor, Noel Snyder. They checked a nest

that Snyder had recently found with 2 eggs and Rod said to Snyder that the male Kite, "looked just like that banded Kite that had nest no. 7 in Lake Okeechobee. He got his field glasses and checked the leg bands good...when we got back to...his banding record book...sure enough it was the same male kite that raised two young ...out of nest #7 in Lake Okeechobee about April 20th." The male kite had nested again in a new area in the same year. Years of research later, we know that Snail Kites have an interesting nesting strategy where males often will leave a successful nest to start again with a new female, apparently improving his reproductive output. Here we had Florida crackers ("cracker" is a complimentary term) and academic researchers learning together.

By the 1970s, great changes were happening to the central Florida region. The native "Dry Prairie" ecosystem, which originally covered perhaps 2.8 millions acres, was being drained and plowed under and replaced with citrus, row crops, or tame grass pastures. Rod told Audubon, "my family and I have been patrolling these prairies for many years trying to protect the birds. Now the prairies themselves are being destroyed. If anyone is going to save prairies, maybe Audubon should." His advice was heeded and in 1980, with funding from benefactor George Whittell, and the Goodhill Foundation (Katharine Ordway's foundation), and with assistance from the Dick Pough who now was heading The Nature Conservancy, the first 6,107 acres (2,442 ha) of Audubon's Ordway-Whittell Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary was purchased in Okeechobee County (Blair 1989). Two more purchases in 1982 and 1984 brought the Sanctuary to 7,315 acres (2,926 ha), protecting some of the most pristine habitat remaining in Lake Okeechobee's watershed. Rod's son, Noel Chandler, was hired to help with the new Sanctuary. Both worked into the 1990s on the prairie and the Lake. Harvey Thomas, friend and neighbor, helped extensively too, especially loaning farm equipment for management, and helping with feral hog control.

Chandler's observations about the loss of prairie were all too true; between 1960 and 1995, an estimated 88% of Florida's prairies were lost. When Audubon learned in 1995 that a huge ranch adjacent to the Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary might be available for sale, Audubon spearheaded a campaign to get it bought by the State. As early as the 1970s, Rod Chandler had identified this tract for acquisition. Once again, with the able help of The Nature Conservancy, and other partner's including Okeechobee County (having a long-standing local presence is invaluable), the adjacent ranch is now the 50,000 acre (20,000 ha) Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. The largest remaining contiguous tract of Florida's Dry Prairie ecosystem is conserved.

In 2001, Audubon sold the Sanctuary to the State to incorporate it into the State Parks system, and together with the Audubon Sanctuary, The Florida Park Service manages more than 50,000 acres of the Kissimmee Prairie as "the Real Florida." The proceeds from the Sanctuary sale have been placed in a permanent endowment fund whose annual proceeds are used to fund both Audubon activities in the region, and Park Service activities on the prairie (Audubon is directing part of the proceeds each year to the Park Service for projects) for perpetuity.

Today, Paul Gray, Ph.D. manages the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Program with great assistance from the Audubon network. Policy staffs in the Miami and Maitland offices also represent Okeechobee issues in a variety of meetings. Jamie Furgang and Mark Kraus, Ph.D., help write and review technical papers and positions on the Lake. In Tallahassee, Eric Draper works with the legislature and in Washington, D.C., April Gromnicki works with Congress. Florida's conservation problems are more complex and more pressing than ever before, and through this network of professionals (and let's not forget the other staff members who support them), Audubon is leading the fight to restore Lake Okeechobee by cleaning the water, managing water levels properly, controlling exotic species in the Lake, and indeed doing these actions throughout Okeechobee's watershed.

People interested in visiting the Lake Okeechobee Sanctuaries can do it—but it is not easy. The Okeechobee Sanctuaries are literally, out in the lake. A boat is needed to get there, but once you make it, it is worth it.

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epilogue

Working on natural systems takes one into often inhospitable places. As wonderful as Florida is, it can be dreadful at the same time. Why do it? Rod Chandler's notes contained the following passage, "The most worry that you have is that airboat motor - when you stop the motor to check on the Kites nest, you are never sure that the motor will start again. And most all of the kite nest away back in rough marsh land, where about all times, an outboard motor can not go. And about the only time that you will get help is when another airboat comes by. The Conservation Areas down in the Everglades is a nite - mare. About the only time that you see an airboat down there is in the hunting season, and most times when Noel Snyder and myself was working the Kites nest with young down there, the hunting season was out. An airboat can come within fifty yards of you and never see you. The sawgrass is so high.

I know one thing for sure, I am always closer to God while checking the Everglades Kites with the airboat than most any other time, and I am always thankful to him when I get back to the landing."

Roderick Chandler (1918-2001)

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