



Audubon | FLORIDA

# Naturalist

Fall 2024



Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

Photo: Christina Evans/Audubon Photography Awards



## Heidi McCree, Board Chair

There's no such thing as a slow summer here at Audubon Florida. The coastal team not only protected nesting sea and shorebirds, they also celebrated the construction of a brand-new living shoreline within the Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries to protect critical nesting islands from wave and storm erosion (pg. 7). Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary kept tabs on migrating birds (pg. 6) and the Center for Birds of Prey inspired visitors of all ages through a fun and busy event calendar (pg. 5).

As the weather cools down, our work will only continue to heat up as we monitor the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's plans to develop portions of state parks for golf courses, hotels, pickleball courts, and more (pg. 4). Our premier conservation event is coming up too, as we flock together in Daytona Beach from Nov. 7-9 for Audubon Assembly (pg. 3).

As many Floridians take stock of impacts and undertake recovery from this storm season, I hope you find support and comfort in our resilient Audubon community and the return of migrating birds to our state. I look forward to seeing you all at Assembly!

Heidi McCree, Chair, Audubon Florida



## Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director

Floridians love our state parks. In my 27 years working to protect birds and the places they need, I have rarely seen such an immense wave of support on behalf of protected lands as I did this August. Students and teachers, Republicans and Democrats, visitors and locals, all wrote to their elected officials, contacted the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, reached out to the Governor's office, posted photos of their favorite state park views, and attended in-person shows of support to prevent hasty and harmful planned development in our state parks.

This August, when news broke that the State was advancing development proposals for golf courses, motels, and more in nine state parks, the outcry was swift, loud, bipartisan, and had Audubon chapters at its core. Our members have long histories with their local state parks, often serving as volunteers for decades, and know their natural resources like the backs of their hands.

Watching this groundswell of advocacy for state parks and the conservation victory it delivered underscored for me the galvanizing importance of these special places, their habitats, and wildlife for Floridians and visitors alike. And it showed that when we work together, Audubon knowledge and skills can make all the difference in coalition efforts to meet challenges like these. This year's Audubon Assembly is not only a celebration of all we've accomplished in the last year, but an investment in skill building and subject matter expertise that help Audubon serve as a thought leader in crises like these. Join us!

Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director, Audubon Florida

## 2024 Florida Audubon Society Leadership

### Executive Director

Julie Wraithmell

### Board of Directors

#### Chair

Heidi McCree

#### Vice-Chair

Carol Colman Timmis

#### Treasurer

Brian Miller

#### Secretary

Lida Rodriguez-Taseff

#### Policy Committee Chair

Mary Jean Yon

#### DEI Chair

Lida Rodriguez-Taseff

#### Conservation Committee Chair

Kirsten Hines

#### Chapters Committee Chair

Melissa Lammers

Jim Brady  
David Cox  
Bren Curtis  
Paul Ferber  
Jason Fischer  
Mary Keith  
Lois Kelley  
Amy Koch  
Paul Loftus  
Trent Maddox  
Ron Magill  
Steve Nellis  
Lauren Sher

#### Emeritus

Joe Ambrozy  
Sandy Batchelor  
John Flanigan, Esq  
Jud Laird  
Steve Lynch  
Michael Sheridan

2024

# Audubon Assembly

## 125 Years of Audubon in Florida: Legacy and Leadership

Registration is open for  
Audubon Assembly 2024!

### **NOVEMBER 7-9**

The 2024 Assembly will be held at the Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort. With learning sessions, keynote presentations, awards, and field trips to some of the birdiest hotspots in the Eastern Central Florida region, Assembly is a great opportunity to network with Audubon members, staff, partners, and volunteers from across the state.

**Tickets: \$165**

**Early Bird Tickets End Oct. 8: \$145**

**Friday Night Banquet Only: \$80**

Great Egret.

Photo: Bonnie Masdeu/Audubon Photography Awards



Visit [fl.audubon.org/assembly](https://fl.audubon.org/assembly)  
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 on Saturday, November 9, 2024 at 1 p.m. 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](mailto:Adrienne.Ruhl@audubon.org).

# You Spoke Up for Florida State Parks

Audubon congratulates the passionate conservationists and park lovers across the state who spoke out for these special places when it was needed most. You wrote letters, shared updates, and called your elected officials—and it worked!

## THE DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

From three golf courses at Jonathan Dickinson State Park to 350-room hotels at Topsail Preserve and Grayton Beach state parks, pickleball and disc golf courses at Honeymoon Island and Hillsborough River to glamping at Camp Helen State Park, the development proposals touched nine state parks across the Sunshine State (for a complete list of parks and proposals, [click here](#)). The public had only one week to organize before eight meetings (scheduled during the work day, with no virtual component, and all at the same time) would convene to take comment on the proposals.

Florida has no shortage of places to swing a golf club, sample the continental breakfast, or participate in a pickleball match—but increasingly rare are the opportunities to spot the deep blue feathers of a Florida Scrub-Jay, witness the miracle of neotropical bird migration, or experience Florida in all its natural beauty.

## AUDUBON TEAM LEAPS INTO ACTION

As soon as Audubon Florida staff learned of the proposals, we began calling state officials and alerting our members to the state park threat. Immediately, responses rolled in as more than 30,000 people used our action alert to send letters to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the agency in charge of state parks, and Governor Ron DeSantis. Our chapters organized to attend the meetings and give media interviews.

## YOU SPOKE, THEY LISTENED

Amidst the bipartisan avalanche of public support for the state parks and rejection of these development proposals, members of Florida's state legislature, cabinet, congressional delegation, and both U.S. senators all echoed the concern expressed by their constituents. DEP first delayed the public meetings in search of larger venues to accommodate those



Thanks to the groundswell of support for state parks, plans to build a 350-room hotel in Topsail Hill Preserve State Park was tabled, for now.

who wanted to share their opinions in person, then cancelled them altogether as Governor DeSantis sent the management plan amendments “back to the drawing board.” If reworked proposals are submitted, they won't return for public comment until next year.

## INTO THE FUTURE

Audubon Florida will continue to find ways for grassroots advocates to engage with park planners as this process moves forward and provide expert evaluation of the potential impacts of new proposals. As Florida's oldest statewide conservation organization, Audubon was part of the effort to create Florida's state parks decades ago and is just as important to the survival of these special places and their wildlife today.



Wilson's Plover chick at Anastasia State Park. Photo: Jonathan Hoiles

# Center for Birds of Prey Programs Grow Next Gen to Bend the Bird Curve

Fall is a busy time of year. Eagles begin nesting, students are back in school, and the Center for Birds of Prey runs a packed event calendar! Each offering is an opportunity to inspire environmental leaders of all ages.



Susie the American Kestrel reads with kids for a Center for Birds of Prey storytime. Photo: Sydney Walsh/Audubon

## LATINO CONSERVATION WEEK

The Center for Birds of Prey team hosted two events to celebrate the Latino community getting outdoors: *Cuentos con Susie*, a special Storytime with Susie the American Kestrel in Spanish on September 21; and in partnership with Orange Audubon Society, a Bilingual Bird Walk at the Orlando Wetlands on September 22.

## A CLIMATE-FRIENDLY BACK-TO-SCHOOL SEASON

Back to school can be a hectic time: buying new clothes, school supplies, and lunch materials, deciding how to get to and from school, and so much more. All of these decisions have impacts on our climate, but the choices we make can mitigate the effects of climate change.

On September 28, the Center hosted a Back-to-School Bird Bash to teach families about the many small switches people can make to have an earth-friendly school year. Admission to the event was free with the purchase of an item from the Center's [wish list](#).

## OWL PROWL

On October 11, visitors will celebrate spooky season with an after-hours tour featuring the Center's creatures of the night! This family-friendly evening of owl education features up-close encounters with native Florida owl species, a presentation on owls and how to find them in the wild, and a walking tour in the dark to encounter the Center's owls as they awaken for the night. Halloween costumes are encouraged at this themed event, which also includes themed crafts, games, and activities.

Owl Prowl tickets have sold out! The Center for Birds of Prey looks forward to additional events in the coming months.

In order to "bend the bird curve" and reverse declines in the hemisphere's birds, Audubon knows that bringing people together to appreciate and understand birds at places like the Center for Birds of Prey is the first step in inspiring them to take action.

Learn more about our strategic Flight Plan here: [audubon.org/about/welcome-flight-plan](https://audubon.org/about/welcome-flight-plan)

# High Tech Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Motus Station Records Tagged Shorebird Migrating from Canada to Colombia

*Wetland habitats in South Florida serve as important refueling stations for birds migrating from the boreal forest to South America each fall.*

Rolling along a back-country road in northern Collier County, Allyson Webb slows her buggy to a halt and surveys the sodden land near an ephemeral pond. As land stewardship manager for Audubon Florida at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, she regularly monitors this location for invasive plants and other threats. On this warm August morning, she is excited to hear a familiar sound: *tu-tuu, tu-tuu!* She smiles and goes about her day, pleased to know that a Lesser Yellowlegs has made its presence known in “her” sanctuary.

Dozens of visitors and staff have reported sightings at the Sanctuary over the years, but a new tool is providing land managers like Webb and bird researchers everywhere with clues that increase their collective understanding of migration patterns and habitat needs.

Each spring, Lesser Yellowlegs breed and raise their young in the boreal forests of Northern Canada and Alaska. Once summer is over and the young can fly, they leave to spend winters in Florida, around the Gulf of Mexico, or as far south as the Argentinian Pampas before returning the following spring. Some birds travel around 8,000 miles each year!

Lesser Yellowlegs rely on wetland habitats like marshes as feeding areas because they harbor a bountiful supply of delicious diving beetles and other water bugs. While some shallow wetlands are disappearing or drying out due to our changing climate, many others are being degraded, drained, or otherwise altered by development,



Lesser Yellowlegs. Photo: Eary Warren

making the protection of remaining wetland habitats like Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary so important. These 13,000 protected acres serve as stopover sites or wintering destinations for countless migrating birds.

“At least a few times every year, I see Lesser Yellowlegs on the northern side of our property taking advantage of shallower wetlands for foraging,” says Webb.

Webb works to protect and manage wetland habitats that birds like Lesser Yellowlegs need along their annual journeys. Since 2022, a Motus wildlife tracking system station in the Sanctuary has connected this habitat to the Audubon network and other stations around the world. Its antenna picks up radio signals emitted from birds outfitted with tracking devices if their flight path takes them within seven miles of the station. Data collected by the station are uploaded to a database where researchers who use nanotags or other tracking technology can see the exact date and time when the tagged bird was near the station, essentially connecting the dots along their annual migration routes, as long as there are stations along the way.

Jorge Velásquez, science director for Audubon Americas, oversees a research team in Cali, Colombia that radio-tags Lesser Yellowlegs as part of their study. A Motus station in Missouri tracked one of their birds on May 16 before it continued north to its breeding grounds, where Motus coverage is lacking. Shortly after midnight on August 2, it reappeared, flying past two Motus stations near Des Moines, Iowa, already on its southbound journey. Later that day, it passed near stations in Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina. On August 4, the bird was recorded by the station at the Sanctuary!

Learn more about the perilous journeys that Lesser Yellowlegs undertake at the [Bird Migration Explorer](#) from Audubon’s Migratory Bird Initiative and partners.



A pair of Lesser Yellowlegs foraging with a White Ibis in a wetland at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Photo: Allyson Webb/Audubon Florida

## Audubon Florida Installs New Living Shoreline to Protect Important Nesting Habitat

This fall, some unusual activity is underway at a few islands within the Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries of Tampa Bay. The sounds of waves gently lapping the shoreline and occasional calls of resident herons and egrets are temporarily joined by shouts and the loud thrumming of heavy machinery as new living shorelines are installed to act as breakwaters.

Many islands in this region have experienced erosion brought on by wave energy from passing ships and coastal storms. In some locations, shoreline scouring is so severe that even mature mangroves have been toppled, and critical nesting habitat has been lost. The effects of erosion are intensified by sea level rise.

In 2019, Audubon Florida completed construction of a mile-long living shoreline breakwater along the Alafia Banks Critical Wildlife Area, leased from and managed in collaboration with The Mosaic Company and Port Tampa Bay as a bird sanctuary.

This year, the nature-based solution is also being installed around colonial waterbird nesting islands Audubon manages in Pinellas and Manatee counties. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation funded this project.

“**This project will protect the habitat for 15 species that nest at the islands, including state-threatened Reddish Egrets, Little Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, American Oystercatchers, Roseate Spoonbills, federally threatened Wood Storks, and other iconic species like Brown Pelicans.**”  
— Jeff Liechty, Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries Manager



▲ New living shoreline installed around an island near Dunedin. Photo: Jeff Liechty/Audubon Florida

The ball-shaped, pH-neutral concrete structures are specially designed to reduce the amount of wave energy that reaches the shoreline while allowing water to pass through. Unlike seawalls that eliminate shoreline habitat, living shoreline structures like this one protect the islands from erosion working with nature, rather than against it. They are considered “living” because they are made of material that is easily colonized by oysters and other invertebrates that are food for birds and fish. Another benefit of breakwaters? The structures will improve local water quality by recruiting more oysters to filter nutrients from the water as they feed.

When complete later this year, these breakwaters will extend the length of living shorelines that Audubon has built in Tampa Bay by 1,800 feet.

Audubon Florida has worked with local, state, and federal partners to protect these iconic species and their habitat at the Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries since 1934.





Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) leadership joined Audubon Florida and non-profit partners for a tour of Florida Bay in September to discuss Everglades restoration, Florida Bay recovery, Roseate Spoonbill populations, and upcoming conservation opportunities in the Florida Keys.

From left to right: Paul Julian, PhD, Everglades Foundation; James Erksine, FWC; Kelly Cox, Audubon Florida; Jerry Lorenz, PhD, Audubon Florida; Charter Captain Steve Friedman; Marisa Carrozzo, National Parks Conservation Association; Keely Weyker, Everglades Foundation; Roger Young, FWC executive director.

## Save Taxes and Birds! Double your Impact in 2024

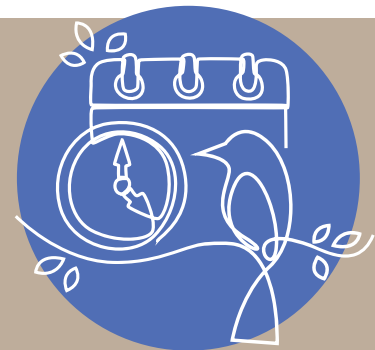
If you are 70½ or older, you can make a tax-free distribution from your **traditional or Roth IRA** to Audubon Florida.

Here's how it works: you donate up to \$100,000 without incurring income tax on your withdrawal. The process is simple: you direct distributions in the amount of your choosing from your traditional or Roth IRA to Audubon Florida. This can be a one-time or recurring gift. The distributions go directly to Audubon Florida and are not subject to federal income tax.

When making your gift, to ensure it is properly processed and that you are listed as the donor

of record, please have all checks directed to the address below and contact Suzanne Bartlett at 305.371.6399, ext. 123 or [Suzanne.Bartlett@audubon.org](mailto:Suzanne.Bartlett@audubon.org) to let us know to expect your gift.




**National Audubon Society  
Office of Gift Planning  
225 Varick Street, 7th Floor  
New York, NY 10014**



DONATE: [givetoaudubonflorida.org](http://givetoaudubonflorida.org)

STAY IN TOUCH: [fl.audubon.org/keep-touch](http://fl.audubon.org/keep-touch)

FOLLOW US:

 @AudubonFlorida  
 @AudubonFL  
 @Audubon\_FL

 **Audubon** | FLORIDA

4500 Biscayne Boulevard, Suite 350, Miami, Florida 33137  
Tel: 305-371-6399 | [fl.audubon.org](http://fl.audubon.org)

The Naturalist is published by Audubon Florida. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from Audubon Florida © 2024. The Florida Audubon Society, National Audubon Society (doing business as Audubon Florida), and the 44 chapters in Florida, work together in a strategic alliance.

**Executive Director:** Julie Wraithmell | **Production:** Target Printing | **Editor:** Erika Zambello | **Associate Editors:** Renée Wilson, Karina Jiménez  
**Designer:** Frances Roy Agency | **Contributors:** Jeff Liechty, Karina Jiménez, Heidi McCree, Renée Wilson, Julie Wraithmell, Erika Zambello