



Audubon | FLORIDA

# Naturalist

Summer 2021



Female Snail Kite. Photo: Nancy Elwood



## Heidi McCree, Board Chair

What a privilege to serve as the newly-elected Chair of the Audubon Florida Board. It is an honor to be associated with Audubon Florida's work and together, we will continue to address the important issues and achieve our mission to protect birds and the places they need. We send a huge thank you to our outgoing Chair, Jud Laird, for his amazing work and leadership — the birds are better off because of your efforts!

Summer is here! Locals and visitors alike enjoy sun, the beach, and Florida's amazing waterways. Our beaches are alive with nesting sea and shorebirds, and across the Everglades we are wrapping up a busy wading bird breeding season. At the Center for Birds of Prey, more than 200 raptor chicks crossed our threshold — and we released more than half back to the wild. As Audubon Florida's newest Board Chair, I see the nesting season as a time to celebrate the resilience of birds, while looking forward to how we can protect them into the migration season and beyond. We will work with state agencies to make sure the high levels of conservation funding turn into real wins for both wildlife and communities (pg. 8). We will forge new partnerships to protect Lake Okeechobee and the Snail Kites that nest there (pg. 14). We will inspire — and be inspired by — the next generation of environmental leaders (pg. 13). And we will continue to be grateful for your support as members, volunteers, advocates, and donors!

Heidi McCree, Chair, Audubon Florida



## Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director, Audubon Florida

The world is opening back up again. We are birding together, meeting with elected officials and policymakers, and welcoming field trip and education program participants back to the Center for Birds of Prey and Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Through it all,

birds have been with us, and millions of people across the country have fallen in love with the backyard species that teach us so much about the natural world.

But as the country re-opens human impacts on birds have escalated; from the flushing of seabird colonies on our beaches to the algal blooms that remind us that we all need to reduce nutrients entering our waterways. At Audubon, we continue to work with individuals and agencies to hold people accountable while encouraging everyone to enjoy the unique bird species that make Florida so special. After an intense Florida Legislative Session, we are encouraged that high levels of funding have been appropriated to restoration programs — including in the Everglades — as well as to land conservation initiatives that give birds and wildlife more protected space.

We need your voice now more than ever. If you haven't already, **subscribe** to our electronic newsletters and alerts to stay up to date on upcoming training opportunities, action alerts, and success stories. We hope to see you at one of our Assembly meetings this fall! Find out more on page 3.

Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director, Audubon Florida

## 2021 Florida Audubon Society Leadership

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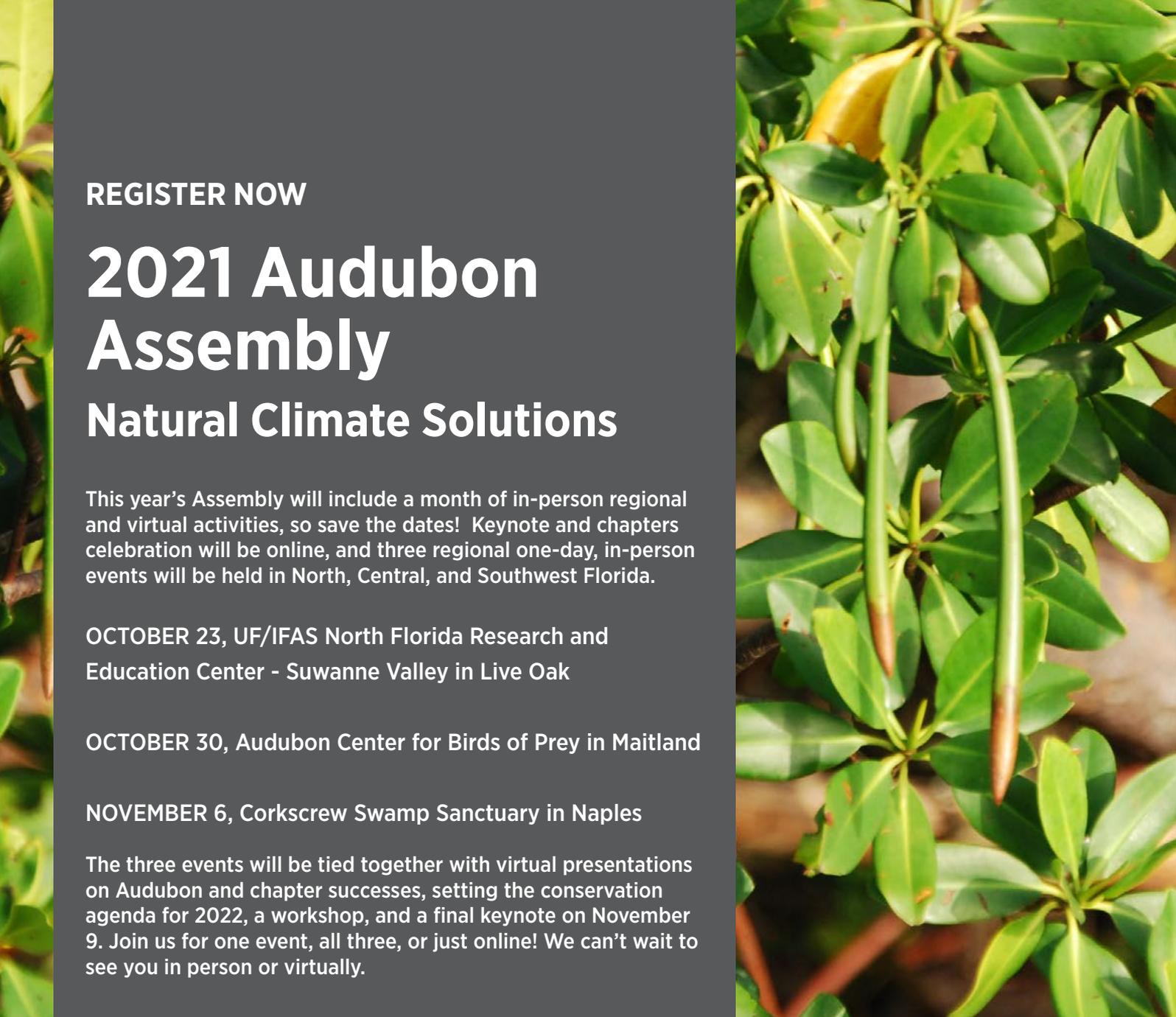
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# 2021 Audubon Assembly

## Natural Climate Solutions

This year's Assembly will include a month of in-person regional and virtual activities, so save the dates! Keynote and chapters celebration will be online, and three regional one-day, in-person events will be held in North, Central, and Southwest Florida.

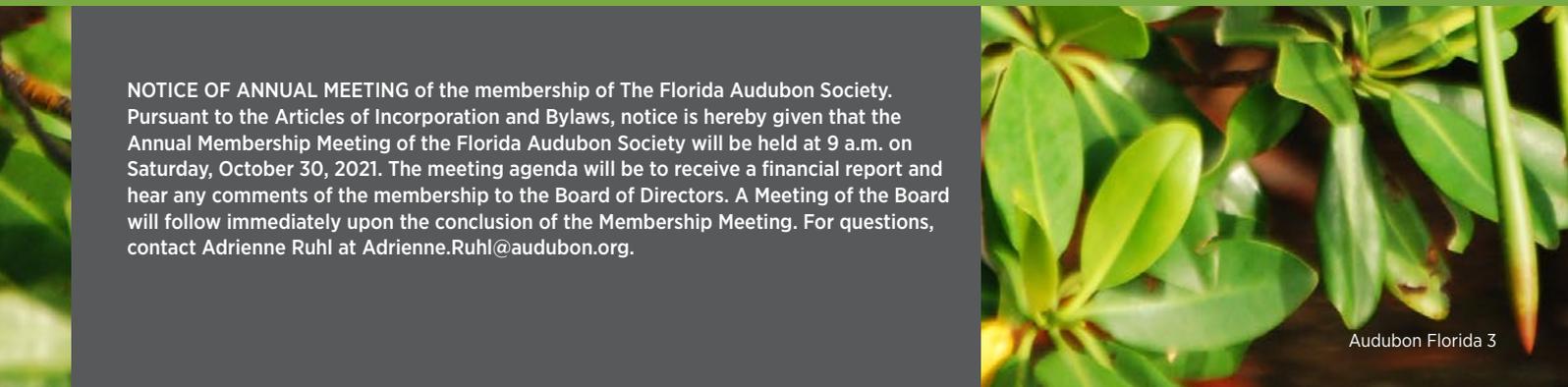
**OCTOBER 23, UF/IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center - Suwanne Valley in Live Oak**

**OCTOBER 30, Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland**

**NOVEMBER 6, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples**

The three events will be tied together with virtual presentations on Audubon and chapter successes, setting the conservation agenda for 2022, a workshop, and a final keynote on November 9. Join us for one event, all three, or just online! We can't wait to see you in person or virtually.

**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 at 9 a.m. on Saturday, October 30, 2021. 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).



Banded American Oystercatchers left their rooftop nesting site with one fledge in tow.

## American Oystercatchers: Working Across the State to Protect this Vulnerable Shorebird

American Oystercatchers are an iconic coastal species, nesting in our beaches and coastal islands across the Gulf Coast and up the Atlantic seaboard. Sensitive to disturbance, they are a critical barometer of sea level rise and the resiliency of coastal habitats. Audubon works throughout the state to monitor and protect this beautiful shorebird.



## Audubon Florida Partners with FWRI to Band Rooftop Nesting Oystercatchers

In mid-March — just as breeding season was kicking off — Audubon Florida staff in the St. Petersburg region worked with Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) to band American Oystercatchers that nest on rooftops in Pinellas County. American Oystercatchers, a state-designated Threatened species, are declining as a result of both habitat loss and human disturbance. In Pinellas County, we have started to see a shift in oystercatchers nesting on the ground to nesting on gravel rooftops due to a lack of suitable ground nesting habitat where they could successfully raise their young. Banding American Oystercatchers that nest on rooftops will help us better understand movement patterns, site fidelity, survival, and how they are contributing to population recovery.

Audubon Florida's rooftop biologist, Kara Cook, scouted out oystercatchers that started showing up on previously known nesting sites to find pairs that would be suitable for banding. The ideal time to band oystercatchers is as soon as they show up at their

territory, but before they lay eggs. Federally permitted researchers catch them for banding by using a carpet net, decoys, and audio playback in an area we think that they might be ready to defend their territories. Once caught, they are removed from the net, measurements and weights are taken, bands are added to their legs, and then they are released. The whole banding process takes less than five minutes to reduce the time the birds are in-hand.

Audubon and FWRI staff banded two rooftop nesting pairs. Now that the oystercatchers are banded anyone can report their sighting of a banded oystercatcher to the American Oystercatcher Working Group. All that is needed is a confirmed sighting of the band code and location of where it was seen. Thanks to reports of band sightings by community scientists, we are learning more about their flight patterns and post-nesting behavior. As of mid-June, three chicks fledged from the two recently banded adult pairs.

# American Oystercatchers Choose St. Petersburg-area Airport for Nesting Site

Audubon coastal biologist Jeff Liechty couldn't help feeling nervous for the American Oystercatcher pair that chose to nest at the Albert Whitted Airport in St. Petersburg this season. Their diminutive size and tendency to spook made the pair strange bedfellows with the airplanes coming and going from the runways, but it is the presence of the planes — and predator control — that has made this site a successful fledging area for American Oystercatchers.

There are very few nest sites in Pinellas County where American Oystercatchers can nest undisturbed by recreation or other human activity. This site is closed to public access for safety concerns, and is in proximity to food in the bay. "The habitat isn't traditionally something that the oystercatchers would have chosen for their nest," Liechty explains, "but they have few options here and it meets the few criteria that this flexible species needs: no mammalian predators, no human disturbance, food nearby, open sightlines, gravelly/sandy substrate."

Luckily, the birds are far enough from the flight path that they are not a concern for the airport; in fact, the grounds crew made sure the nesting birds remained undisturbed. American Oystercatchers have fledged chicks from this site successfully, and we hope the trend continues this year.

## Lack of Disturbance Due to COVID Restrictions Yields Banner Year for Chicks at Shell Key Preserve

Pinellas County closed Shell Key Preserve at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing personal watercraft from landing and people from using the beach. Even when the beaches re-opened, the tour boats and shuttles ran on a limited schedule, and visitation remained lower than in previous years. Three pairs of American Oystercatchers nested in 2020, and two pairs fledged a total of five chicks. In fact, every egg hatched led to a fledged chick, an unheard of success rate! All five were banded in partnership with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as well as Pinellas County.

**This year was confirmation: Protecting beach-nesting birds like American Oystercatchers from disturbance makes all the difference between chicks surviving or dying on Florida's beaches.**

Photo: Jesse Gordon/Audubon Photography Awards



**Report a Sighting:**  
[FL.Audubon.org/birds/banded-birds](https://www.flaudubon.org/birds/banded-birds)



American Oystercatcher in Shell Key Preserve

# 2020 Sampling of Florida Bay Fish Reveal Improving Everglades Water Conditions

The Everglades Science Center team regularly monitors fish species in Taylor Slough, where the Everglades meets Northeast Florida Bay, as freshwater species indicate the ecosystem is receiving enough freshwater. During the sampling year from June 2020 through April 2021, 14.2% of fish captured were freshwater species. Center staff recorded very few species that depended on moderate salinity and virtually no high salinity species.

This is a good sign. Fish that thrive in low salinity conditions show that the community could be moving back towards one dominated by freshwater species, which would mean a greater abundance of fish available to predators like the Roseate Spoonbill.

By comparison, the three-year average annual percent of freshwater species captured prior to this year was 6.1%. On a positive note, this year, Bluefin Killifish were a significant portion of the catch. This species takes a relatively long time to recolonize habitat once it has been too salty, so an increase in their numbers points to freshening of water in this basin.

Although these findings show a tremendous improvement over the last three years, it still falls well short of the target of having freshwater species make up more than 40% of the catch. To complicate matters, the Spotted Tilapia — an invasive species — dominated the freshwater catch this year.



## Gulf Power Foundation Funds New Signs to Protect Birds

Audubon began coordinating conservation efforts at the Navarre Beach Causeway seabird-nesting site in 2013 to protect the seabird colony near the busy roadway. In order to keep the local seabirds safe, Audubon works with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Santa Rosa County to reduce the speed limit each year. When the coastal birds begin nesting behavior on the causeway, the Santa Rosa County Public Works department temporarily lowers the speed limit from 35 mph to 20 mph. Drivers did not always adhere

to the lower speed limits, citing a lack of awareness of the lower speed limits.

Audubon began using electronic reader boards and flashing speed signs in 2015 to alert drivers of the nesting birds and reduced speed limits. The reader board and flashing speed signs are a part of a successful strategy Audubon and the local community — and now Gulf Power Foundation — use to ensure the safety and success of the Navarre Beach Causeway seabird colony, decreasing bird mortality by over 80%.



## Bonnie Samuelson Retires as Shorebird Project Manager for Northwest Florida

Bonnie joined Audubon Florida in 2013 as our very first Panhandle coastal team leader and built our legendary bird stewardship program from the ground up across the region. Her hard work and passion for coastal bird conservation are etched in the foundations of the program today. Thank you, Bonnie, for your relentless devotion to the birds, and your talent in enlisting so many others in our work.



Two Wood Stork adults with four chicks.

## Colony Watch Volunteers Work with Audubon to Protect Wading Birds

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Because Audubon's Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries manage and monitor dozens of island nesting sites across many counties in the Tampa Bay region, Audubon staff are stretched to manage all these areas. A dedicated network of "Colony Watch" volunteers help manage and monitor the sites and nesting activity, and alert staff if something is amiss at one of the nesting islands.

Colony Watch volunteers provide vital information on nesting species in addition to keeping a close eye on the well-being of the colony. Together with our partners at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Audubon Sanctuary staff have removed unauthorized hunting blinds, worked to reduce human disturbance to nesting birds, and recorded critical colony data. We are grateful to have such committed volunteers who are passionate about protecting the birds.

### Want to help?

Contact Mark Rachal at [Mark.Rachal@audubon.org](mailto:Mark.Rachal@audubon.org) about joining Colony Watch efforts.

## Audubon Partners with Port Tampa Bay to Protect New Nesting sites

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Each spring, hundreds or even thousands of colonial waterbirds congregate to nest on the Richard T. Paul Alafia Bank Critical Wildlife Area, which is leased from and managed in collaboration with the Mosaic Company and Port Tampa Bay. The island has been managed by Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries staff since the 1930s as a nesting island that supports a wide variety of species including Brown Pelicans, wading birds, and American Oystercatchers.

This year, a majority of the White Ibis, as well as Little Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Herons, and a couple pairs of Reddish Egrets, have chosen to nest on nearby Fantasy Island instead. Fantasy Island, a public use area that is commonly enjoyed by boaters, is owned and managed by Port Tampa Bay.

Typically, the entire island is open to visitors to roam the small island and enjoy its beach. Through a partnership with Port Tampa Bay and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Audubon staff have been



A Roseate Spoonbill nest.

able to post the island as a nesting area, seasonally closing this area. Allowing Audubon to erect signage and symbolically roping off the colony should enable the birds to raise their young undisturbed by human visitors. "The Port continues to be a leader in protecting some of Florida's most iconic and imperiled nesting birds" said Sanctuary Manager Mark Rachal. Audubon staff will continue to work with Port Tampa Bay to ensure that the colony is protected through the end of the nesting season, when public access to the island will be restored.

Every rookery counts, as a constellation of nesting sites is needed for the health of the colonies. This is especially important in light of manmade environmental catastrophes, such as the harmful wastewater discharges released from the Piney Point phosphate plant located adjacent to the Sanctuaries.

## Legislative Session 2021: Budget Delivers High Levels of Environmental Funding

The final budget passed by the Florida Legislature this spring tipped the scales at \$101 billion, with nearly \$7 billion in federal COVID-19 relief funds helping provide critical funding for key environmental priorities like Florida Forever. In January, Governor Ron DeSantis originally proposed a \$96.6 billion budget, while the Senate's first proposal was \$95 billion and the House's proposal was \$97 billion.

As we began the 2021 Session, we worried that the effects of the pandemic would reduce funds available for critical wildlife and environmental priorities. Using federal relief dollars towards land conservation and resiliency underscores the importance of our environment to Florida's economic well-being.

Everglades	\$419 million
Water Quality and Protection (Highlights)	\$871 million
Local Water Infrastructure (Member) Projects	\$116.6 million
Coastal Climate Resiliency	\$530 million
State Park Improvements	\$50 million
Florida Forever Land Acquisition and Easements	\$400 million
Beach Nourishment	\$150 million
Piney Point Restoration	\$100 million

## FWC Approves New Invasive Species Rules to Prohibit Several Reptiles

On February 25, the commissioners at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) voted unanimously to approve rule updates that prohibit several species of invasive reptiles, including pythons, tegus, and green iguanas.

Current pet owners can apply for permits to keep their pets, while commercial breeding operations of tegus and green iguanas have until June 30, 2024 to transition away from these species. The updated rules also include improved caging requirements for those permitted to own prohibited species.

Audubon supports the rule updates and commends the commission for moving forward with these important environmental protections.

"The commission updated rules that will drastically reduce the source of new invasions in the future," Chris Farrell, Audubon Florida Northeast Policy Associate, explained, "Continued work to reduce existing populations is a priority for FWC, but this vote marks an important and necessary step as we work toward healthier ecosystems."

Audubon Florida members submitted more than 2,000 public comments in support of the rule change. Thank you for your efforts to protect birds and the places they need to survive and thrive.



Burmese Python. Photo: NPS



Sandhill Crane. Photo: Diana Whiting/Audubon Photography Awards

## M-CORES Repeal Ends Turnpike Proposals

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The original 2019 Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) legislation mandated the construction of 330 miles of new turnpikes through some of Florida's most sensitive environmental areas and important rural farmland areas, effectively prying them open for future development and sprawl.

An amended Senate Bill 100 by Senator Harrell (R-Stuart), Chair of the Transportation Committee, has repealed the M-CORES mandate. The bill focuses primarily on extension of the Suncoast Parkway to U.S. 19 in Citrus County, then allowing a gradual improvement of U.S. 19 and related roads up to Interstate 10 by 2034. The bill also directs a new study of a northern extension of the Florida Turnpike.

While the bill eliminates the immediate creation of new turnpikes, we know advocates for these routes will try again. And so, Audubon worked diligently to make sure this legislation enshrined in statute the good work of the three M-CORES Task Forces. The new language requires that "The department (of transportation) shall take into consideration the guidance and recommendations of any previous studies or reports relevant to..." future projects, which would include the protective recommendations from the Task Forces.

This new language in the bill will require DOT to at least consider the recommendations of the M-CORES Task Forces, which include some of the most environmentally protective guidelines for highway planning and design ever prescribed in Florida, in the event the turnpikes are proposed again in the future.



Red-shouldered Hawk. Photo: Hrishikesh Nulkar/Audubon Photography Awards

## A Bipartisan Approach to Reduce Emissions on Working Lands

Policies to promote natural climate solutions—actions that restore or enhance the capacity for trees and plants to absorb and sequester carbon pollution—are attracting a lot of attention from both sides of the aisle. There’s a good reason for that, as these policies are often win-win: they’re good for the climate, and they’re good for the local economy. When you add in the potential for habitat conservation and restoration, they’re good for birds too.

Enter the Growing Climate Solutions Act of 2021, reintroduced in the senate this year by lead sponsors Mike Braun (R-IN) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), along with several of their colleagues from both parties. As with last year’s version, the bill directs the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to help expand,

harmonize, and add structure to the existing patchwork of voluntary greenhouse gas offset markets around the country. It’s a bipartisan approach that recognizes the vital role our nation’s farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners play in the fight against climate change. The bill would also lay the groundwork for new sources of revenue to flow to local economies in rural areas.

By acting now, we make Florida more resilient into the future. Senator Marco Rubio is to be commended for recognizing the importance of agriculture to our climate resilience by co-sponsoring the Growing Climate Solutions Act. We applaud the senate for joining him on behalf of Florida’s economy and resilience.

## Representatives Kathy Castor and Vern Buchanan Reintroduce Legislation to Permanently Ban Drilling along Florida’s Gulf Coast

In April, U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor (FL14) reintroduced her bipartisan Florida Coastal Protection Act with Rep. Vern Buchanan (FL16). This legislation, supported by a bipartisan majority of the Florida delegation, would make the moratorium on oil drilling off Florida’s coast permanent. Currently, these legislative protections are slated to expire in 2022.

“Here in the Sunshine State, our natural resources and beautiful beaches are central to our way of life and the cornerstone of our economy. We have seen the devastating impacts of oil and gas drilling off of our shores, and are coming together, Democrats and Republicans, to once again introduce legislation to protect our coast — permanently,” said Rep. Castor.

“Allowing drilling off of Florida’s pristine coasts would be a colossal mistake,” said Rep. Buchanan. “Red tide has already plagued the Sunshine State — it would be imprudent to invite the potential for another catastrophic oil spill that would devastate Florida’s economy and environment. As co-chair of the Florida congressional delegation, I will continue working with colleagues in both parties to protect the state’s beautiful coasts and waters.”

*Current cosponsors of the bill include: Florida Reps. Kathy Castor, Vern Buchanan, Gus Bilirakis, Charlie Crist, Val Demings, Ted Deutch, Byron Donalds, Lois*

*Frankel, Scott Franklin, Matt Gaetz, Carlos Gimenez, Al Lawson, Brian Mast, Stephanie Murphy, Bill Posey, John Rutherford, Darren Soto, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, and Frederica Wilson.*

While drilling is currently banned through a Trump Administration executive action, enshrining these protections in statute will keep oil exploration and drilling permanently off the table.



**During a meeting with Audubon advocates, Chair Castor reiterated how critical a protected Eastern Gulf of Mexico is to our state’s ecology and economy.**



Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Marsh and Prairie Restoration

## Publix and SeaWorld Invest in Restoring Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's Wetland of International Significance

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In 2021, Audubon received two grants toward the five-year, 1,000-acre marsh and prairie restoration project at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples. SeaWorld Conservation Fund has added \$100,000 to its previous commitments of \$200,000. Publix announced that it is contributing \$2 million to restore wetlands in the Everglades, with \$1.2 million of those funds earmarked to support the restoration of 500 acres at the Sanctuary.

Healthy wetlands remove excess nutrients from our watershed, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires in our communities, hold floodwaters during the rainy season, and provide habitat to many of our wading birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals that call these wetlands home.

Restoration efforts are already showing progress. Hundreds of ducks spent part of their winters here, attracted to the diversity of plants. They forage on smartweed, grasses, and sedges, and already multiple species of wading birds, including herons, egrets, and Roseate Spoonbills, are using the area.

It costs approximately \$2,300 to restore an acre of marsh or prairie, and we have a goal of 1,000 acres. Thank you, SeaWorld Conservation Fund and Publix!

## Innovative Model Finds the Smoking Gun Responsible for Drying Swamp

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Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary once hosted the nation's largest colony of nesting Wood Storks. Over the past two decades, however, their nest numbers have declined steadily, and new research points to overdrying in the swamp as a primary factor. Flood control structures and operations downstream of the Sanctuary are substantially reducing dry season water levels.

Healthy wetlands are not only important to Wood Storks and other birds, but also to the Naples and Bonita Springs communities that rely on them for drinking water, flood protection, and as protection against catastrophic wildfire. Wetlands also serve as critical stormwater filters, improving downstream water quality and reducing red tide events along our beaches.

Staff and research partners have recently developed a powerful new tool to explain why wetlands at the Sanctuary are getting dryer and staying dry longer each season. This tool, developed for Audubon by Water Science Associates, can provide the information Audubon needs to diagnose the causes of the water level declines while illuminating the regional nature of watershed hydrologic impacts and solutions.

Audubon scientists and policy staff are now working closely with regional land and water managers to develop a plan to reverse these hydrologic changes in the Sanctuary. This plan will likely include both recommended changes in flood control operations and engineered structures to retain groundwater in the dry season. Plans to ensure the long-term protection of this region will also include buying and restoring key wetlands and revising rules to better protect wetlands. Collier County and the South Florida Water Management District have both expressed strong interest in further collaboration.

## Center for Birds of Prey Wraps Up Another Busy Baby Season

Spring is the busiest season for the Center for Birds of Prey, with more than 200 raptor chicks coming through our doors. This year we started off with nearly double the usual number of juvenile Bald Eagles admitted for treatment (65 in 2021 compared to 47 in 2020), and were able to release 25 back into the wild (two are still pending).

*Caring for baby owls, hawks, and eagles is both expensive and time intensive. Are you interested in supporting our clinic during these critical months?*

Please consider a donation: [cbop.audubon.org](http://cbop.audubon.org)

## Wind Beneath Our Wings

This year, the Center's annual event Wind Beneath Our Wings was held virtually March 24-26. Though we missed seeing our friends, colleagues, and partners in person, we welcomed folks from all over the country. Wind Beneath Our Wings hosted three evenings of activities including Remarkable Rehabilitation, Raptor Happy Hour and Trivia, and our Friday Keynote with Ron Magill, sharing about the Harpy Eagle Project. We are thankful to our partners, donors, and supporters who took part in Wind Beneath Our Wings. Funds raised directly support Center operations helping to fill the financial gap and loss in revenue due to hardships experienced this past year. We are truly grateful to all who were able to join us and participate.



Barred Owl.  
Photo: Doug DeNeve

## Thank You to Our Generous Sponsors



Kathy SAYRE & John CORBITT

Ann HARWOOD-NUSS

Scott & Elaine TAYLOR



Emma Wilkinson works with fellow students in marine litter cleanup.

## CLI Members Make Connections During a Distanced Year

The Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) is designed to immerse college students in experiential learning, professional development, and networking opportunities through Audubon's grassroots conservation efforts. In return, Audubon leaders learn how to better connect with and be inspired by the next generation of conservationists.

When 25 Florida college students and 23 Audubon chapter leaders joined this year's Conservation Leadership Initiative, the intention was to join the program remotely in October 2020 and shift to in-person events in Spring 2021. Although COVID-19 continued to impact program logistics, CLI Students and Mentors found plenty of ways to create meaningful relationships and experiences.

- Central Florida students were able to safely connect with each other through volunteer workdays at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland. Students from Tampa to Orlando gathered for days of service, working together in a safe outdoor environment. One student, Eli Schroeder (UCF) even became a regular bird care volunteer at the Center, and Nat Harrison (Seminole State College) was hired on as CLI's summer intern. Nat will be helping to recruit and plan for next year's CLI program and assisting with education projects at the Center for Birds of Prey.

- Several chapters welcomed their CLI students as Student Directors on their Executive Board or secured funding to hire them as interns in their conservation projects.
- CLI has also become a valuable pipeline of young professionals to the Audubon Florida hiring pool this year. Three CLI students accepted seasonal Anchor Steward positions on our Coastal team, and our former intern Olivia Sciandra joined the Climate team.

Many students will continue to work with their local chapters throughout the summer and into the fall. The Audubon Florida network looks forward to staying connected with our 2020-2021 students as we watch their careers take flight! Planning for the 2021-22 Cohort has already begun, integrating the most successful outcomes of virtual programming with more hands-on experiences.

To support the next generation of environmental leaders, visit:  
[FL.Audubon.org/CLI](https://FL.Audubon.org/CLI)



Snail Kite. Photo: Sandra Rothenberg/Audubon Photography Awards

## Biden Administration Announces \$350 million for Everglades Restoration

Building upon the discretionary budget request released in early April (also known as the “skinny budget”), the Biden Administration recently released its much-anticipated full budget proposal for fiscal year 2022. The full budget proposal provides additional details for federal projects and programs that support birds, restore habitat, drive energy innovation, and protect communities. Audubon is pleased to see robust funding levels for many of the line-item programs we and our partners support for bird conservation and climate action.

The \$350 million appropriated for Everglades restoration is not the full amount requested by the Florida delegation, but represents historic funding levels for the River of Grass. Full funding in the amount of \$725 million for FY 2022 remains a priority for Audubon and our coalition partners who are engaging the Florida delegation to see this ask come to fruition. Florida’s bipartisan delegation has always been united in advocating for funding for Everglades Restoration.

## Snail Kites Face another Difficult Nesting Year on Lake Okeechobee

Lake Okeechobee is designated as critical habitat for the endangered Snail Kite and offers more habitat than any ecosystem in Florida, outside of the Everglades. But low water levels in 2019 and 2020 resulted in no kite nests in either year. The Everglades also had very dry conditions in 2019 and 2020, resulting in an estimated 25% drop in the population of Snail Kites in one year!<sup>1</sup>

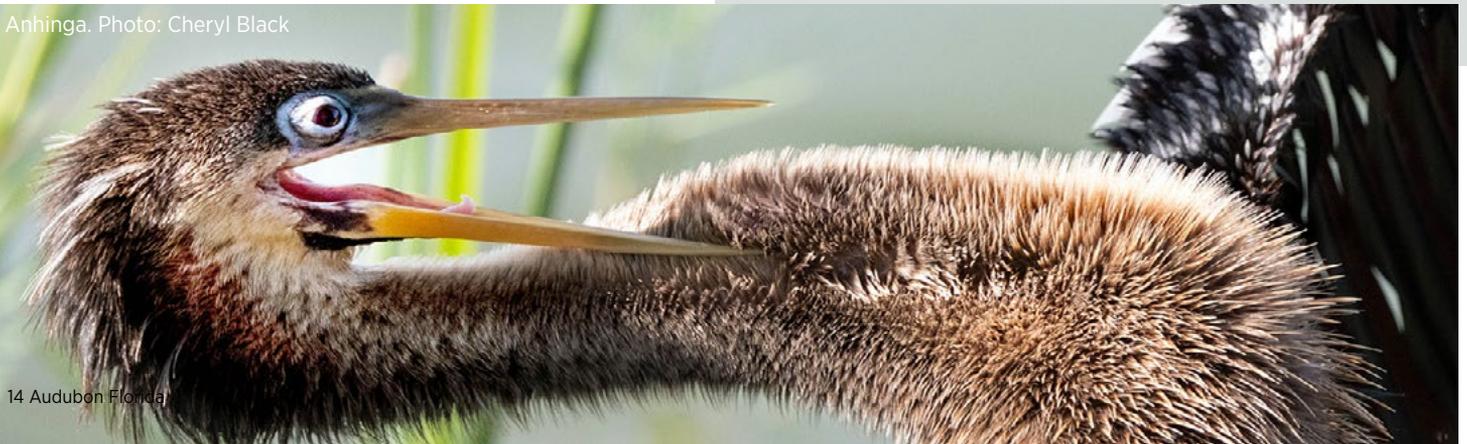
This year, Lake Okeechobee has been deeper and as of early June, 151 kite nests have been found. This good news is tempered by bad; researchers report that about 75% of the nests have failed. Snail Kites tend to have lower nest success than other raptors, but these numbers are low even for them. A major factor appears to be very rapid declines in water levels during April and May, when Lake Okeechobee dropped more than a foot per month. That is twice as fast as the goal and many of the nests had very little water under and around them when they failed. Low water allows terrestrial predators to take nests and reduces the ability of kites to get snails as conditions dry.

Hot, dry weather is partly to blame for the rapid recession rate, but so is massive water withdrawal by farmers around Lake Okeechobee. As the US Army Corps of Engineers works on the new lake level management plan (called LOSOM), the question arises as to whether giving so much water to farmers can be done without undue harm to Lake Okeechobee, and to Snail Kites and other organisms that live around Lake Okeechobee.

Audubon is very engaged in the LOSOM process and will continue to be the leading advocate for Lake Okeechobee and all the ecosystems it supports.

<sup>1</sup>According to data provided by the University of Florida

Anhinga. Photo: Cheryl Black



## Paul Gray Named Environmental Steward

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The Florida Wildlife Federation named Paul Gray, PhD, their “Environmental Steward of the Year” for 2021. Because COVID-19 canceled their annual awards banquet this year, FWF Director George Jones met Dr. Gray at the Okeechobee Fishing Pier to give him the award. According to Dr. Gray, “It is a humbling honor to receive this recognition from an organization that has unselfishly worked at my side for decades in the protection of Florida’s resources. Florida Wildlife Federation’s focus on advocacy for Lake Okeechobee has directly benefited Audubon’s and my work.”



George Jones with Paul Gray

## Welcoming Kelly Cox as New Everglades Policy Manager

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Kelly Cox is an environmental attorney and advocate, most recently serving as General Counsel and COO to Miami Waterkeeper. As Miami Waterkeeper’s representative in the Everglades Coalition, Cox has been involved in the Biscayne Bay and Southeastern Everglades Ecosystem Restoration (BBSEER) Project and other coastal wetland restoration projects throughout South Florida.

Cox is currently serving on the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) Connectivity Team and will soon be appointed to the Sanctuary Advisory Council as an alternate in the Conservation and Environment Seat.

Since 2017, Cox has served as a member of the adjunct faculty at the University of Miami’s Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science where she teaches Environmental Law and Policy to graduate-level students. Cox holds a JD/MPS from the University of Miami and completed her undergraduate studies in Natural Resources and Political Science at North Carolina State University.

A South Florida native, Cox enjoys kayaking and exploring Florida Bay and the Ten Thousand Islands of Everglades National Park in her spare time.





Eastern Screech Owl.  
Photo: Arnold Collens

## Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary 2020-2021 Conservation Partners

**Naples Trust Company**  
**Lee County Electric Company**  
**Arthrex**  
**Crowther Roofing**

## Corporate Conservation Partners

Corporate Conservation Partners recognize the urgent need to invest in our community's environmental health and future by providing critical mission support for Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Through these valuable partnerships, Audubon is able to protect the Sanctuary's 13,000 acres, provide habitat for hundreds of species, and educate over 100,000 learners of all ages on our iconic boardwalk. In return, corporate partners are fulfilling their philanthropic interests and receive special benefits and recognition.

Partnership benefits and levels begin at \$5,000. If you are interested in becoming a Corporate Conservation Partner for Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, please contact Sarah Lathrop at: Sarah.Lathrop@audubon.org.

## Donor Advised Funds are a Great Way to Give to Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and the Center for Birds of Prey

Did you know that over \$140 billion is sitting in Donor Advised Funds (DAF)? When individuals deposit funds into their DAF, they immediately gain the tax benefit. However, those funds don't make a difference for nonprofits until they are granted out! If you make charitable contributions using a DAF, we hope you will take advantage of an opportunity to double your gift impact this fall by participating in the #HalfmyDAF matching initiative. In fact, this Spring, Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary was the recipient of a \$5,000 match grant through this challenge. Take these three easy steps by September 30:

- 1 > Put your Donor Advised dollars to work. Make grants (of all sizes) to Audubon Florida, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, or the Center for Birds of Prey - or any of your other favorite nonprofits!
- 2 > Supercharge your grant! Complete this form: [bit.ly/3zUb73L](https://bit.ly/3zUb73L) to nominate the nonprofits for the matching gift opportunity.
- 3 > Let us know you've nominated Audubon! We'll keep in touch as the drawing for the match gift nears on September 30 and want to celebrate with you if you're matched. Notify Sarah Lathrop at: Sarah.Lathrop@audubon.org.

We hope you'll take advantage of this exciting opportunity to double your DAF gift impact. Learn more about the #HalfmyDAF matching initiative and the philanthropists that are funding this initiative.

**For more information visit [halfmydaf.com](https://halfmydaf.com)**

## Looking for Ways to Double Your Impact in 2021?

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 and the gift comes to Florida, please have all checks directed to the address below and contact Suzanne Bartlett at 305.371.6399, ext. 123 or 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**



## Pensacola Chapter Invests in Habitat Restoration, Community at Historically Black Bruce Beach

In late 2020, 99 volunteers helped plant 150 keystone native trees and plants on the upper bank slope of Washerwoman Creek at Bruce Beach City Park in Pensacola. This planting included keystone native live oak, sand live oak, bald cypress, red mulberry, and persimmon trees. This May, another volunteer effort convened to conduct deep watering, manual and organic weed control, plastics pickup, and organic fertilization. Friends from the Long-Leaf Pine Chapter, Escambia Bay Estuary Committee, and Gulf Power joined forces with the “Old Reliables” from the Watering Crew and Jerry Callaway who provided brush-hog services to rid the weeds to get the grove ready for summer. Francis M. Weston Audubon Society completed this project with a \$2,500 Audubon Florida “Plants for Birds” grant funded by Gulf Power Foundation.

To learn more, watch a video summary of the program at <https://youtu.be/IEjWAd3NIYs>

## Pájaros Sin Fronteras / Borderless Birds

West Volusia Audubon announced a new film, Pájaros Sin Fronteras / Borderless Birds. Directed and produced by West Volusia Audubon Chapter’s Treasurer, Megan Martin, the film is 50 minutes long, and explores both ecological and social themes through interviews and oral history.

 **Watch the video:**  
<https://youtu.be/Am5F-plpYBU>

## Member Profile: Coastal Native Plant Champion Barbara Stoia Meister

Barbara Stoia Meister had a vision for her dunes in Palm Beach County. Born and raised in Florida, she has always been fascinated with native plants, learning to appreciate nature during time spent in the Keys and Everglades. Her dunes would be thriving ecosystems, home to numerous plants and animals. But first, with help from coastal dunes expert Robert Barron and Richard Moyroud, contracted Sanctuary Manager for the Bingham Islands, she needed native plants.

To make room for native species, Barbara and her team removed two truckloads of invasive species from the dunes. “I have a long list of salt tolerant natives that I have planted and am delighted to see many endangered plant species thrive in their intended environment,” she explains.

“I am passionate about pollinators and observe daily how they are attracted to specific plants for survival,” she continues. “It gives me such joy when I finally see that longed-for butterfly find its beautiful host plant or that beloved bird land to feed on berries in their native habitat.”

By using her dunes as an example, Barbara hopes that surrounding property owners, designers, and landscapers will use native plants whenever possible, both restoring and sustaining Florida’s flora and fauna.

Native plants now grow on Meister’s dune ecosystem.



# Southwest Florida Resiliency Compact Poised for Major Strides Forward

Audubon Florida is excited to announce that all fourteen coastal jurisdictions in Southwest Florida have voted to join the Southwest Florida Resiliency Compact. The entire southwest Florida coast is taking this important step to augment the region's ability to protect its natural resources and bolster its resilience in our changing climate.

"This area's natural resources, economy, and communities will benefit from this united front against sea level rise and climate change," said Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director for Audubon Florida.

The list of participating jurisdictions includes Collier County, Lee County, Charlotte County, City of Punta Gorda, City of Sanibel, City of Fort Myers, City of Cape Coral, Town of Fort Myers Beach, Village of Estero, City of Bonita Springs, Captiva Erosion Prevention District, City of Naples, City of Everglades, and City of Marco Island.

Regions that are organized into Compacts are better poised to demonstrate their readiness and capacity for state-coordinated efforts, including funding. Governor DeSantis' resilience budget tackles the challenges of sea level rise, intensified storm events, and localized flooding by establishing the Florida Resilient Grant Program which will provide \$1 billion over four years to provide grants to state and local government entities.



Snowy Plover. Photo: Jean Hall

## East Central Florida Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Cohort Finishes Regionwide Inventory

Florida's largest, simultaneous GHG inventory initiative in East Central Florida concluded in April 2021. The Audubon Florida + R2C Cohort was co-facilitated by Audubon Florida and the East Central Florida Regional Resilience Collaborative (R2C) in partnership with ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability. In this cohort, eighteen local governments and seventeen students from Stetson University, Florida Institute of Technology, and University of Central Florida were paired to complete a greenhouse gas inventory of local government operations.

The East Central region is home to approximately 20% of the state's population and is Florida's tourism epicenter. The completion of eighteen local government baseline inventories in this region is a major step towards mitigating climate change impacts for birds and the places that they need.

**We look forward to seeing the inventories in action as local governments adopt solutions that reduce emissions, save taxpayer dollars, and make our communities more resilient.**

## Jacksonville Moves Ahead with Resiliency Work

We know that resilient communities can be created by investing in solutions driven by sound science. The Jacksonville Special Committee on Resiliency, made up of a group of City Council members, met regularly in 2020 and into 2021 to develop a set of recommendations that will guide Jacksonville's resilience work.

On February 25, 2021, the Special Committee unanimously approved the recommendations, which included actions such as conserving and implementing green infrastructure, updating building codes, and incentivizing low impact development. These recommendations will serve as a blueprint for the newly hired Chief Resiliency Officer (CRO), who will lead the city's resilience work. With the approval of the special committee's recommendations and the new CRO position, the city of Jacksonville is taking important steps to bolster the city's resiliency.



Stephanie Morse assessing a building

## Lights Out Northeast Florida Records Migration Collisions to Better Plan Dark Sky Initiatives

It's dawn in downtown Jacksonville. Most of the city remains asleep on these spring mornings, but volunteers are up and prepared with clipboards, bags, and carefully mapped routes. The Lights Out team is ready to collect data on bird-building collisions during migration.

The Lights Out Northeast Florida program began in 2020 as a partnership between Duval Audubon Society, St. Johns County Audubon Society, and Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens. Billions of birds migrate each season, mostly at night to save energy and avoid predators. Unfortunately, buildings and homes that keep bright lights on at night are a hazard, and millions of birds are lost to collisions each year.

But how many? Before the local nonprofit organizations could ask Jacksonville building managers to change their lighting strategies, they needed to know how many birds were impacted each season.

In Fall of 2020, the team commenced their pilot program, working through four routes that took them around the edges of the brightest buildings in downtown Jacksonville. At the same time, they began a publicity push, educating local home and business owners about the effects of lights on birds during migration.

With their routes and protocols in place, they recruited volunteers to walk the four routes three days a week

at sunrise from March 16 through May 29. When volunteers came across dead birds, they carefully took photos and notes, uploading their information into an online database. Injured and stunned birds were carefully picked up and released, only transported to the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens if their injuries looked more severe.

According to the data collected thus far, fall migration leads to more bird collisions than spring. Still, Lights Out Northeast Florida recorded more than 70 bird deaths on their spring routes, with Ovenbirds as the most common species encountered. The team theorizes that as a ground-dwelling species, Ovenbirds may not have as much experience with buildings or windows, and this lack of experience takes a toll during migration. However, they are continuing to collect data in upcoming migration seasons to get a full picture of bird mortality in downtown Jacksonville. Though Ovenbirds are the most common, the volunteers have also found many warbler species, Chuck-Will's Widow, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and more.

While continuing to collect data, Lights Out Northeast Florida will bring their initial findings to building managers, homeowners, and city officials to work out strategies for dimming bright lights during the migration season. Chapter participation in the Lights Out Northeast Florida program was funded by two Collaborative Grants from National Audubon Society.

For more information on upcoming seasons and volunteer needs, visit: <https://bit.ly/3gUsHvR>

# Protect the birds and we protect the Earth.

Audubon works throughout the state using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation.



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