



# Audubon | FLORIDA Naturalist

Spring/Summer 2019



Baby Screech Owls. Photo: RJ Wiley

## 2019 Florida Audubon Society Leadership

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## Jud Laird, Chair Florida Audubon Society

Dear Audubon Members and Supporters,

Longer, hotter, days. Afternoon thunderstorms. Summer approaches Florida much as it does the rest of the Atlantic Flyway. But here in South Florida, we hold on to our seats and hope that the summer of 2019 is better for wildlife, people, and our beautiful natural world than the summer of 2018. We hope that massive, intense waves of red tide don't make it ashore to disrupt the Florida coast's summer tourist season. We hope that the plagues of blue green algae don't reappear and threaten our health and that of our waterways.

From Florida Bay to Apalachicola, bodies of water define Florida. For over 100 years, Audubon Florida has worked to protect our waters, and the wildlife and all inhabitants who need them to remain clean and flowing in the right direction. This spring we celebrate progress with a state budget that provides historic funding for water, restoration, and climate change. But our work is far from done.

Audubon was essential to the passage of historic funding for Everglades restoration—more than \$360 million. The allocations included almost \$108 for the Everglades Reservoir—enough to advance and accelerate this critical component of restoration. Other water quality projects receiving significant funding include restoration for the Lake Okeechobee watershed, innovative technologies for algal blooms, restoration for Florida's freshwater springs, water-quality projects to meet restoration goals, and alternative water supply programs. You can read more details about this legislative session's strengths and shortcomings on pages 4 and 5.

Audubon leaders have been speaking out across the state—commending the governor's good efforts, and demanding more from the Legislature. Recent opinion pieces in Jacksonville's Florida Times Union and the Naples Daily News featured Audubon board members Paul Ferber and John Elting. In the Palm Beach Post, the Miami Herald, and Tallahassee Democrat, Audubon's policy team members have been frequently cited for their expertise on Everglades restoration projects, Lake Okeechobee management, and wetland protection. Audubon's measured voice of reason is being heard and consulted around the state. Our team is sharing Audubon's science and providing evidence-based policy solutions to advance protections for wildlife, water quality, climate, and conservation.

As you settle into the summer and soak up those long, lazy, summer days, keep in mind that Audubon is already preparing for the challenges that await. Session will begin in January, with legislative committee meetings convening in late Fall. Please consider a gift to support this important work.

Sincerely,

Jud Laird



## Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director Audubon Florida

Dear friends,

What does summer in Florida mean to you?

Beating the heat in the ocean or springs?

Vacations? Flip-flops? Watermelon and cookouts?

For me, in Tallahassee, it's not summer until I've heard Least Terns, Common Nighthawks, and Eastern Kingbirds calling all in the same day.

But the correct answer, for all of us, should be "Summer in Florida is meeting with legislators."

What's that, you say?

Legislative Session just ended, right?

It did. And now, when schedules are less hectic, legislators are home in their districts, and most importantly, you're not asking for anything urgently, now is the time to build relationships with your elected officials. These are the same relationships that will help you lend your voice to Florida's environment when legislative committees convene again in four short months.

Audubon is effective not just because we are science-based, or sophisticated in our policy solutions, but also because we are local everywhere—every legislator in the state has Audubon members in their district. And whether it is in their office or on a field trip, through social media or by happenstance in the produce section of your local grocery (true story), these interactions matter. Do you have a relationship with a legislator that would be helpful in Audubon's work? Would you like to help develop one? Read more on page 5 on how to let us know, and get involved.

We often brag about the diversity of our members' skills—Audubon members are professional biologists, contractors, attorneys, teachers, doctors, air conditioning specialists, artists, and more. For any need, there is an Audubon member with that talent or skill. But we often forget that one of the greatest benefits you can lend to our natural resources isn't learned in college or a long career. The friendliness of Audubon members and their willingness to build the connections needed to effect real change is our greatest strength. Get to know the elected officials who represent you. Say hello at that Fourth of July parade. Give them a high five on social media for their role in things like Everglades funding or fending off bad amendments in the last legislative session. Invite them to explore a park or preserve in your district. And coordinate with Audubon's legislative team, so that these efforts build into something bigger than each of us.

I hope you enjoy this edition of the Naturalist. It includes a debrief on the recent Legislative Session, a celebration of the coastal birds nesting on our islands and beaches, and a tour of the creativity and effectiveness evidenced over the last year of work from Audubon's 45 Florida chapters, to name a few stories. Our members, staff, donors, and board have been making Audubon Florida a remarkable organization for 119 years. As always, thank you for helping make this essential work possible.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julie Wraithmell".

Julie Wraithmell

# 2019 Legislative Session: Historic Water and Climate Appropriations, But Protections Struggled

Photo: Adobe Stock



This spring, legislators passed a \$91.1 billion budget that made good on Governor DeSantis' commitments to Everglades and water quality protection with an unprecedented \$682 million in funding, but fell short on key priorities like Florida Forever and the Rural and Family Lands program (see "appropriations" inset). On the policy front, progress on protections for Florida's land and water were few and far between, while legislative attempts to diminish protection were common. Of the nearly 3,400 bills introduced this session, fewer than 200 made it to the finish line.

## Stronger Water Protections Fail to Pass

In response to last summer's harmful algal blooms, several environmental regulation bills were filed this year. However, none of them made it to the finish line. The bills went through many iterations and were eventually combined into a comprehensive water quality bill that included improvements like the transfer of the septic program from the Department of Health to the Department of Environmental Protection, regulation and management of the disposal of wastewater sludge (biosolids), and creation of a grant program for water-quality projects. We cannot solve Florida's water challenges without changes like these, and Audubon looks forward to revisiting them in the 2020 session.

## Senate President's Turnpikes Proposal Flies through Both Chambers

Despite widespread opposition from many groups, the top priority of Senate President Galvano—to construct three new turnpikes and development corridors—won approval from the House and Senate. This would be the largest expansion of Florida's highway system since the 1950s. The bill creates three regional corridors – the Southwest - Central Florida Connector from Collier to Polk County, the Suncoast Connector from Citrus to Jefferson County, and the Northern Turnpike Connector from the north end of the Florida Turnpike to the Suncoast Parkway. Audubon policy staff worked successfully to embed several important protective features into the bill as it barreled toward final passage. These provisions will give conservation advocates stronger footing in the planning process for these roads. Despite vocal opposition, Governor DeSantis signed this bill into law.

## Chilling Public Opportunities for Constitutional Amendments

The Legislature passed a bill to make it more difficult for citizens to initiate constitutional amendments. As we've mentioned previously, this bill makes it harder to get citizen-led initiatives like 2014's Water and Land Legacy Amendment (Amendment 1) on the ballot.

## Limiting Local Governments' Ability to Be More Protective than the State

The Legislature also introduced several measures in 2019 that would strip cities and counties of a wide range of powers. These included a ban on local governments prohibiting the use of single-use straws; a bill that limits a local government's ability to protect trees; and making it harder for citizens to challenge land use decisions, among others. The governor issued his first veto, rejecting HB 771 (that would have prevented municipalities from banning plastic straws), while standing up for local government control. DeSantis stated that since none of the bill's provisions harmed the state's interest, local governments should be allowed to address this issue through their political processes. As bills are sent to the governor over the next few weeks, we may see more vetoes.

## Appropriations:

Governor DeSantis asked for and the Legislature delivered \$682 million in landmark funding for Everglades Restoration and water protection—enough to not just implement but accelerate some projects. Thanks to the diligent work of our army of staff, advocates, and partners, funding for the Everglades, water, springs, coastal resiliency, and Florida Forever remained in the budget when it crossed the finish line. Additional appropriations of interest included:

### Water

\$10 million for innovative technologies to combat or treat harmful algal blooms and nutrient enrichment in Florida's water bodies including Lake Okeechobee.

\$50 million for restoration of Florida's freshwater springs (in addition to \$50 million appropriated during the 2018-19 Legislative Session that the Legislature failed to release previously).

\$25 million for water quality projects that help meet water quality restoration goals.

\$25 million for water quality projects to target sources that contribute to Harmful Algal Blooms.

\$40 million for alternative water supply projects to help communities implement conservation and reuse programs.

### Climate

\$5.5 million toward coastal resiliency planning in the face of climate change.

### Land Conservation

\$33 million for Florida Forever, the state's conservation land buying program.

# Preparing for Legislative Session 2020

While it may seem that we just finished, next Session will be here before we know it, especially since the election year means session will run January-February, with committee meetings starting in October. Governor DeSantis continues to emphasize the importance of clean water and the environment, and the Legislature has shown appetite for conservation by proposing record spending in water quality and Everglades Restoration in 2019. But appropriations aren't enough: Florida also needs policy improvements to better manage and protect our water. Protection is more economical than restoration, and both tools will be needed to achieve DeSantis' goals and meet Florida's needs. Together with other stakeholders, Audubon will continue to work to better regulate pollution sources like biosolids and septic tanks next session.



Eastern Meadowlark. Photo: RJ Wiley

With concerted effort, a comprehensive water protection bill should be our goal for Session 2020. Similarly, resiliency planning and addressing climate change will be an area of emphasis in 2020. Floridians are increasingly concerned with climate change and its effects, from aggravating harmful algal blooms, to sea level rise, to increased storm intensity and frequency. Over the next several months, Audubon will be engaging with citizen groups to help organize support for resiliency and adaptation progress at local government levels, while building a larger base for advocacy at the state level.

Lastly and most importantly, land acquisition is a critical restoration tool. Florida Forever is the largest public land acquisition program in the country. A large and consistent source of funding for this vital program and Rural and Family Lands will improve planning and keep a steady stream of potential acquisitions in the pipeline. As we continue to spread the word about the value of land conservation—aquifer recharge and wetland protection, carbon sequestration, clean air, and habitat for birds and wildlife—we will work to find standard bearers in the Legislature to improve appropriations for land acquisition in 2020.

## Looking for a Few Good Advocates

The time for building relationships with decisionmakers at any level is not when you need something, but when you don't. That's why Audubon's Director of Legislative Affairs Joshua Romero will be making a concerted effort to connect chapter leaders and Audubon advocates with elected officials in key districts this summer, building a relationship of mutual respect, understanding of Audubon's mission and priorities, and communication.

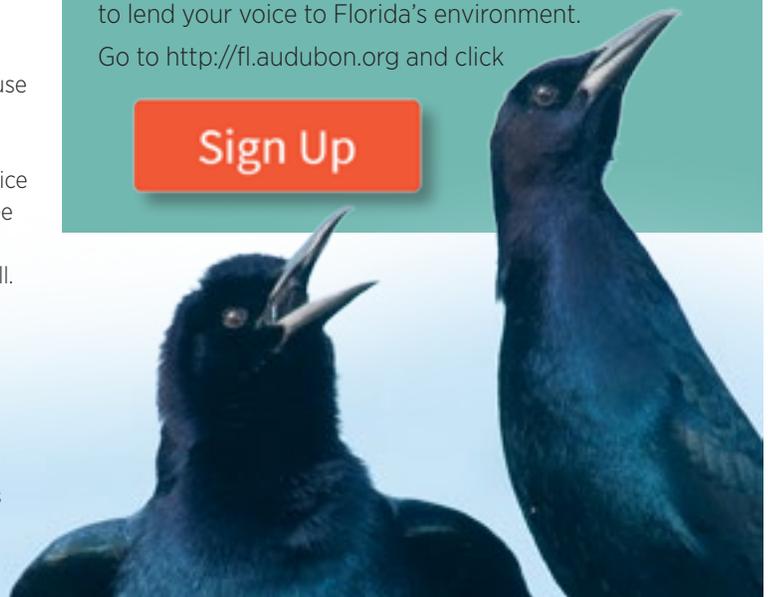
"Our ability to influence outcomes during Session is stronger because Audubon is local everywhere," said Romero. "Every decisionmaker has Audubon members in their district. We're looking forward to strengthening those relationships this summer." Whether it's an office visit or a field trip, a conversation on social media or in a local coffee shop, engaging with your elected officials in your local community now will be important when legislative committees convene this fall.

To help with Joshua's efforts and learn whether you live in one of these target districts, email him at [jromero@audubon.org](mailto:jromero@audubon.org).

You can help from the comfort of your desk! Be sure you are signed up to receive Audubon Florida's electronic updates, the Advocate, Restore and more, to stay abreast of policy developments and opportunities to lend your voice to Florida's environment.

Go to <http://fl.audubon.org> and click

Sign Up



Boat-tailed Grackles. Photo: R. Munguia

Boat-tailed Grackles

# Proposed Parking Expansion at Clam Pass Park: Nice for Sunbathers, Troubling for Black Skimmers

Each year people flock to Florida in increasing numbers to visit or to live—and in the Sunshine State that spells increased demand for public beach access. A current proposal to expand parking at Collier County's Clam Pass Park would roughly double the visitation along a one-third-mile of beach on peak weekends, from the current 880 to more than 1,600 visitors on the same stretch of beach.

In addition to its popularity with sunbathers, Clam Pass Park is an important overwintering site for the state threatened Black Skimmer. Audubon Florida and Audubon of the Western Everglades have documented that Clam Pass hosts a flock of 3,000 to 4,000 Black Skimmers daily in winter. Band resightings indicate the birds originated in New York, New Jersey, and Virginia, in addition to nesting sites elsewhere in Florida. This is a critically important place for the skimmers to rest after eating and build needed fat reserves

for northward migration and nesting. Weekend surveys also show substantial disturbance to the birds during times of peak human use—something that would only increase if the number of beach visitors were doubled.

Given that Clam Pass Park is arguably the most important mid-winter site in the eastern United States for Black Skimmers, the proposed parking garage has the potential to greatly increase stress on this already-imperiled species; it could harm not only Florida-nesting birds, but breeding colonies along the entire eastern U.S. coastline as well. Audubon Southwest Florida Policy Associate Brad Cornell and volunteer bird stewards in Naples are working to find a solution. As demand for parks increases with population growth around the state, we need more parks, not more parking.

Black Skimmers. Photo: Jean Hall



## Rooftop-nesting Birds, Plentiful in the Tampa Bay Area, Face Many Urban Challenges

Like beaches in the sky, 136 gravel rooftops in the greater Tampa Bay Area support up to three species of threatened beach-nesting birds: Least Terns, Black Skimmers, and American Oystercatchers. In 2018, Audubon biologists documented two of the rooftops hosting all three species at once! American Oystercatchers start nesting in late March, just as Least Terns are arriving back to their Florida breeding grounds. Least Terns and Black Skimmers are both highly social birds that nest in colonies; they began nesting on rooftops shortly after the oystercatchers' eggs hatched in early May.

In Pinellas County, six to eight American Oystercatcher pairs nest on rooftops, each pair returning to their favored rooftop year after year. Collectively, these birds have raised at least 10 chicks to fledging in the last two years. Unfortunately, many young birds struggle to meet the challenges posed by the urban environment once they leave the rooftop. Dangers they face in the first week they learn to fly include cars, drowning, and collisions with buildings or signs. Audubon works to improve the odds for rooftop-nesting birds with surveys, roof chick-proofing, building owner outreach, and returning fallen chicks to their rooftop colonies. To learn more about how Florida's beach-nesting birds fared in 2018, check out Audubon's Coastal Bird Report at:

[http://fl.audubon.org/sites/default/files/coastal\\_bird\\_report\\_2019-web\\_copy.pdf](http://fl.audubon.org/sites/default/files/coastal_bird_report_2019-web_copy.pdf)



*Rooftop-nesting birds are doing their best to adapt to our human-engineered environment, but still face many challenges in raising their young.*

—Jeff Liechty, Rooftop-nesting Bird Biologist,  
Greater Tampa Bay Area

# Rooftop-nesting Least Terns Return to Changed Panhandle, Post-Michael

Audubon's Panhandle rooftop program monitored 27 active rooftops from Escambia County to Bay County during the 2018 breeding season. Chick fencing was installed at 11 of these sites to prevent chicks from tumbling off unprotected roof edges. Audubon biologists surveying historic rooftops in preparation for the 2019 nesting season found that seven historic sites had been re-roofed post-Hurricane Michael with substrate unsuitable for nesting.

The loss of gravel rooftops historically used by Least Terns was particularly evident in Bay County, hard hit by Hurricane Michael's 155 mph winds in October 2018. Damage to the Chateau by the Sea motel, previously home to the largest Least Tern colony in the Panhandle (about 300 nests), led to re-roofing with a reflective membrane material rather than the gravel preferred by the Least Terns.



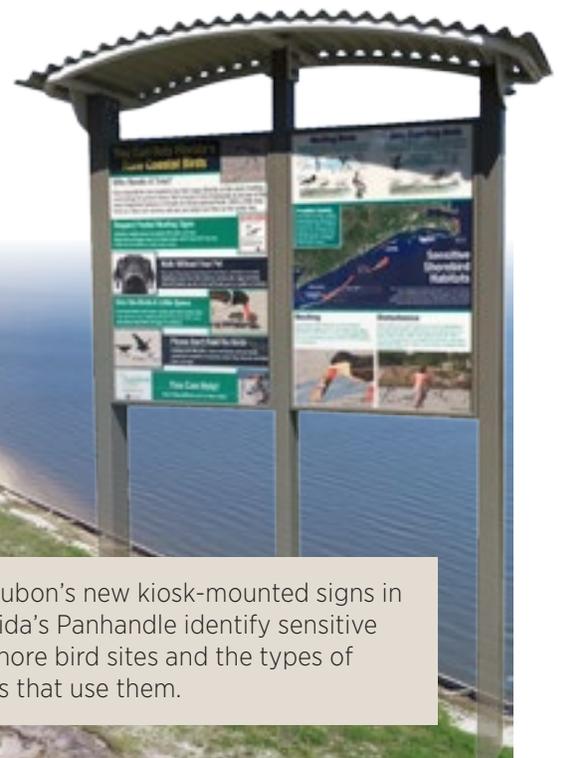
*The loss of suitable nesting areas is an ever-increasing problem for breeding Least Terns as both their natural habitat, and now their preferred artificial habitat, continue to diminish.*

— Rebekah Snyder, Audubon's Rooftop-nesting Bird Biologist, Florida Panhandle

## Major Milestones in Gulf Restoration for Coastal Birds in Florida Panhandle

Audubon is celebrating the completion of two major Gulf Restoration projects in the Florida Panhandle, and so are the seabirds that depend upon them. The St. George Island causeway seawall stabilization project was completed in early April after a delayed start due to Hurricane Michael. The causeway, essentially an island in Apalachicola Bay, hosts thousands of nesting seabirds each summer including American Oystercatchers, Least Terns, Royal Terns, Sandwich Terns, and Brown Pelicans. The decommissioned bridge section has been deteriorating for years, with seawall failure in several sections. Washouts have been forming, increasing the risk that a storm could over-wash the island and cut it in half. In 2014 a joint effort between Audubon Florida and the site managers, Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve, was begun to stabilize eroding sections of the causeway, with support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Gulf Environmental Benefits Fund. This project was completed during the spring of 2019 and nesting by imperiled seabirds began immediately.

The causeway has always been prone to human disturbance. Boaters travel offshore and unintentionally disturb birds on sensitive nesting islands. Audubon Florida implemented a project to educate boaters about shorebirds and seabirds before they launch from the mainland. Audubon's new kiosk-mounted signs identify sensitive offshore bird sites and the types of birds using them. Information on the best way to protect our imperiled coastal birds is also provided. These educational kiosks are now positioned at 14 boat ramps throughout Franklin, Gulf, and Bay counties. These completed projects are two more steps in Audubon Florida's constant efforts to conserve our Panhandle coastal bird species.



Audubon's new kiosk-mounted signs in Florida's Panhandle identify sensitive offshore bird sites and the types of birds that use them.

**Restoration work on the St. George Island Causeway is complete.**

# A New Prescription for a Healthy Liquid Heart

Few things are as controversial as Lake Okeechobee water management. Florida's greatest lake serves many masters. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is tasked with balancing the needs of all stakeholders with flood protection its primary mission. The South Florida Water Management District relies on the Lake to meet its obligation to supply water for urban consumption and agricultural irrigation. Downstream ecosystems do not welcome massive gushes of nutrient-enriched, often cyanobacteria-laden, water. To remain healthy, the Lake needs water levels to fluctuate annually across the surrounding marshes to support growth of submerged aquatic vegetation.

Amidst these conflicts, the Herbert Hoover Dike that completely encircles the Lake has been deemed unsafe by the Corps, and is in the middle of a \$1.8 billion repair project.

Approaches to managing these trade-offs are laid out in the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule adopted in 2008 (LORS08) over concerns about the Dike's safety. LORS08 was intended to lower average lake levels, but they have reached 16 feet or higher in six of the last seven years, with devastating impacts to the Lake and disastrous high volume releases to estuaries.

With Dike repair completion scheduled for 2022, the Corps has begun planning for a new Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM) to replace LORS08 when repairs are completed. Water supply interests have expressed desires to return to the harmfully-high lake levels of the past that wrecked marshes, created harmful estuary dumps, kept water from reaching the Everglades at critical times, and led to two emergency declarations regarding lake health by government agencies.

Audubon Florida is uniquely positioned to protect Lake Okeechobee, estuary, and Everglades interests in the LOSOM process. Our staff members have been on the Lake continuously since 1936, with Dr. Paul Gray doing Audubon's work there for 24 years. Our highly respected Everglades Program has built valuable connections throughout South Florida, and together we will work to get the best Lake management plan ever.



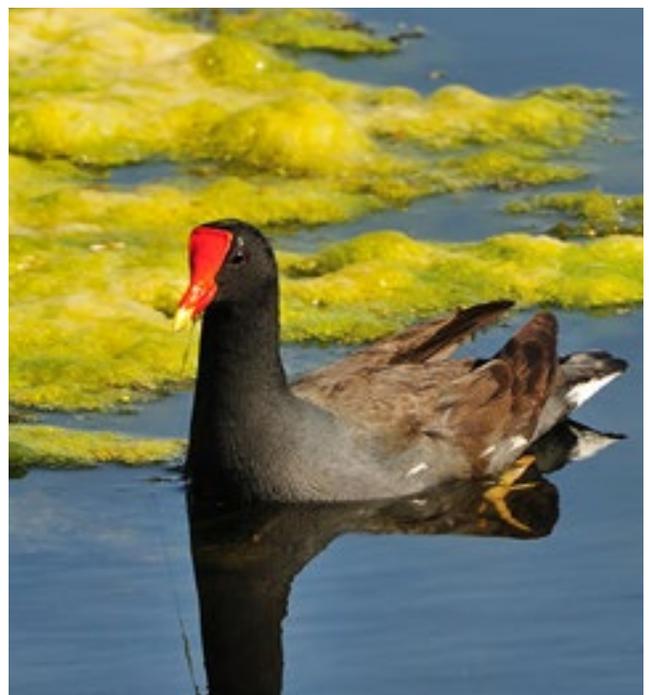
A Snail Kite forages over healthy Lake Okeechobee marshes. Photo: Paul Gray

## Task Force Assigned to Address Algae Threats to Florida's Waters

At a ceremony at the Nathaniel P. Reed Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge, Governor Ron DeSantis announced the formation of a Blue-green Algae Task Force to address Florida's intensifying harmful algal bloom problems. Lake Okeechobee has suffered severe blooms in two of the last three years, and its waters were dumped into coastal estuaries—threatening the health of fish, wildlife, and humans. Blooms in the St. Johns River this spring, and in many other water bodies, are increasingly common and severe.

Five of the task force's planned seven members were named: Dr. Wendy Graham, University of Florida; Dr. Evelyn Gaiser, Florida International University; Dr. Michael Parsons, Florida Gulf Coast University; Dr. James Sullivan, FAU's Harbor Branch; and Dr. Valerie Paul, Smithsonian Marine Station. Dr. Paul Gray attended the event, applauding the appointment of accomplished scientists to this important task force.

Blue-green algae, also known as cyanobacteria, are ubiquitous in ecosystems but are usually a minor presence. When fertilized with human-produced nutrients, especially phosphorus and nitrogen, they can erupt in blooms that turn waterways pea-green and can make toxins. The situation's devastating effect on Florida tourism is another reason to bring the blue-green algae situation under control.



Common Gallinule. Photo: R. J. Wiley

# Newly-Hatched Roseate Spoonbills Symbolize Renewed Breeding Success in Florida Bay

Situated between the marine waters of Northeast Florida Bay and the complex freshwater delta of Taylor Slough is Joe Bay. These restricted waters require special permission from Everglades National Park to enter. Kevin Welsh, a field technician at Audubon Florida's Everglades Science Center (ESC) in Tavernier, felt privileged to make regular visits to that area. Making the 20-mile journey by boat from the upper mainline Keys to monitor ecological patterns in birds, fish, aquatic vegetation, and hydrology, Kevin gathered this heartening news about Roseate Spoonbill nesting.

In Spring 2019, on a small isolated mangrove island within Joe Bay known as Diamond Key, a colony of waders took up residence. Among the multitude of egrets, herons, and anhinga was a small group of Roseate Spoonbills, the spatula-billed indicator species of overall Everglades ecosystem health. It was with great pleasure that ESC field technicians, through regular colony surveys, watched these spoonbill nests fill with eggs, and eggs become chicks. A video of newly hatched chicks was posted to the ESC's Facebook page and subsequently went viral with over 13,000 shares and 4,000 likes. If you haven't seen it yet, check it out on the Audubon Everglades Science Center's Facebook page.

***A video of newly hatched chicks was posted to the ESC's Facebook page and subsequently went viral with over 13,000 shares and 4,000 likes.***



This year's breeding success with Roseate Spoonbills gives us hope for Everglades ecosystem health with restoration. Photo: R J Wiley

Since 1984, the ESC has dutifully monitored the Florida Bay keys for nesting spoonbills, but it was not until 2014 that the center began monitoring on Diamond Key. Since then, spoonbills have made two nesting attempts, both within the last two years. Although total nests observed for this colony remains low, the newly hatched spoonbills captured on video are not only adorable, but are symbols of hope that these birds are finding suitable times and new locations within Florida Bay to rear chicks despite such threats as sea level rise, upstream water diversions, and harmful algal blooms.

To quote Robert Porter Allen, Audubon's spoonbill research pioneer: "If there were ever a bird in need of a thorough study of its life history and ecological relationships, that species was the Roseate Spoonbill."

ESC field technicians will continue their monitoring efforts on Diamond Key to learn whether these spoonbills will be successful. Their fate could add to our understanding of upstream water management practices, especially in regard to the C-111 canal, and even shed light on much larger scale shifts in environmental conditions in South Florida.

# Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Welcomes Lisa Korte, PhD, as Director

Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary is excited to welcome Lisa Korte, PhD, to the team as Sanctuary Director. Dr. Korte brings global experience to bear on the local challenges facing Corkscrew and its resources.

With a PhD in Zoology and substantial experience in field station operations, she finds Corkscrew's place-based work in conservation, research, and education near and dear to her heart. She has worked for the Peace Corps, Smithsonian, US Department of State, and the Wildlife Conservation Society in Africa, and is as comfortable in the tropical jungle as she is at a diplomatic dinner party. Perhaps most importantly, she has great experience leading teams with substantial budgets and vulnerable resources in conditions that require a MacGyver-like approach to problem-solving—the same ingenuity Audubon employs to make a difference in Florida and throughout the hemisphere.

In her short time on staff, she says she has already fallen in love with the sanctuary. And we're pretty sure it's mutual. Lisa can be welcomed at:

[Lisa.korte@audubon.org](mailto:Lisa.korte@audubon.org)



Audubon is pleased to welcome Dr. Lisa Korte to Corkscrew.

Photo: David Korte

## Corkscrew Recognized as a Wetland of Distinction for Its Exemplary Ecosystem and Community Services

Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary has become the first wetland in the southern United States to be recognized as a Wetland of Distinction by the Society of Wetland Scientists. "We're honored to receive this international recognition," said Research Director Dr. Shawn Clem of the Western Everglades Research Center at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

The Society of Wetland Scientists noted several of Corkscrew's exemplary ecosystem services, including aquifer recharge, flood storage, carbon storage, and water quality improvement, in addition to community services like recreation, education, and aesthetic value. They also highlighted the important role the

Sanctuary plays as habitat for endangered species, including Wood Storks, Florida Panthers, Florida Bonneted Bats, and several species of orchids.

The Wetland of Distinction initiative was created in 2017 "to promote awareness, appreciation, and knowledge of some of the country's most ecologically sensitive landscapes."

More about this recognition is available on the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary website at <http://fl.audubon.org/node/15296>



An intern carries out aquatic sampling in a wetland restoration area at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

# Audubon Champions Flagler Salt Marsh Restoration - for Water, Wildlife, and Climate

Started just a few months ago, the Flagler County Wetland Restoration Project is restoring salt marsh habitat lost to dragline ditching for mosquito control, an outdated practice that did more harm than good. For almost two decades the St. Johns River Water Management District and cooperating partners have leveraged funds from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore more than 625 acres of dragline-impacted wetlands. Despite the success of previous restoration efforts, the Flagler project was almost derailed last year due to concern from some members of the public.

Early in the review of this project, Chris Farrell, Audubon's Northeast Florida Policy Associate, engaged with concerned residents by speaking at public meetings and following up with agency staff. Many residents were worried about potential changes to the landscape and the length of time needed for the system to recover. Restoration is achieved by grading back down to marsh elevations the sediment piled up during ditching and letting vegetation repopulate the site naturally. Although this process produces a temporary habitat flux, earlier projects show that marsh plants respond quickly once natural elevations are restored.

So, is restoration of mosquito ditches worth it? The answer is definitely yes. Mosquito ditching actually harmed the function of these marshes. Restoration removes spoil piles that support invasive exotic vegetation and brings back tidally influenced wetland habitat. This improves water quality, provides critical habitat for wildlife, and – perhaps most important – allows the system to respond to rising sea levels by slowing and trapping sediment. In a promising sign of things to come, marsh plants are already sprouting on the first completed sections of the project.



*“We are grateful for Chris’s understanding of the project’s benefits to Northeast Florida and for being an independent voice supporting the project,” said St. Johns River Water Management District Executive Director Ann Shortelle.*

*“And as always, we appreciate Audubon Florida’s science-based perspective and thoughtful engagement on many other water resource issues that impact birding and nature-based recreation.”*



Reddish Egret. Photo: R. Munguia

# “Audubon in Action” Grants Fuel Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Student Engagement in Florida

*Change is not always easy, but Audubon chapters that are determined to build vibrant futures know that change is critical. National Audubon’s “Audubon in Action” grant program supports chapters as they try daring new ways to engage the next generation and explore opportunities for diversity at every level.*



Marion Audubon engaged students from the College of Central Florida in birding basics and field trips under an Audubon in Action grant.

Following their success in recruiting participants for the chapter-executed Conservation Leadership Academy, Marion Audubon stepped up their relationship with the College of Central Florida. In an Audubon in Action grant proposal, the chapter incorporated birding activities for non-traditional students; these included birding basics, class lectures, and kayaking on the Silver River. A unique event was a trip to Sweetwater Wetlands Park designed for basketball team members. Students learned about the benefits of treatment wetlands and candidly discussed Audubon’s goals for engagement, diversity, and inclusion. In the works now is a college chapter!

On October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael slammed into the Florida Panhandle, devastating communities including Panama City, home to Bay County Audubon and their Parker Preserve. Most trees were destroyed, leaving a tangled mass of dead and dying vegetation. Chapter leaders from Bay County, Choctawhatchee, and Apalachee Audubon and Audubon Florida came together to draft an Audubon in Action grant



Gulf Coast Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) introduces college students to Audubon conservation initiatives, while helping chapters become more diverse and relevant.

proposal for the initial phase of restoration. Even before funding was confirmed, 16 volunteers from two Scout troops arrived for the first cleanup day. The project's goal is to build strong partnerships to recreate a bird-friendly space to serve as a community model as residents restore their neighborhoods.

To engage the next generation of conservationists, the Gulf Coast Regional Conservation Committee, with Audubon Florida, received an Audubon in Action grant to develop a Gulf Coast Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI). Building on the CLI program held each year at the Audubon Assembly, this program will link Audubon leaders with college students to network, share, and learn from one another. The program will introduce students to Audubon conservation initiatives while helping each regional chapter become more diverse, relevant, and attractive to younger audiences. Graduates of the Assembly program who already work with their local chapters will help with the planning.



Bay County Audubon chapter members came together to clean up their Parker Preserve following Hurricane Michael.



University of Florida alum Zachery Holmes is a founding member and former president of the first official Audubon chapter on a college campus.  
Photo: Jacqui Sulek

The GREBE program (Gators Ready for Exceptional Birding Experiences) was conceived four years ago as a birding club at the University of Florida. With faculty support from Dr. Katie Sieving, now serving on Alachua Audubon's board of directors, this former club morphed into one of first college campus chapters of National Audubon. Former chapter president Zachery Holmes has graduated, but remains engaged with Audubon. He spearheaded several Conservation Leadership Initiatives and participated in Audubon's Jay Watch program. Those activities prepared him for his current position with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in Ocala National Forest. Zachery is working with Dr. Sieving and Jonathan Varol, another CLI graduate, to set up a bird-banding station in North Florida to serve as a training facility.

Zachery's GREBE successor was featured on the National Audubon website. "We are people who are interested in the field and do this for more than just fun—we want to conserve these creatures—and that's what we want from interested individuals and other chapters like ours," said Mackenzie Dorr, president of Gators Ready for Exceptional Birding Experiences (GREBE) at University of Florida, Gainesville.

We can quantify chapter events, volunteers, participants, acres restored, and more, but the true measure of our success is in stories like these. As they continue to be told, lifelong paths will be changed in wonderful ways.



Florida Scrub-Jay, Photo: R. Munguia

# Audubon Center for Birds of Prey Celebrates 40 Years of Conservation, Rehabilitation, and Education

Audubon Center for Birds of Prey opened its doors in 1979 when Doris Mager, a Florida Audubon staff member at the time, was rehabilitating injured raptors out of her home. In an effort to raise awareness of Bald Eagles and of the need for a facility to care for them, Doris got permission to start a rehabilitation program. She sat in an inactive Bald Eagle nest for five days and six nights. People from Central Florida and beyond donated to her campaign. Today the Center still focuses on that mission of protecting birds, wildlife, and the ecosystems that support them.

The Center kicked off its 40th anniversary this year at the Wind Beneath our Wings event held at Leu Gardens in Orlando. Almost 200 guests gathered for an evening of fun, celebrations, and inspiration. Funds raised at Wind Beneath our Wings directly support Center programs.

We were delighted to honor two individuals—Doug Pitts, Jr., and Bill Randolph—who have donated their time, energy, and money to help the Center remain a leading voice in raptor care and conservation. The Center is grateful to its supporters and sponsors for this event. Stay tuned for more 40th anniversary celebrations this year.



Doug Pitts, Jr. received Audubon Florida's Partners in Conservation Award. Pictured with Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director, Audubon Florida (left), and Katie Warner, Center Director, Center for Birds of Prey



Bill Randolph was honored with Audubon Florida's Lifetime Service Award. He is joined by Dianna Flynt, Rehabilitation Supervisor, Center for Birds of Prey (right), and Katie Warner.

## Baby Raptors Get Needed Help from Center Staff and Volunteers

It's spring season at Audubon! Nesting season for many of Florida's raptors occurs March through June in Florida. But spring also brings many injured and orphaned babies that need our help. In May alone, the Center receives 20% of its annual patient load. So far this year, 138 baby raptors have been admitted; birds admitted in 2018 totaled 689. Audubon works to quickly return young raptors to their parents, sometimes providing nest platforms or baskets in cases where a nest has fallen or been destroyed. Staff and volunteers spend numerous hours with multiple daily feedings.



## The 2019 Baby Owl Shower Welcomed 500 Generous Guests

Audubon Center for Birds of Prey hosted its annual Baby Owl Shower to celebrate spring and share our conservation message with the Central Florida community. Held each year on the Saturday before Mother's Day, we welcomed 500 people on May 11, 2019, for a day of activities and Ambassador encounters. Donated items listed on the Center's wish list entitled visitors to free admission for the day. These supplies will support our Raptor Trauma Clinic in the busy months to come.

Learn more about supporting our work as a volunteer or donor at <http://cbop.audubon.org/>



Baby Barred Owl. Photo: Audubon Center staff.

# IRA Spotlight: Mike Fite

## Audubon Supporter and Volunteer

Long time Audubon supporter and volunteer Mike Fite moved to the Sunshine State with his family in 1956 and has been enjoying the birds ever since. "I've always thought birds were cool," said Fite, who has built several nest boxes for his neighborhood. "The current resident in one is a startup Great Crested Flycatcher family. I watch their antics from the kitchen window."

Mike's support for birds goes beyond building nest boxes, however. "Annually I contribute through my IRA to Audubon Florida and National Audubon to use for habitat protection. Audubon's use of conservation easements with private land owners helps protect their farming and ranching heritage and adds more green spaces for nature."

An IRA Charitable Rollover allows individuals age 70 ½ and older to make outright, tax-free donations up to \$100,000 to Audubon Florida directly from their IRA.

For more information, contact Audubon Florida Development Director Suzanne Bartlett at 305-371-3699, ext. 123 or sbartlett@audubon.org.



Mike Fite gets ready to release a Brown Pelican that he rescued from a deadly tangle of monofilament fishing line.

# NFWF Award Recipient Jim Gale

## Honors Audubon

When US Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agent in Charge Jim Gale received the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's highest national law enforcement recognition, the 2019 Guy Bradley Award, he made a generous decision. After receiving his \$1,000 after a career of fighting wildlife trafficking and other wildlife crimes, he decided to donate his award to support Audubon Florida's conservation efforts. "I have been lucky to work with some amazing conservationists throughout my career, including many past recipients of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Guy Bradley Award. To receive this honor along with them is truly humbling," Gale said.

The connection is a strong one between Audubon and Guy Bradley who, in 1905, was the first Audubon warden and Florida wildlife officer killed in the line of duty for opposing plume hunters. "Guy Bradley's legacy and ties to saving Florida's wading birds made investing this award in Audubon a no-brainer," Gale explained.

The Guy Bradley Award honors outstanding careers of service and leadership within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Office of Law Enforcement. It recognizes "extraordinary individuals who have made an outstanding lifetime contribution to wildlife law enforcement, wildlife forensics or investigative techniques."

Audubon congratulates Special Agent in Charge Jim Gale on his award and thanks him for his long career in service of America's wildlife. We are grateful for, and humbled by, your investment of this award in Audubon's work.

*Audubon partners with USFWS to further our conservation goals for birds and habitat. Special efforts have included protections for Florida Scrub-Jays, Florida Grasshopper Sparrows, Wood Storks, Piping Plovers, and Red Knots. NFWF has generously supported Audubon Florida's coastal bird conservation work for two decades.*



Guy Bradley Award recipient Jim Gale contributed his 2019 prize money to Audubon Florida.



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Spring/Summer 2019

The Naturalist is published by Audubon Florida. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from Audubon Florida © 2019. The Florida Audubon Society, National Audubon Society (doing business as Audubon Florida), and the 45 chapters in Florida, work together in a strategic alliance.

**Executive Director:** Julie Wraithmell

**Production:** NPC Printing, Inc. **Editor:** Susan Cumins **Designer:** Reinier Munguia

**Cover Photo:** Eastern Screech Owls. Photo: R. J. Wiley

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# Save the Date: Annual Audubon Assembly October 24-26, 2019 in Gainesville

## Water and Land for Florida's Future: Science-based Strategies for Clean Water and Healthy Watersheds

Sandhill Cranes on Paynes Prairie. Photo: Mac Stone

Visit [FL.Audubon.org/Assembly](http://FL.Audubon.org/Assembly) for Updates and Registration Details