Purple Gallinule eating the seedpod of an alligator flag. Photo: Joseph Przybyla/Audubon Photography Awards
Heidi McCree, Board Chair

Working together is a hallmark of many avian species. They pair up to raise their chicks, sound the alarm when predators are spotted, and some species even nest in large colonies so dozens or even hundreds of eyes can be on the lookout for disturbance. They feed in groups, flit amidst the trees in mixed flocks, and migrate together over vast distances.

Like the birds, we at Audubon Florida pride ourselves on our commitment to partnering with government agencies, elected officials, nonprofit organizations, and passionate community members to protect birds and the places they need. We record bird bands to contribute to regional science studies (page 4), work with partners to monitor sea and shorebirds (page 11), bring together land managers and researchers to discuss 21st-century environmental issues (page 12), and applaud chapters as they commit their efforts to conservation and restoration (page 15). We know that as an environmental movement to improve quality of life for wildlife and people, we are stronger together.

Consider flocking with us again this year at our annual Assembly in Daytona Beach November 7-9. Thank you for your support of our mission and we hope to see you there!

Heidi McCree, Chair, Audubon Florida

Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director

We are in a critical moment for birds and people. Last month we learned that this hurricane season may be one of the most intense ever, as stronger storms are driven by increasing ocean and Gulf temperatures. These storms and their associated wind, surges, and rainfall will have an impact not only on the birds, but our coastal and inland communities, too. The forecast drives home that the dual crises of climate change and biodiversity loss are the defining challenges of our time. We will be remembered and judged by the progress we make towards addressing both in the next decade.

The National Audubon Society has embarked on a new strategic Flight Plan to meet these challenges head on. Here in Florida, we are building on our legacy of almost 125 years of conservation in the Sunshine State to redouble our efforts to protect bird and wildlife habitat, improve water quality, use sound science to guide land management decisions, and more.

Flight Plan harnesses the full power of Audubon—including on-the-ground staff across the Western Hemisphere, centers and sanctuaries, and chapters—by focusing on a set of shared outcomes for greater collective impact. Our long-term vision is to “bend the bird curve” to halt and reverse the decline of birds, and in doing so, protect our own well-being and prosperity, too.

The committed and passionate work of our staff, volunteers, donors, and members makes me hopeful that the next decade will bring some of the most important victories and progress that Audubon has seen since our beginning in Florida in 1900.

Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director, Audubon Florida

Learn more about Flight Plan here: audubon.org/about/welcome-flight-plan
Pink Bird Conservation: Flamingo and Spoonbill Updates

**AMERICAN FLAMINGO**
In February, Audubon Florida organized an American Flamingo survey across the Sunshine State. This effort was coordinated through the Florida Flamingo Working Group as part of a larger effort by the Caribbean Flamingo Conservation Group to census all American Flamingos throughout their range from February 18-25, 2024.

More than 40 people filled out the survey to record 101 wild American Flamingos across Florida. The largest group (50+) was spotted in Florida Bay; 18 were counted in the Pine Island area, with another 14 at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge.

“We are thrilled that there are flamingos that have remained in Florida after being blown here in 2023 by Hurricane Idalia. I actually suspect that 100 flamingos is the floor of this new population, and there could be more that were not counted during the one-week survey. We are continually monitoring for breeding flamingos.”
— Jerry Lorenz, PhD, State director of research for Audubon Florida

**ROSEATE SPOONBILL**
The Everglades Science Center completed their annual surveys for nesting Roseate Spoonbills in Florida Bay. Similar to the past two years, water levels in vital foraging areas did not dry down to lower than 13 cm. This is a critical threshold—when water levels are higher than 13 cm, spoonbills have a hard time feeding their hungry chicks. As a result, we saw low nesting success again this year.

Center staff also outfitted two adult spoonbills with transmitters—the data these birds will share over the next few years will provide a better understanding of their movement patterns and population in Florida Bay.

Did you know?
Under a new partnership with Discovery Cove Orlando, 5% of proceeds from their Flamingo Mingle experience goes straight to Audubon Florida for our conservation and restoration efforts.
Bird Bands Lead to Better Conservation for Sea and Shorebirds

For Audubon’s coastal team, every sighting of a bird band is a moment of discovery. Whether on the barrier islands of the Gulf Coast, the rooftops of Tampa, or the beaches of Northeast Florida, reporting bird bands moves science forward by giving researchers and land managers critical data they can use to protect birds and the places they need.

WHAT ARE BIRD BANDS?
Bird bands are light metal bands applied to the legs of birds to make them individually recognizable when they are resighted. Only certain people with a permit from the federal and state government are allowed to oversee the handling of birds for this purpose. Bands are specifically designed to be lightweight, and their use must follow strict protocols to ensure the birds’ safety.

Audubon’s coastal team members and volunteers are constantly on the lookout for banded birds, which they carefully note and report after their surveys. In fact, one spectacular volunteer, Wendy Meehan, who was named Audubon Florida’s 2023 Volunteer of the Year, has submitted more than 4,000 records of banded birds!

WHAT DO BANDED BIRDS TELL US?

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHERS
American Oystercatchers prefer to nest on small reefs or islands away from shore, where they are not disturbed and the risk of nest or chick predation is lower. Unfortunately, as sea level rises and storms increase, these low-lying areas more frequently experience high tides that make nesting impossible. When this occurs, they lose access to their nesting habitat.

A recent study looked at the survival rates of American Oystercatchers, measured by banding and resight data, from 2007-2018 along a three-county area on Florida’s Gulf Coast. During this time period, the study documented an increase in the number of hours that the region experienced high tides. Their analysis showed that as these “high tide hours” increased, the survival rates of the oystercatchers shrunk from .96 to .89—a 7.3% decline in annual survival.

Of note: Audubon North Carolina staff run the database for the American Oystercatcher working group, which contributed the critical resight data needed for this study.
RED KNOTS
Many Red Knots spend their winter season along the coasts of Florida, Texas, and Louisiana, putting them at risk of harm from algal blooms—which are predicted to increase as a changing climate increases Gulf of Mexico temperatures. Across the three different states, researchers banded 2,412 Red Knots between 2005 and 2019. These knots were resighted 4,078 times.

When comparing the resight data to red tide events, the study draws a sobering conclusion: “While overall apparent annual survival rates were similar across the three locations (0.768 – 0.819), several red tide events were associated with catastrophically low seasonal (fall) survival in Florida (as low as 0.492) and Texas (as low as 0.510).”

Red tide events could continually disrupt populations of Red Knots, which are already on the decline as food sources and habitat availability shrink. To protect them on their wintering grounds, we must address ongoing water quality concerns to reduce higher-than-normal nutrient levels reaching the Gulf of Mexico from agricultural and urban runoff.

*https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fevo.2024.1375412/full

LEAST TERNs
Because beach habitat is often busy with human visitors, many beach-nesting birds are instead finding refuge on rooftops. While rooftop nesting colonies can be as productive as beach colonies and provide relief from most forms of disturbance, these chicks face a threat unique to rooftops: falling off.

From 2011 to 2022, under permits issued by the U.S. Geological Survey and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, past-Audubon Florida Director of Bird Conservation Marianne Korosy, PhD, and renowned bird biologist Beth Forys, PhD, (Eckerd College) conducted a study in which biologists placed colored bands on the legs of any Least Tern chicks they returned to a rooftop following a fall. With a squadron of volunteer rooftop monitors, co-author and Audubon Coastal Biologist Jeff Liechty set out to resight the birds they banded in later breeding seasons on beaches, piers, and rooftops throughout Florida.

Over the course of nine years, biologists banded a total of 168 healthy Least Tern juveniles that had fallen from 16 different nesting rooftops. Fifty of those birds were resighted a total of 347 times. Seven of the terns were resighted while nesting: three on nearby beaches, three at rooftop colonies in Pinellas County, and one on a Levy County beach. Resighting birds while they are nesting means they have survived to adulthood and are ready to raise the next generation of Least Terns.

The banding study also confirmed that at least 39% of those birds survived to one year of age. After one year of age, 82% of the terns survived each year thereafter. The data are valuable for understanding population dynamics and show that putting juveniles back on rooftops is a viable management tool for Least Terns and potentially other rooftop-nesting seabirds.

Banded Birds: See Something, Say Something!

Bird banding is like scientists putting a note in a bottle and tossing it back into the sea of migration. The note only gives us information if someone observes and reports it when the bottle arrives on a far-off shore. Thanks to resighting reports from around the state, we are learning more about the movements, populations, and breeding success of our banded species.

If you see a banded bird:
- Note date, time, & location—with GPS if possible
- Note the species
- Note which leg or legs have bands
- Note the color and order of bands—upper or lower.
  If the band or flag has an alphanumeric code, try to note the code.
- Take a picture! Digital cameras work great through scopes or binoculars and sometimes enable eagle-eyed biologists to record numbers off of the band.

REPORT A BAND AT REPORTBAND.GOV
2024 Audubon Assembly

125 Years of Audubon in Florida: Legacy and Leadership

Registration is open for Audubon Assembly 2024!

NOVEMBER 7-9
The 2024 Assembly will be held at the Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort. With learning sessions, a keynote presentation, awards, and field trips to some of the birdiest hotspots in the Space Coast region, Assembly is a great opportunity to network with Audubon members, staff, partners, and volunteers from across the state.

Tickets: $165
Early Bird Tickets: $145
Friday Night Banquet Only: $80

Visit fl.audubon.org/assembly for updates and registration details.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING of the membership of The Florida Audubon Society. Pursuant to the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, notice is hereby given that the Annual Membership Meeting of the Florida Audubon Society will be held on Saturday, November 9, 2024. 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.
Join Us for a Very Special Assembly Keynote

We have so much to share this year that we’ve split our traditional keynote slot into three riveting discussions of Audubon in Florida across 125 years, our unique place in the Sunshine State’s conservation history, and our role in the future of conservation in the Western Hemisphere.

Paul Gray, PhD, Everglades science coordinator, will give the first talk during our welcome lunch hour. From the plume trade to the senseless slaughter of birds before the advent of the Christmas Bird Count, Dr. Gray will trace the origins of both Audubon and the modern conservation movement.

During the Friday evening dinner event, Charles Lee, director of advocacy, will take the reins of the story and recount a historical perspective on pivotal moments in more contemporary Audubon history. He will outline efforts to save the Everglades, from the establishment of Everglades National Park, to Florida’s water crises of the mid-1950s, the proposed Jetport that almost became a reality in Eastern Collier County, and the onset of Everglades restoration under Governor Bob Graham.

Finally, on Saturday morning, National Audubon Chief Conservation Officer Marshall Johnson will share the ambitious, hemispheric vision of Audubon’s Flight Plan, with an engaging morning celebrating how Florida is leading the way in its implementation at the state and chapter levels!

Field Trips: Enjoy the Birds and Wild Places of Beautiful Volusia County!

You won’t want to miss this year’s suite of exciting field trips, ranging from a boat-based birding tour of the Indian River Lagoon, ramble for shorebirds and migrants at Lighthouse Park, and urban wildlife viewing at Ormond Beach’s Central Park and Environmental Discovery Center.

Added bonus! West Volusia Audubon will host a special open house at Florida Scrub-Jay mecca Lyonia Preserve on Thursday afternoon.

Register for details: fl.audubon.org/assembly
Fixing Water Levels for Wood Storks

Throughout most of the 1900s, Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Southwest Florida hosted the largest Wood Stork colony in the U.S. The birds’ annual nesting pattern has evolved to align their high energy needs (when they are nesting and raising young) with annual dry conditions when fish are plentiful. By the end of nesting season, adults rely on lower water levels that concentrate fish and other prey in shallow wetlands and within reach of their snapping bills. Wood Stork chicks must fledge before the onset of the summer rainy season to be successful because when the wetlands refill, prey fish spread out across the landscape.

In recent decades, however, overdrainage of the Sanctuary has given small fish less time to grow and reproduce. Plus, native-nuisance, woody shrubs have replaced grasses and sedges across hundreds of acres of marshes and wet prairie at the Sanctuary, reducing the birds’ access to fish. Audubon’s Wood Stork survey data show a steady decline in nesting effort since the 1970s. In fact, over the past several years, Wood Storks have failed to nest at all in the Sanctuary in most years.

Audubon scientists in Southwest Florida have monitored water levels for 67 years. Their data show drier conditions overall and lower water levels in both the wet and dry season. Importantly, the water doesn’t last long enough on the landscape in the dry season to support Wood Stork nesting. Their research confirms that canals improved in the early 2000s to relieve regional flood concerns are now overdraining natural areas like the Sanctuary.

It doesn’t take a scientist to see some obvious signs of these changes; for example, roadside swales quickly drain in summer.

While the total amount of rainfall recorded at the Sanctuary each year is relatively constant, a changing climate could alter the timing. If regular downpours are replaced by more rain in fewer events, with more dry conditions in between, this could dramatically impact the environment. With more development occurring in places where water used to be able to move across the land, flooding is still a concern for many neighborhoods, especially during these heavy rainfall events.

In addition to undertaking a large-scale effort at the Sanctuary to restore native marsh plant communities where nuisance shrubs have moved in, Audubon has partnered with the South Florida Water Management District to get the water right on a regional scale in the Corkscrew watershed. In the dry season, that means protecting wetland resources from overdrainage, while wet season efforts focus on holding water in our wetlands while keeping roads and homes dry. Working with regional stakeholders, District and Audubon scientists are developing tools to improve decision-making, evaluate restoration alternatives, and gauge restoration progress.

Getting the water right on a regional scale improves resilience for both wildlife and people.

Extreme Weather Events Reduce Nest Success

At the start of the 2024 breeding season, an unusually rainy winter (courtesy of El Niño) resulted in elevated water levels across Southwest Florida and likely discouraged wading birds from nesting at the historic Corkscrew colony. Wood Storks did start nesting in other Southwest Florida locations much later than usual (February-March instead of December-January). During the May 6 Wood Stork survey, Sanctuary staff saw a large number of nests with adults still incubating eggs. In a year of normal rainfall, such late nesting efforts would likely fail as the arrival of rainy season dispersed prey concentrated in dry season pools.
A New Home for Owls (and a Black Vulture) Coming to the Center for Birds of Prey

The Audubon Center for Birds of Prey, a three-acre lakefront facility in Maitland, Florida, will break ground on a major renovation to its oldest aviary later this year. The original aviary was built in 1979—an octagonal wood structure with eight wedge-shaped enclosures. Today it hosts three aviaries for permanent resident Barred Owls, Great Horned Owls, and a Black Vulture. These raptors and thousands of annual visitors to the Center are at the forefront of the new construction.

To design the space, the Center is working with landscape architecture firm Coyle & Caron, whose past clients include the Smithsonian National Zoo, Bok Tower Gardens, Orlando Health, and Zoo New England. “Coyle & Caron’s expertise has been extremely valuable as we navigate our space and redesign to function better for our birds, staff, and visitors,” says Katie Gill Warner, director of the Center for Birds of Prey.

The new design will inspire guests by connecting them with nature. Each enclosure mimics the species’ natural habitat and offers unobstructed views so visitors can easily observe bird behaviors. A covered viewing shelter provides an opportunity to sit and observe the birds for longer periods of time. Staff look forward to the changes, too: The updated design gives them easier access to the birds for training and husbandry.

Resident Barred Owls Fil and Hitch will enjoy a built-in nest box in their new home. The pair act as foster parents for orphaned owls each spring, raising them until they are ready to fledge. Black Vulture resident Uff-Da will be able to show off her skills—like color identification—in training sessions that will be visible to guests.

The Center has raised 40% of its $650,000 goal for the project. Naming opportunities are still available. Contact Anny Shepard at anny.shepard@audubon.org for more information. The Center will be closed for several months during the construction later this year, with an anticipated reopening sometime in early 2025.

Support the aviary project at cbop.audubon.org/owlaviary

Barred Owls. Photos: Daisy Fiore/Audubon Florida
Why Give? An Owl Rescue Leads to Investment into the Center for Birds of Prey Mission

By Linda and Mike Smith

When we first began giving back to all things regarding wildlife and nature conservation, the behind-the-scenes experience at Audubon Center for Birds of Prey motivated us to do more. Throughout our journey in meeting the team at Audubon Center for Birds of Prey and participating more in bird releases, we realized that there is an unspoken trust within these birds. The trust is solidified by any supporter who witnesses a bird’s recovery and their natural response to the “wings” that support them: the team of hard-working, committed, wise people that keep these birds alive in the world around us.

Our story began while constructing our home in Winter Park, Florida. We noticed some juvenile owls dancing on the ground beneath the existing fence. Our contractor offered to take these owlets to the Center for Birds of Prey; he promptly covered them and moved them into some crates he already had in his truck. After delivering them to the Center, the owlets were rehabilitated—one had an injured clavicle and wing, which was repaired through surgery. The team from the Center returned the owlets to the tree and placed them on a new nesting platform. While the volunteer delivered the owlets to their nest, the mom was screeching loudly and approaching quickly. We watched intently that evening as the mother took care of her young by constantly feeding them. Not only was life restored that day, but nature was restored. It warmed our heart and soul to see such a committed team literally repairing the wings of these owlets.

At the time, this event seemed almost random. Not so random now—we are delighted to support the team here and all it does, but are especially excited to see the new aviary’s finished construction in order to further progress the Center’s mission! Spotlight’s on y’all for making the world a better place!

Save Taxes and Birds! Double your Impact in 2024

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

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

When making your gift, to ensure it is properly processed and that you are listed as the donor of record 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
Northeast Florida Partnerships Raise the Bar for Sea and Shorebird Nesting Success

Protecting a shorebird nesting colony takes a village. Luckily for birds across the Sunshine State, a dozen “villages” are coordinated through the Florida Shorebird Alliance. Established by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) in 2009, this network of partnerships unifies monitoring and management efforts to ensure important sites within their respective areas are protected for nesting sea and shorebirds.

In the Timucuan Partnership in Northeast Florida, Audubon works in partnership with FWC, the Florida Park Service, the City of Jacksonville, and volunteers to safeguard beach-nesting birds along the coasts of Duval and Nassau counties. By pooling resources and information, we can accomplish more than by working alone.

Chris Farrell, Audubon’s Northeast Florida policy associate, recruits and trains a cadre of volunteers, while Greg Raker, a part-time, seasonal steward hired by Audubon, provides on-the-ground assistance to protect nesting areas within Amelia Island State Park and Little Talbot State Park—two locations that include Critical Wildlife Areas for nesting birds designated by FWC.

FWC regional staff support the partnership in many ways. They provide supplies and signage, assist with posting and stewarding needs at nesting sites, and survey shorebird populations at beach nesting sites and on rooftops.

Florida Park Service staff post the nesting sites, coordinate volunteer stewards, perform nesting site management, provide vehicles for stewards to use, and conduct surveys to track nesting progress.

Another Northeast Florida beach-nesting bird site, Huguenot Memorial Park, is managed by the City of Jacksonville. The city provides a park naturalist who posts nesting sites, performs surveys, manages habitat, and, with the help of Duval Audubon Society Board Member Elizabeth Filippelli, coordinates volunteer efforts.

“Volunteer assistance is critical at all nesting sites to reduce any negative interactions between beachgoers and our imperiled birds,” says Farrell. “They educate the public with a positive outlook and enlist beachgoers in our efforts to ensure a safe and productive nesting season.”

Together, this partnership has safeguarded the nesting efforts of Least Terns, Wilson’s Plovers, and American Oystercatchers in the region, and even helped bring Black Skimmers and Gull-billed Terns back to the Nassau Sound area. The partnership also created conditions that led to the only beach-nesting colony of Brown Pelicans on the Atlantic Coast at Huguenot Memorial Park.

Nesting success in these locations would not be possible without our village of partners, including Blair Hayman, Hailey Dedmon, and Isabella Launi (FWC), Allison Conboy and Wade Smith (Florida Park Service), and Patty Haas (Huguenot Memorial Park).

Learn more about the partnership at flshorebirdalliance.org
Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Convenes Annual Science Forum

Nearly 100 environmental professionals from across Southwest Florida attended the 2024 Corkscrew Watershed Science Forum on May 10. The event included 13 presentations by scientists and conservation professionals with Audubon Florida, South Florida Water Management District, University of Florida, and more. Their work covered wide-ranging topics, from the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan to lichens, mosquito control to Snail Kites. Many projects presented had both a local focus and far-reaching impacts, sharing lessons learned, best practices, and resources for all who work or live in the watershed.

The daylong event kicked off with remarks by Sanctuary Director Keith Laakkonen, who highlighted the Sanctuary’s 70th anniversary and connections to the coast. Three Audubon staff members presented during the forum.

WOOD STORK DECLINES
Shawn Clem, PhD, director of conservation, provided a retrospective on the loss of shallow wetlands and resulting decline of Wood Stork nesting in the region. She highlighted the importance of long-term datasets for informing land and water management. The birds are telling us that there is a lot of work to do to restore annual changes in water levels for the benefit of all wildlife and people. In response to this identified need, South Florida Water Management District Big Cypress Basin has begun to seek solutions for water restoration.

MONITORING RESTORATION PROGRESS
Biologist Jacob Zetzer shared an update on the restoration taking place at the Sanctuary and monitoring efforts. Aerial images document a large-scale reduction of Carolina willow (a native-nuisance species), and species-level transect data illustrate increasing coverage of the native grasses and sedges that provide better wildlife habitat. Once restored, staff will manage these habitats with prescribed fire every two to five years, maintaining conditions that fish, birds, and other marsh wildlife need to flourish. The approximate cost of this restoration is $3,500 per acre, and nearly 1,400 acres are now in various stages of restoration at the Sanctuary.

SMART GROWTH
Brad Cornell, Southwest Florida policy associate for both Audubon Florida and Audubon Western Everglades, gave a riveting presentation on smart growth. After defining the value and benefits of smart growth, he shared a map of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s annual overview of “billion-dollar weather and climate disasters.” These events, worsened by climate change, show the importance of resilience and the benefits of taking steps now to avoid more costly disasters in the future. Large-scale efforts like Everglades restoration, wildlife linkages, and springs restoration are critical, and we must also take steps as individuals, neighborhoods, and municipalities to educate and empower people to build back stronger after disasters. We still have great opportunities to build more sustainable communities to accommodate the influx of residents in our state. With more native plants, less grass, and support for wetland plants in human-made lakes, we can save water and support insects that birds need to survive while making ourselves more resilient to catastrophic events.

Founded by Audubon in 2015, the Corkscrew Watershed Science Forum annually unites environmental professionals working within the Corkscrew Watershed to present their work to colleagues, policy staff, decision makers, volunteers, and the general public. The result is a regional forum for networking, productive discussion, and building collaborations aimed at informing and advancing conservation efforts across Southwest Florida.

Find more information from the event at corkscrew.audubon.org/cwsf-24.
Kelly Cox, Audubon Florida’s director of Everglades policy, flew into Washington, D.C. in early May to meet with staffers from 12 congressional offices about Audubon’s funding and project priorities for the Everglades. Alongside Caitlin Wall, policy director for water conservation at the National Audubon Society, the pair advocated for congressional authorization of important projects, including the Western Everglades Restoration Project, the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project, and the Lake Okeechobee Component A Reservoir Project. With appropriations season in full swing, Audubon also supported a $725 million federal ask for Everglades restoration.

“We are looking forward to approval of these critical project authorizations under the Water Resources Development Act of 2024,” says Cox. “Project authorizations, coupled with sustained funding streams, will bring these projects to life—allowing us to make significant headway toward a restored Everglades.”

This is a goal shared by the bipartisan Florida delegation and led by the Everglades Caucus. Audubon met with offices of the caucus co-chairs, Representative Diaz-Balart and Representative Wasserman Schultz, who reaffirmed their commitment to project authorization and funding.

“The bipartisan leadership from the Florida delegation on Everglades issues is unparalleled,” continues Cox. “We are so grateful to have Everglades champions amongst our Congressional leaders and applaud their vision for a restored River of Grass.”

In addition to meetings on Capitol Hill, National Audubon Society also hosted a bird outing for the Florida delegation at the United States Botanic Garden. The outing offered a great opportunity for birding and a good chance to chat about the recent success of the Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act—a bipartisan bill that reauthorizes and enhances a conservation program for migratory birds. Each fall, many migratory birds rely on the Everglades as a “last gas station” before completing their migratory paths to South America.
Farewell, Jacqui

We send well wishes to Jacqui Sulek as she retires after 19 years as chapters conservation manager. In addition to supporting our 44 local chapters in Florida, Jacqui also coordinated Jay Watch, our community science program protecting the Florida Scrub-Jay.

During her time on staff, she inspired chapters to widen their conservation programming and reach; supported the Conservation Leadership Initiative through chapter mentor recruitment; helped plan and host the pilot year of FLEDJE, a chapter-driven EDIB learning program; and took an instrumental role in Audubon Florida’s annual Assembly. Her passion for the birds and the people in her flock is apparent in everything she does. Thank you, Jacqui, for two decades and beyond!

Welcome, Kristen

Kristen Kosik stepped into the role of chapters conservation manager upon Jacqui’s retirement. While the role may be new to Kosik, Audubon and our Florida chapters are not. Since 2019, Kosik has been part of the Audubon Florida staff supporting the Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI), working with college students and Florida chapters to connect next-generation conservationists with our network and conservation projects across the state.

Kosik has nearly a decade of experience in environmental education and public engagement and is excited to share her skills in advancing equity and inclusion, engaging new communities, and leadership development with our state’s chapter leaders. She will continue to lead the CLI program as part of her new role.

Remembering Bob Simons of Alachua Audubon Society

We remember and honor Bob Simons, who passed away in June, for his 52 years serving on the board of the Alachua Audubon Society. During his tenure, Simons spearheaded countless important conservation projects. As a young forest ecologist in the early 1970s, he identified an extensive, environmentally-sensitive, mixed-hardwood forest in northwest Gainesville. He convinced ten private landowners to sell their properties to the state and lobbied legislators for two years, resulting in the establishment of San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park. He also promoted the establishment of other natural areas including River Rise Preserve State Park, Silver Rise section of O’Leno State Park, Silver Springs State Park, Tosohatchee Preserve, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve, and Pinhook Swamp, which connects Osceola State Forest with Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

Simons also recognized the precarious state of the Southeastern American Kestrel. For three decades he constructed, installed, maintained, repaired, and rebuilt countless nest boxes. He acquired a telescoping camera and developed a kestrel nest box monitoring project to share the exciting science of kestrels with college interns and other volunteers.

For decades, Simons was a leading voice at AAS for conservation initiatives. He advocated against large-scale development on ecologically sensitive lands in Alachua County; led opposition to the state park’s plan to allow grazing, timbering, and hunting on state parks; and advanced awareness and acceptance of controlled burns. These accomplishments represent just a fraction of Simons’ impact. Audubon is deeply grateful to Bob for everything that he accomplished to preserve and protect natural Florida.
Audubon Chapters Restore and Manage Bird Habitat Across Florida

As part of the National Audubon Society’s Flight Plan, preserving and creating healthy bird habitat is key to protecting bird populations. Many Audubon chapters across Florida manage land to protect birds and other wildlife.

BAY COUNTY AUDUBON SOCIETY AND LAIDLAW PRESERVE
Laidlaw Preserve, 272 acres in Washington County, is owned by the Florida Audubon Society and has been managed by Bay County Audubon Society (BCAS) since 2008. BCAS manages Laidlaw with three signature species in mind: Florida gopher tortoise, Florida native azalea, and Swainson’s Warbler.

Chapter members Ed Keppner and Neil Lamb, who also acts as preserve manager, wrote and maintained an Adaptive Management Plan as part of the ongoing work at the preserve. Management strategies include clearing old human-made trails and game trails while, at the same time, maintaining more of the edge habitat that supports the species richness of the property. This has allowed gopher tortoise populations to flourish, providing the tortoises “highways” to food sources. Fire ants, once a serious detriment to success of ground nesters on site, are now kept under control. Efforts are made to eradicate as many invasive, non-native plants as possible.

MANATEE COUNTY AUDUBON SOCIETY AND FELTS PRESERVE
Manatee County Audubon Society’s (MCAS) Felts Preserve in Palmetto, Florida contains a variety of bird habitats including mesic hammock, ponds, and grasslands. The diversity of habitats and bird species supports birding and other passive recreation and educational experiences. The property was acquired in 2002 from the estate of Otis and Anita Felts. MCAS partnered with the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast to grant Felts Preserve a conservation easement in 2020.

MCAS engages the community by using Felts Audubon Preserve for events such as “Hiking with a Librarian,” guided walks, open houses, educational field trips, and conservation days where the community learns about the importance of preserve management.

Audubon Collaborative Grants ($1k)
- University of Central Florida Knighthawk Audubon
- Audubon of Martin County
- Citrus County Audubon Society
- Eagle Audubon Society
- Four Rivers Audubon
- Halifax River Audubon
- Seminole Audubon Society
- Southeast Volusia Audubon Society
- Tropical Audubon Society

Audubon In Action Grants ($15k)
- Orange Audubon Society
- Pelican Island Audubon Society
- Tropical Audubon Society

CONGRATULATIONS TO CHAPTERS AWARDED NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY GRANTS THIS SPRING!

Every year, National Audubon Society supports the work of local chapters through grant programs. This year, 12 Florida chapters secured 13 grants to fund programs that align with the Flight Plan through protecting bird habitat, community building, policy work, and climate action.

A covered shelter for birders at the Laidlaw Preserve.
A Very Busy Earth Month Yields Big Wins for Birds

By Felice Stadler, Vice President, Government Affairs, National Audubon Society

Earth Month 2024 brought big conservation wins at the White House and Congress—and new campaigns to protect the lands and waters that are critical to our communities, our wildlife, and our future. This isn’t just good policy—it honors the demands of more than 80 percent of voters who say that conserving America’s lands and waters must be a national priority.

The new efforts come at a critical moment. North America’s bird population has declined by 3 billion birds since 1970, a loss of more than one in four birds. Whether the threats come from habitat loss or a changing climate, what depletes bird populations threatens all of us.

Audubon and its many allies have been mobilizing millions of Americans to move these conservation efforts forward, to support local and Indigenous communities across the country, and the birds and wildlife that are critical to our future.

SUPPORTING MIGRATORY BIRDS

Hundreds of bird species that grace our neighborhoods every spring and summer depend on safe migratory paths and nesting grounds thousands of miles away—and these migratory species have seen the largest declines among bird populations.

These birds help drive consumer spending by more than 96 million birders that generate nearly $100 billion in economic output.

The good news is that legislation supporting these frequent fliers—the Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act—was passed by Congress and signed by the president. This small but mighty program has provided funding and partnerships for conserving more than 350 species of birds.

PROTECTING COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Our coastal communities are too often ravaged by floods and storm surges, endangering vulnerable bird habitat and wetlands.

For more than 40 years the Coastal Barrier Resources Act has buffered people and birds—and saved taxpayers billions of dollars—by protecting undeveloped beaches, wetlands, and other coastal areas.

In April, the Senate passed legislation to strengthen the Act and extend its protections for communities and vulnerable bird populations along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

BRINGING CLEAN AIR AND SAFE, PLENTIFUL WATER TO OUR COMMUNITIES

Our birds, wildlife, communities, and families need a clean, thriving environment to stay healthy and build economic prosperity. April brought two important new steps:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released new climate pollution standards that cut emissions from coal and new natural gas-fired power plants, which are one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gasses and one of the largest sources of harmful air pollution.

Audubon joined the White House, states, Tribes, municipalities, and other NGOs for the America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge—a new conservation and restoration partnership to reconnect eight million acres of wetlands and 100,000 miles of rivers and streams, deliver clean and safe drinking water, and enhance climate resilience, among other goals.

PROTECTING COMMUNITIES AND ECOSYSTEMS

The Biden Administration finalized a rule that restored and strengthened the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) while also requiring that climate change and environmental justice impacts are assessed in federal agency decision-making.

These victories mark important policy steps toward our strategic goals—reflecting the priorities of tens of thousands of Audubon members and supporters, and of millions of birders across the United States. Policymakers who deliver these victories will have a flock of supporters making the long journey with them.
Legislative Session Recap

On Friday, March 8, the 2024 Legislative Session officially came to a close. Audubon Florida's policy team, led by Senior Director of Policy Beth Alvi, worked overtime to stay on top of worrisome bills, collaborate with elected officials on bill language and amendments, and keep our stakeholders up to date.

Budget Highlights

2024 was a historic year for many of Audubon’s budget priorities. The legislature passed a $116.5 billion budget, including a historic investment of $1.5 billion in water resource protection and the Everglades. Coastal resiliency and land conservation also saw strong funding levels, including $100 million set aside for the Rural and Family Lands Protection program—an initiative Audubon supports to engage working lands in conservation efforts—and $100 million for the Florida Forever conservation program.

Good Bills

Representative Hunschofsky’s HB 1049 requires property owners to disclose flood risk, prior property damage from flooding, and more. Such disclosures increase transparency and support smart growth strategies in flood-prone areas.

Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s new stormwater rule ratification under SB 7040, sponsored by Senator Harrell. Florida’s existing stormwater rules are more than forty years old and this new update would support goals of improving water quality in springs, lakes, and groundwater by reducing stormwater pollution.

HB 321: Release of Balloons, sponsored by Representative Chaney. This bill prohibits the intentional release of balloons which can become litter and endanger birds and wildlife.

Bad Bills

SB 1210, introduced by Senator Martin, would have revised the boundaries of Estero Bay Aquatic preserve to accommodate increased development. This bill would have run contrary to conservation goals and thankfully did not pass.

SB 738, Environmental Management, included a provision that stipulated that a person challenging permits issued by FDEP or water management districts over environmental issues would have to pay attorney fees if they lost, effectively shutting off citizen engagement in bad agency decisions. Thanks to our team’s targeted hard work and to the advocacy of many others, this language was removed.

HB 1645, Energy Policy, by Representative Payne repeals previously established renewable energy targets as well as renewable energy grants, effectively removing programs aimed at fostering renewable energy and conservation.

Taking of Bears Signed into Law Over Audubon Objections

This broadly written bill makes it legal for individuals to shoot bears without penalty to prevent what they perceive to be imminent threat of death, serious injury, or significant property damage, so long as no lure was used to attract the bear. Not only is this law likely unconstitutional, it is also unnecessary and dangerous.

We need broader adoption of known effective solutions for living alongside Florida black bears, instead of legislation encouraging individuals to open fire in Florida neighborhoods.

For a detailed accounting of this past legislative session, please visit: fl.audubon.org/2024session
A New Kissimmee Prairie Preserve Bunk House Will Step Up Conservation Efforts

Audubon and the Florida Park Service have completed construction on a brand-new “bunkhouse” at the Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park (Preserve). The 58,000-acre Preserve, located in a remote corner of Okeechobee County, conserves the largest remaining tract of Florida’s unique dry prairie ecosystem. Limited housing made it hard for the Preserve to host visiting workers and this bunkhouse will help fill that large void to give more people access to this ecological treasure.

“In the past, there have been funds available for more workers, but they could not be hired because we didn’t have anywhere for them to stay. Now we do. From Florida Grasshopper Sparrow technicians, to visiting researchers, fire crews, and others, we now can accommodate more people, and in a really nice dwelling, too,” explains Everglades Science Coordinator Paul Gray, PhD.

Why is Audubon making this infrastructure investment? It is a story 88 years in the making.

Audubon hired our first full-time warden to patrol the Okeechobee and the Kissimmee Prairie regions in 1936. Marvin Chandler was the first of four Chandler family members who worked for Audubon for the next 56 years. His nephew, Rod Chandler, told Audubon in the 1970s that the prairies were being plowed under by people and needed to be conserved as soon as possible for future generations of plants, wildlife, and people.

Audubon heeded the call and bought the 7,300-acre Ordway-Whittell Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary in 1980, named for the two foundations that donated the money. In 1997, we helped convince the state to buy the Latt-Maxcy property next to our Sanctuary—then the largest tract of remaining prairie, and now the Preserve. With that accomplishment, we sold the Sanctuary to the state to be part of the Preserve and used the proceeds to set up a permanent endowment fund that supports ongoing Audubon work in the region, as well as special projects on the Preserve.

The six Florida State Park managers of the Preserve all agreed the bunkhouse was a priority and have let the fund grow until now, and we finally had enough money to build it. Audubon and the Florida Park Service are elated to have reached this point and be able to make such a fundamental contribution to the Preserve and dry prairie ecosystem.
New Tricolored Heron Study to Shed Light on Population, Predation Problems

In May, the Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida granted Audubon funds to manage and protect six active nesting colonies and one abandoned colony that has supported past Tricolored Heron nesting. The Tricolored Heron is a state-Threatened wading bird with a declining population in the Tampa Bay region.

Using new motion-sensitive game cameras and other techniques, staff will manage threats to the colonies, including predation, human disturbance, and trash—especially fishing line and gear. As we continue to gather information on this species, we will work with land managers and decision makers to give productive nesting sites additional protections.

Audubon Celebrates New Islands in its Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries System

Thanks to a generous donation from Mahaffey Management, LLC, the Florida Audubon Society now owns Dot Dash Dit Critical Wildlife Area in the Tampa Bay region.

Dot, Dash, and Dit are three small mangrove spoil islands on the Braden River—important breeding and nesting sites for a mixed wading bird colony that includes Roseate Spoonbill, Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, and Wood Stork. Audubon staff have managed the islands since the early 1990s, conducting monitoring surveys, posting no trespassing signs, and removing trash and other debris. We are thrilled to now have official ownership of this important property.

Audubon will manage in partnership with the State of Florida, which owns the southern 40% of Dash Island. We plan to construct a living shoreline breakwater similar to the mile-long breakwater currently protecting islands from erosion at Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary, leased from and managed in collaboration with the Mosaic Company. This construction is possible thanks to a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

“The islands present a unique opportunity for Audubon to own a regionally important waterbird roosting and nesting site that has been recognized by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as a Critical Wildlife Area of statewide significance.”
— Audrey DeRose-Wilson, Director of Bird Conservation, Audubon Florida
A Successful 2024 Birdathon

We birded across Florida's diverse habitats, from wetlands to ranchlands, beaches to neighborhood parks. More than a hundred Audubon members and staff participated between April 20 and 26, logging a whopping 188 total bird species across the Sunshine State. The total number of species recorded by staff was 172. Folks were very generous in using Birdathon to raise awareness and funds for two of Audubon Florida's gateways to the birdy world: the boardwalk at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and the new aviary at the Center for Birds of Prey. Thank you to everyone who participated!

GET OUT AND EXPLORE!

Audubon manages two visitor centers in the Sunshine State, offering birdy experiences for all birding levels.

For travelers and tourists in Central Florida, the Center for Birds of Prey provides an opportunity to see Bald Eagles, Ospreys, kites, owls, and falcons; some of nature's top predators. Visitors learn about the unique adaptations of raptors, the challenges they face, and ways to help, and simply enjoy birdwatching and a picnic lunch at the gazebo on Lake Sybelia.

Plan your visit: cbop.audubon.org/visit

In Southwest Florida, a visit to Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary is a journey into the heart of an Everglades ecosystem. Discover the rugged beauty of this natural area on the Sanctuary’s famous boardwalk—a 2.25-mile adventure through the largest old-growth bald cypress forest in North America, home to a wide variety of wading birds, songbirds, and raptors. Find exhibits, a nature store, bird-friendly gardens, and picturesque photo opportunities around every turn (Note: The Sanctuary will be CLOSED for cleaning and repairs from August 19-30, 2024). Online tickets are recommended.

Plan your visit: corkscrew.audubon.org/visit

DONATE: givetoaudubonflorida.org

STAY IN TOUCH: fl.audubon.org/keep-touch

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