



SUMMARY OF 2019

# Tampa Wading Birds Report

PHOTO: SEAN HOWELL



Roseate Spoonbill. Photo: Mark Rachal.

## Introduction

Every nesting season, Audubon Florida staff head out into the Tampa Bay region to count wading birds. Since 1995, we have compiled data on nesting birds, including: Roseate Spoonbills, Wood Storks, Reddish Egrets, Little Blue Herons, Great Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, and Brown Pelicans in the region.

Most species experienced declines over the 25-year period, likely due to pressure from the increasing human population. Human disturbance at nesting colonies - boat landings, anglers, and photographers - causes adults to fly from their nests, leaving eggs and young unprotected from Fish Crows and other aerial predators, as well as vulnerable to temperature extremes. Chicks that fall out of their nests can't fly yet and often die. Development in coastal watersheds degrades or destroys wetlands critical to waterbirds foraging to feed their young and also releases a variety of pollutants into estuaries that exacerbate harmful algal blooms.

Importantly, Audubon and partners have collaborated to better protect the region's nesting islands, stemming population declines and working towards higher numbers of fledged chicks for some species in recent years. The Tampa Wading Bird report summarizes our data over 25 years, and looks towards the future for these iconic bird species.



Little Blue Herons. Photo: Robert Black.

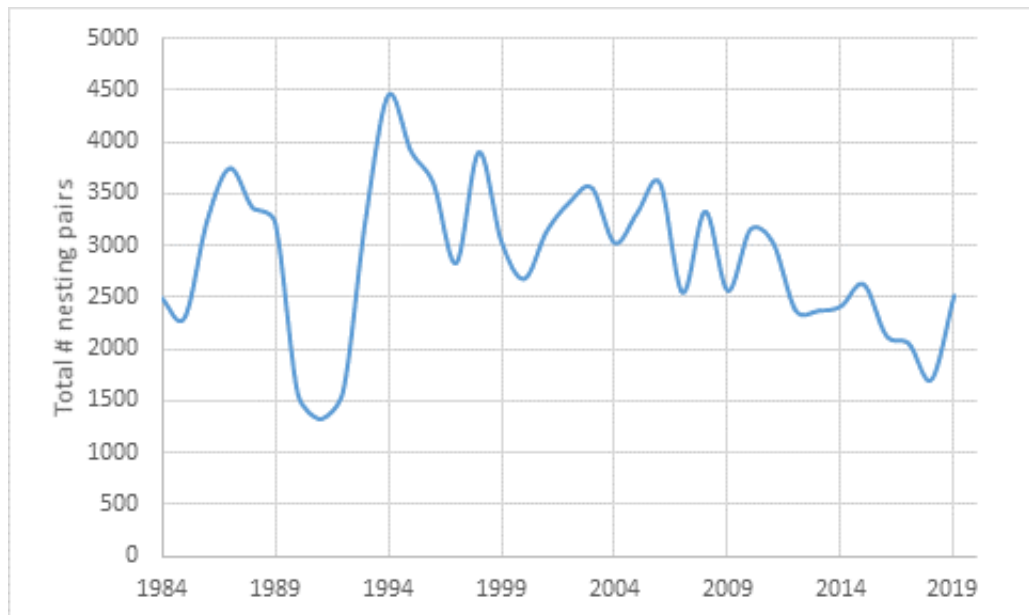
## Audubon Works to Protect Nesting Birds

Overall nesting varies from year to year as the weather strongly impacts inland wetland prey production and estuary bait abundance. Generally, numbers have remained stable over the last 25 years, although some species have experienced regional declines. Audubon Florida will continue to work with local, state, and federal partners to protect the areas these birds need to survive and thrive, now and into the future.

## Overall Nesting in the Tampa Bay Region

**Brown Pelicans, Great Blue Herons, Little Blue Herons, Reddish Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills, and Tricolored Herons**

While overall nesting pairs increased in 2019 vs. 2018, these numbers are largely driven by the recent success of Great Blue Herons and Brown Pelicans. As seen on the following page, most species have not had nesting upticks.

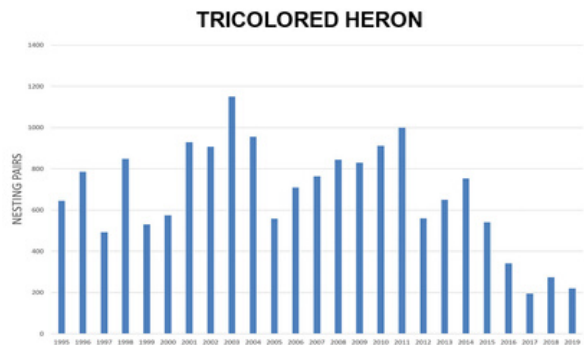
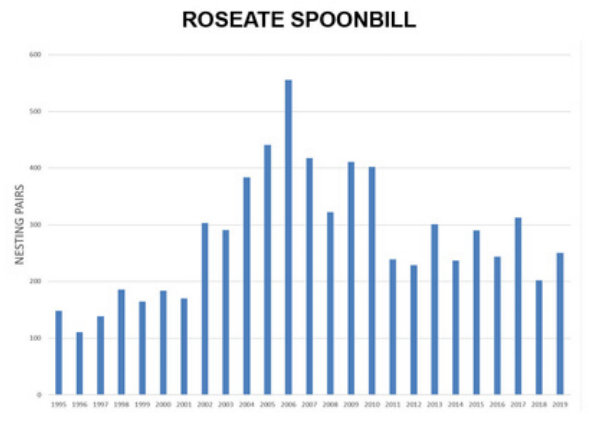
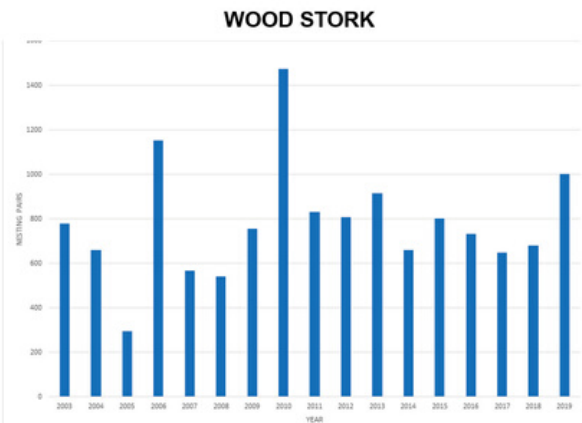
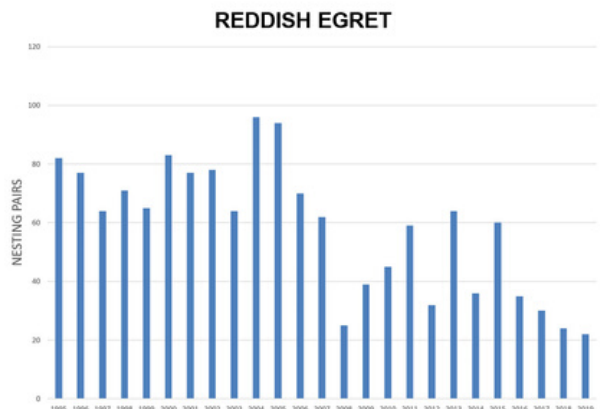
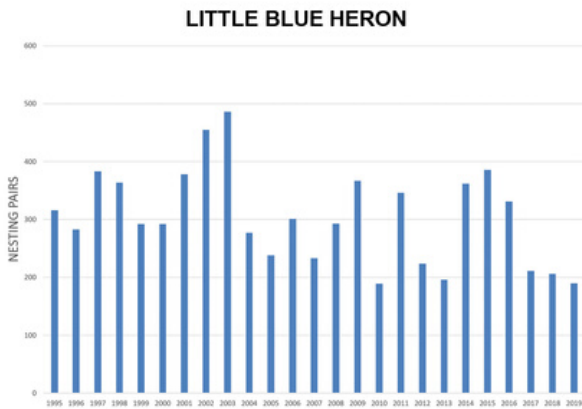
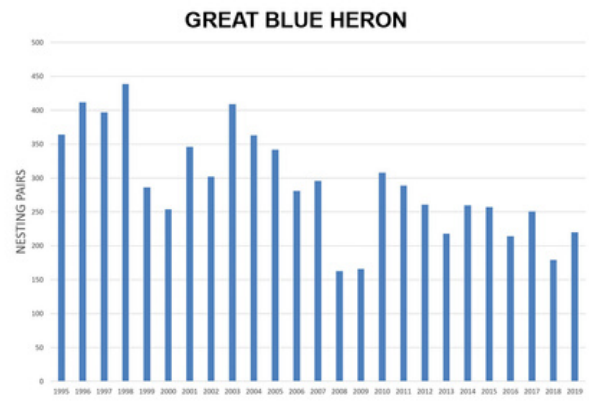
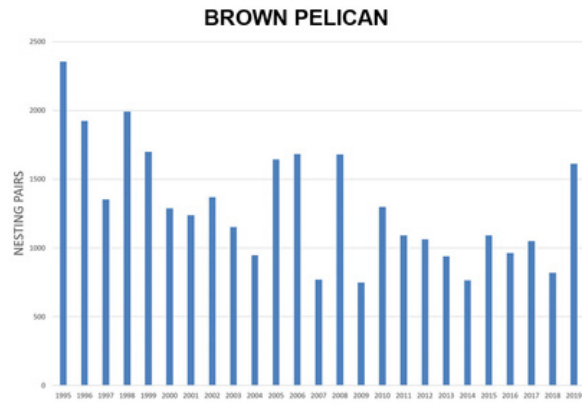


**View this report online at:**

**[fl.audubon.org/news/2019-tampa-wading-bird-report](https://fl.audubon.org/news/2019-tampa-wading-bird-report)**

# Nesting Pairs by Species: 1995-2019

Three-year running average nest counts by species for sites in the Greater Tampa Bay region



## Roseate Spoonbill

The local population increased from the mid-1970s through the mid-2000s, as the spoonbills recolonized sites within their former range in the region. After a peak in 2006, numbers declined slowly and stabilized over the last seven or eight years. The region's aggressive development and concurrent impacts on freshwater wetlands remain a concern for the future of adequate foraging habitat for this iconic, pink species.

## Reddish Egret

Reddish Egret populations remain low in Florida. The local population increased from 1995 through the mid-2000s, and then declined. Increased disturbance by boaters, photographers, and anglers at vulnerable nests close to shorelines, compounded by degraded estuarine water quality from

human development in coastal watersheds, likely contributed to their decline. In the fall of 2017, the FWC responded to the human disturbance factor by designating the Alafia Bank\*\* as a Critical Wildlife Area.

## Wood Stork

Just over 1,000 stork nests at sixteen nesting sites were monitored by Audubon staff in 2019. Storks that lost nests in South Florida early in a season can re-nest farther north in central Florida where the wetland conditions and prey availability are more favorable. Sites with significant stork nesting included the Dot Dash Dit CWA with 124 nests, the colony at the Lone Palm Golf Course in Lakeland with 213 nests, and a newly discovered stork colony in lower Sarasota Bay, the Dona Bay Colony with 70 nests. At Lake Somerset, 93 pairs of storks nested.



Roseate Spoonbills. Photo: Cynthia Hansen.



Reddish Egret. Photo: David Pugsley.



Wood Storks. Photo: Lorraine Minns.

\*\*Alafia Bank is leased from and managed in collaboration with The Mosaic Company.



Brown Pelicans. Photo: Tom Bell.



Great Blue Heron. Photo: Tom Bell.

## **Brown Pelican**

In 2019, staff observed increased nesting productivity. Pelican adults sustained two, three, and even in rare cases four chicks across the region. We speculate that this might be a result of the appalling impacts of the red-tide fish die-off in fall 2018, when fish of all size classes perished. As it takes larger fish longer to reach predatory size, bait fish abounded in estuary and near-shore Gulf waters, which could have promoted more efficient chick feeding.

The second largest nesting colony of Brown Pelicans in the region is within Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge/State Park, where biologists counted 330 nesting pairs in 2019. The colony's location near the major fishing piers at the Skyway Bridge and Ft. De Soto has meant that young, naïve pelicans fed by fishermen are often entangled in line or hooked. Audubon volunteers and others have recorded over 500 pelicans hooked or entangled in fishing gear each year, causing death or injury. A new program aims to reduce fishing line through community engagement.

## **Great Blue Heron**

Since the mid-1990s, the Great Blue Heron population has declined regionally. This species nests in colonies with other birds, but also singly in some sites, choosing the highest positions in the trees where large adults and clumsy young birds can easily fly in and out of tree-top platforms. These tree-top nest positions mean that the birds are exposed to temperature and weather extremes and the adults must be especially vigilant against aerial predators.

In 2019, 220 pairs of Great Blue Herons nested at 26 sites in the Tampa Bay. Most sites harbored only a handful of nests, but at the Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary staff counted 30 pairs within the protected area. Because of strong sibling rivalry combined with food scarcity, most pairs raised only one chick.

## Little Blue Heron

The population of Little Blue Herons, listed as state-Threatened in Florida, has declined in the Tampa Bay area since the mid-2000s; the cause of the decline is unknown.

During the 1990s, Audubon staff actively worked to improve colony management activities, enlisting agency and managers to allow posting of the nesting islands under their jurisdiction. This increased protection helped Little Blue Herons at nesting colonies successfully raise their young, adding to the adult population for several years.

Unfortunately, human alterations of the region's foraging wetlands may have reversed the positive trend. In 2019, Little Blue Herons nested in only nine colonies in Pinellas County.



A living shoreline protects nesting birds in the Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary. Photo: J. Landon.

## Tricolored Heron

In 1993, we began to work more closely with colony managers across the region to promote better protection at nesting colony sites, adding “no trespassing” signage on islands and other management activities. Tricolored Herons responded with increased nesting success, and adults were recruited to the nesting population for a few years.

Recently Tricolored Herons have been affected by foraging habitat losses. The alterations of the region's wetlands have dramatically reduced the feeding opportunities for this species, listed as state-Threatened. In 2019, Tricolored Heron nesting occurred at only four sites in Pinellas County, with few birds nesting overall.



Little Blue Heron. Photo: Bill Dix.



Tricolored Herons. Photo: Michael Libbe.

# Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries

Audubon's Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries (FCIS) protect nesting colonial waterbirds in the greater Tampa Bay area, including nesting colonies in Pinellas, Hillsborough, and Manatee Counties, as well as colonies in Sarasota Bay and north Charlotte Harbor. We review management actions and population trends based on the last 25 years of nesting population surveys conducted by Audubon staff.

To protect nesting colonies, Audubon Florida works with local, state, and federal partners to protect habitat with new living shorelines, restore wetland foraging areas, post and patrol islands for disturbance during nesting season, census all colonies annually, and reduce entangling debris through volunteer clean-ups. Audubon's FCIS team has been conducting region-wide surveys of nesting colonial waterbirds since the mid-1990s, with the aim of identifying the most important nesting areas to improve management of these sites, and to determine site-specific and regional population trends.

[fl.audubon.org/conservation/florida-coastal-islands-sanctuaries](https://fl.audubon.org/conservation/florida-coastal-islands-sanctuaries)



From left to right: Michelle van Deventer, FWC CWA Coordinator; Mark Rachal, FCIS Director; Nikki Foster, The Mosaic Company; Chris Cooley, Port Tampa Bay.

## Thank You!

To The Batchelor Foundation, The Mosaic Company Foundation, Pinellas Community Foundation – Tonne Fund and Bushnell Fund, Robert F. Schumann Foundation, and TECO Energy. And thank you to our individual donors and volunteers!

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