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BirdLife International and National Audubon Society recognize global significance of the Hillsborough Bay Important Bird Area

Tampa, FL – BirdLife International and the National Audubon Society have ranked the Hillsborough Bay Important Bird Area (IBA) as a globally significant site, based on the bird populations found there. Spoil islands in Hillsborough Bay provide key nesting, wintering, and migratory habitat for bird species. The islands are the Richard T. Paul Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary located west of the mouth of the Alafia River (comprised of two islands, Sunken Island to the west and Bird Island to the east), and Tampa Port Authority Spoil Islands 2D and 3D, located east of the main Tampa shipping channel. The Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary is owned by Mosaic and managed through a long-term lease by the National Audubon Society/Audubon of Florida's Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries. The Tampa Port Authority owns Spoil Islands 2D and 3D, and manages these islands to store material dredged from the port berths and shipping channels, with bird management assistance from Audubon's Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries.

Ian Hartzler of the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Areas Program, centered in Ivyland, Pennsylvania, reported that the Hillsborough Bay IBA was prioritized this week as globally significant based on the specific presence of four species, Laughing Gulls, White Ibis, Glossy Ibis, and Roseate Spoonbills. In each case, more than one percent of the world's population of these species nests in Hillsborough Bay, triggering the designation of global significance. The Laughing Gulls nest in large numbers on the Port Authority spoil islands (6,350 pairs in Spring 2008), and the White Ibis (8,870 pairs in Spring 2008), Glossy Ibis (170 pairs in Spring 2008), and Roseate Spoonbills (260 pairs in Spring 2008) nest on the Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary. All of these islands are posted as "no trespassing"; the Port Authority islands because of concerns about construction and homeland security and the Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary because of the bird colony habitat on the islands.

The Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary islands were constructed by the U.S. Phosphoric Products Company in 1929-1930, to allow shipping access to the fertilizer plant in Riverview. The islands were immediately important as bird nesting habitat, at first for beach-nesting birds including gulls, terns, Black Skimmers, and American Oystercatchers, and then as a nesting site for pelicans, herons, egrets, ibis, and spoonbills. Today it remains one of the largest nesting colonies in Florida and one of the most diverse in the United States, with 8,000-15,000 pairs of sixteen species nesting there each spring. The White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbills that nest here constitute one of the largest colonies for these species in Florida. Both species are state-listed as “species of special concern” (SSC) by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Other listed species that nest at the Alafia Bank include Snowy Egret, Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, Reddish Egret, and American Oystercatchers.

Spoil Islands 2D and 3D were constructed in the 1980s by the Tampa Port Authority and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Caspian, Royal, Sandwich, Least, and Gull-billed terns, Laughing Gulls, Willets, Black-necked Stilts, and American Oystercatchers nest each spring and summer on the Port Authority islands, which also provide valuable bird habitat during the winter for migrating and wintering shorebirds. Twenty percent of the state’s American Oystercatcher population nests in Hillsborough Bay.

Audubon of Florida’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries is marking 75 years of conservation activity in Tampa Bay this spring, with the first sanctuaries protecting the progenitors of this globally significant bird population in Hillsborough Bay beginning in 1934.

For more information, please contact: Ann Hodgson, Ann Paul, or Mark Rachal, Audubon of Florida’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries Program, 813/623-6826, mobile 813/376-8663 and Ian Hartzler or John Cecil, National Audubon Society’s Important Bird Areas, 215/355-9588.

Audubon of Florida and the National Audubon Society are dedicated to protecting birds and other wildlife and the habitat that supports them. Audubon’s national network of community-based nature centers and chapters, scientific and educational programs, and advocacy on behalf of areas sustaining important bird populations, engage millions of people of all ages and backgrounds in conservation. National Audubon Society is the BirdLife International partner for conservation in the United States. For more information, please visit www.audubon.org or audubonofflorida.org.

BirdLife International works on a world-wide stage using birds as vital environmental indicators. By focusing on birds, and the sites and habitats on which they depend, the BirdLife Partnership is working across the globe to improve the quality of life for birds, for other wildlife (biodiversity), and for people. For more information, please visit <http://www.birdlife.org/index.html>.

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