

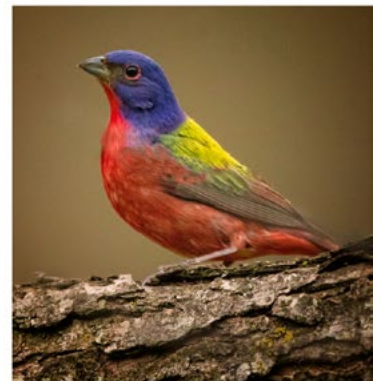
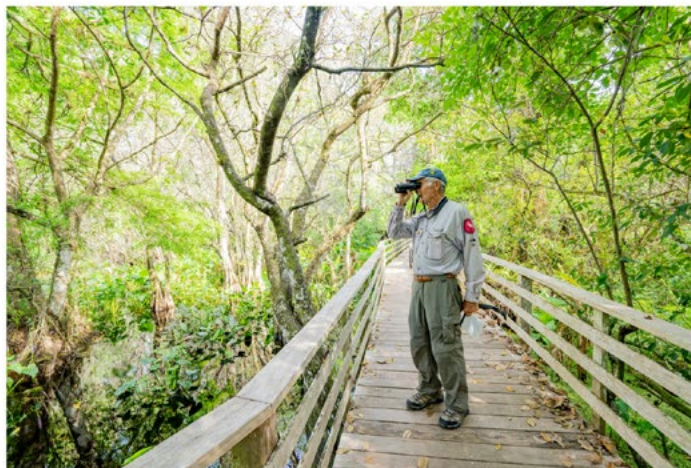




Photo: Renée Wilson/Audubon Florida

Friends and Supporters,

A lot has changed since 1954 when this critical forest was recognized as something special and worth protecting. Saving the swamp's 500-year-old trees from logging required guts, patience, and sheer determination. But keeping it safe is another battle altogether. It's an important one, because what we do here leaves a lasting mark on everyone who visits, and benefits untold others who do not.

As I think about the 13,000 acres now entrusted to our care, I think about all of the people who came together to make it happen and continue to work for a more resilient future. From the first warden protecting plume birds to today's visitors, volunteers, donors, and dedicated staff, we are stronger because of their care for Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

As you read this retrospective, I hope you will find inspiration and join us in this transformational time.

Keith Laakkonen
Sanctuary Director

2024 Corkscrew Sustainability Board Members

Keith Laakkonen
Sanctuary Director

Steve Nellis
Board Chair

Joe Ambrozy

Dan Ault

Deb Carrier

Lois Kelley

Gerry Manning

Bruce McEver

Brian Miller

Mike Rohovsky

Sharon Stilwell

Audubon's Legacy at Corkscrew Swamp



▲ *Camp of Rhett Green, warden of Corkscrew Rookery, Florida. The rookery begins in cypress swamp, shown in background, and extends for four miles deep into the "Big Cypress." Photo: T. Gilbert Pearson.*

In 1912, Rhett Green arrived at what is now Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary as a warden charged with protecting birds from illegal hunting. By the turn of the 20th century, bird feathers were prized for ladies' hats and poachers had decimated bird colonies across South Florida. People concerned about the future of these birds founded the National Audubon Society to campaign for legislation to make hunting birds for their feathers illegal and funded wardens like Green to protect the birds and their breeding grounds. While Audubon no longer employs wardens, the legacy continues through habitat conservation, policy leadership, and community building.

COVER PHOTOS (L to R): Allan D. Cruickshank (2), R J Wiley, Renée Wilson/Audubon Florida, Jean McCollum, Mike Fernandez/Audubon, David Korte, Sydney Walsh/Audubon, Pixabay.

70th Anniversary Celebrations in 2024

To mark the year-long celebration of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's 70th birthday, we hosted a variety of events on-site and in the community, including a kick-off celebration welcoming 450 people to enjoy festivities on World Wetlands Day.

Photographers in Residence

Sanctuary visitors were treated to a new exhibit in the Cypress Café made up of photos by our 2024 Photographers in Residence.



Our World Wetlands Day and 70th Anniversary kick-off celebration included the unveiling of our new Photographers-in-Residence exhibit and other activities. From left: Rod Wiley, Keith Laakkonen, and Zeida Cecilia-Mendez. Photo: Renée Wilson/Audubon Florida

Lisette Morales McCabe is a photographer, artist, and healing arts advocate. Originally from Nicaragua, she has resided in Florida since 2000 and enjoys documenting the natural splendor of South Florida.

Film & TV director **Zeida Cecilia-Mendez** won three Emmys for her unique “behind the camera” perspective. A graduate of New York Institute of Photography, her wildlife photography highlights Florida’s special kind of beauty.

Rod “R J” Wiley is known by many for his work on Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary’s “Super” ghost orchid. He specializes in birds and landscapes as well as high-definition, aerial photography.

Photography Mini-galleries in the Community

Throughout the year, photography by our 70th Anniversary Photographers in Residence was

showcased across the county including at three local and regional libraries, a craft brewery, and the Collier County jury room and Board of County Commissioners chambers.

We also hosted a special photography exhibit and reception at the Immokalee Pioneer Museum at Roberts Ranch featuring short films, remarks, and light refreshments. From February through April, museum visitors toured historic and contemporary photos depicting Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary’s 70 year history.

70th Anniversary Luncheon

Nearly 70 invited guests, including leadership donors, elected officials, and other dignitaries, gathered to celebrate our 70th anniversary and the launch of our capital campaign supporting strategic investments in the Sanctuary’s campus infrastructure. The event was kicked off by Audubon Florida’s Executive Director Julie Wraithmell, and included presentations by Audubon’s Everglades Science Coordinator Paul Gray, PhD, and Sanctuary Director Keith Laakkonen, who shared a vision of the future and debuted architectural renderings of our new campus.

See page 16 for details about this vision and the capital campaign that will maximize the full potential of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

Southeastern sunflowers.
Photo: Lisette Morales McCabe



Looking Back | A Short History of Our Iconic Boardwalk

What makes Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary so special? What typically comes to mind are the 500-year-old bald cypress trees within the largest expanse of old-growth bald cypress forest remaining in the world. Some say it is because it is home to the biggest ghost orchid ever discovered. To others, it's that the community came together in 1954 to protect this magical place from logging.

But something else at the Sanctuary is looked at *daily* but is often *overlooked*, even though more than a million pairs of feet have left their mark. It is the 2.25-mile boardwalk that transports visitors into the heart of the swamp and offers them a glimpse of the spectacular Sanctuary that was saved so many years ago.

EARLY DAYS

In 1953, then-National Audubon Society President John H. Baker published an article in the *Miami Herald* proclaiming Corkscrew Swamp's outstanding scientific and aesthetic value. Shortly thereafter, a flood of financial support from the local community, including several businesses, enabled the purchase of the first few thousand acres of land that were deeded to the National Audubon Society as a Sanctuary.

In 1954, the fledgling Sanctuary's vast, 5,680-acre wilderness was accessible only by four-wheel-drive vehicles along a remote dirt road. As more people

started expressing interest in the scenery, wildlife, vegetation, and history, Audubon hired Henry (Hank) P. Bennett as the warden and first nature interpreter. He toured visitors through the Lettuce Lakes in a boat, but Sanctuary managers realized they needed a better way to keep visitors dry while immersing them in this special swamp.



▲ In October 1955, Sam, Bob, and Fletcher Whidden, assisted by Hank Bennett and Alexander (Sandy) Sprunt, began construction of the first Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary boardwalk. Photo: Allan D. Cruickshank.



▲ On March 4, 1955, Audubon Warden Hank Bennett led visitors beneath the moss-draped cypress trees at the Lettuce Lake. Construction on the one-mile boardwalk through the swamp was still an idea and wouldn't be completed for almost another year and a half. Photo: Allan D. Cruickshank.

THE FIRST BOARDWALK

The local Whidden family headed up construction on the first Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary boardwalk, built with locally harvested cypress wood, in 1956. At the end of the boardwalk, visitors could walk right up to one of the largest trees in the Sanctuary. In its first year, the new boardwalk welcomed about 10,000 visitors.

Four years later, one of the biggest natural disasters in Florida's history wrought havoc on this special place when Hurricane Donna lumbered ashore just

south of Naples. She made landfall on Sept. 10, 1960, with winds reaching 120 mph. The large tree at the end of the boardwalk had its top taken off and barely survived, while entire sections of the boardwalk needed repair or replacement.

BOARDWALK EXPANSION

By 1968, increasing use made it clear that the original boardwalk could not keep up with demand. It was narrow and seemed crowded at times, encouraging managers to add on, making it a loop so visitors would return via a different route.



Original boardwalk map as depicted in the 1981 version of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's "A Self-Guided Tour of the Boardwalk" publication.

In 1969, staff and volunteers completed the final portion of the new loop, seen on the left side of the above map: a spur and observation platform in the central marsh. The total length of the boardwalk was nearly two miles.

Most of the cypress forests had already been logged by this time and cypress wood was no longer readily available so the team used pine instead. The joists and decking were pressure-treated to minimize decay. Despite using the best materials available at the time, boardwalk maintenance required constant funding.

THE SECOND BOARDWALK

The cypress and pine boardwalk served visitors for nearly 30 years. In the early 1990s, with visitation approaching 70,000 people per year and flood waters submerging the boardwalk on a few occasions, managers realized they needed to replace the old structure and raise it up by a few inches. Requirements were that it be smooth and wide enough for



Two boardwalks, side by side, are seen in this 1996 photo: the original, first constructed in 1956 (right) and the new boardwalk (left). Photo: Clyde Butcher.

wheelchairs, rot, water, and fire resistant, and that it last a long time.

After an extensive search for the hardest and most sustainable wood available, the Sanctuary director selected ipe wood grown in sustainably managed tropical forests in Brazil.

Ipe wood, also known as pau lope, is five times harder than pine and is fire and insect resistant—an ideal material for a boardwalk through a Florida swamp. Amazingly, the wood was so durable it was virtually nail-proof. Workers needed battery-powered drills to pre-drill holes before installing stainless-steel hardware.

The new boardwalk was completed on December 26, 1995, with additional spurs added the following spring. At 2.25 miles in total length, it was considered the fifth-longest boardwalk in the world.

Today, our iconic boardwalk welcomes roughly 80,000 visitors a year. From local families and international travelers to students of all ages, the boardwalk provides exciting experiences and beloved memories for all. Maintaining this structure is no easy feat and requires constant upkeep, from replacing screws and boards and weekly sweeping by volunteers, to full repairs when a tree falls.

Admission fees, memberships, and donations provide crucial funding for the important, ongoing maintenance of our boardwalk.

Looking Back | The National Audubon Society Ecosystem Research Unit *Established at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary*

In 1973, the Sanctuary was still small but slowly growing when Sandy Sprunt, then director of Audubon's research department, obtained a grant to document potential impacts on the Sanctuary's natural resources from the adjacent, newly created Golden Gate Estates residential area. Audubon was particularly concerned about unintended consequences of the large canal system associated with this huge residential development and how to compensate for these impacts.

Sprunt hired Mike Duever, PhD, to conduct a three-year ecological study. Ed Carlson, a former volunteer boardwalk builder and recent college graduate, was hired shortly thereafter, and the Ecosystem Research Unit (ERU) was formally established. Over 20 years of its existence, the ERU was made up of an evolving team of researchers charged with providing information to land managers and government agencies looking to protect, manage, and restore important natural areas and their associated wildlife.



Mike Duever (right) with Ed Carlson (center) and local botanist George Avery (left) at the Central Marsh Transect in 1982. Photo: Jean McCollom

At the encouragement of Sprunt, Duever generated contracts or grants to support similar work on the Big Cypress National Preserve, Okefenokee Swamp, and numerous smaller projects in Florida, the southeastern U.S., and around the country.

"Eventually, Audubon asked us to focus on small-to-large projects at Audubon sanctuaries around the country, with some of the larger projects being in Francis Beidler Forest Sanctuary in South Carolina, Rainey Sanctuary in coastal Louisiana, and Rowe

Sanctuary on the Platte River in Nebraska," says Duever.

Over time, these activities ramped up and resulted in the expansion of ERU staff—first at Corkscrew, and eventually at Rainey and Rowe Sanctuaries, as well as in the Florida Keys.

In 1983, Carlson left ERU to become director of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and the ERU team continued their activities until Duever left in 1993.

What did they learn? It turned out that Corkscrew in the 1970s was likely the least disturbed major wetland ecosystem remaining in South Florida and beyond.

"Corkscrew's presence at the top of its watershed, in a minimally developed upstream landscape that was also relatively distant from downstream influences, is what made this possible," says Duever.

The information they collected about the natural environmental processes and characteristics of a major, naturally functioning wetland ecosystem has proved invaluable when advising Sanctuary research and stewardship efforts. It has also guided numerous other organizations and agencies around the country on the management of their lands.

"I've always felt, although I've had a long, very satisfying professional life, those years with Audubon were the best years of my life," Duever adds.

Duever has remained involved with Audubon Sanctuaries on ecological issues and served on the Corkscrew Sustainability Board for nine years. The work done by ERU is now providing a foundation of data for the new Corkscrew Watershed Initiative.

Did you know? There are 42 Conservation Action Centers and Sanctuaries in Audubon's national network. They combine Audubon's science, on-the-ground conservation, and inspiring nature experiences, bringing people together to protect birds and the special places they need.

Looking Back | The Fight for Wood Stork Nesting Success

In 1957, Southwest Florida was home to the largest nesting colony of Wood Storks in the United States, with 6,000 nesting pairs at the Corkscrew Swamp colony. Audubon began monitoring regional Wood Stork nesting efforts in 1958. By the 1970s, data showed that Wood Storks in South Florida colonies were delaying nesting, usually waiting until January or February to initiate. This delay was accompanied by a significant drop in the number of chicks fledging.



➤ *Wood Storks are tactile feeders (birds that feed by touch), requiring shallow pools with high densities of small fish and other prey. A pair of Wood Storks needs an estimated 440 pounds of food over the 13-week nesting season to successfully fledge chicks. Photo: R J Wiley*

The Sanctuary and surrounding wetlands used to hold water for the entire dry (winter) season but in the mid-2000s, Audubon staff started noticing substantial changes to water levels in the swamp. Monitoring data showed that the wetlands were drying out faster, with water levels remaining lower for longer intervals, despite no change in rainfall amounts.

Historically, high water levels throughout the wet (summer) season allowed fish populations to grow, while falling water levels in the winter and spring concentrated those fish in depressions where wading birds readily fed on them. Disruptions in this cycle reduced food availability for fast-growing Wood Stork chicks.

Audubon staff conducted a Wood Stork foraging study to document foraging events over the course of two nesting seasons (2006-07 and 2008-09). The data confirmed that wet prairie habitat was particularly important to Wood Storks early in the nesting season.

Loss of wetlands have likely reduced the ecosystem's capacity to provide enough aquatic prey to support the thousands of Wood Storks that historically nested at Corkscrew. To make matters worse, over-drying of the Sanctuary during the dry season makes nests vulnerable to mammalian predators, while an invasion of native-nuisance woody shrubs into wet prairies make them inaccessible to the foraging birds.

The establishment of the Sanctuary provided much-needed protection of the colony site, but Wood Storks remain vulnerable to ecological changes throughout the region, as their core foraging area includes all wetlands within 18.6 miles of the colony.

Since the 2000s, Wood Stork nesting has expanded in Georgia and South Carolina, with modest increases across the Greater Everglades. In recent years, Wood Storks have established new colony sites in the region—a sign that conditions at Corkscrew have changed and are less than ideal for this species.

In addition to restoring wet prairies at the Sanctuary, Audubon contributes data toward engineering solutions and guides policy efforts benefiting the entire region.

Audubon staff conduct aerial flights monthly in breeding season to monitor Wood Storks nesting at the Sanctuary and four other Southwest Florida locations.

*Photo: Christine Lin/
Audubon*



Watch the short film, “Flight of the Wood Stork,” to learn more:

corkscrew.audubon.org/flight-wood-stork

Looking Back: A New Emphasis on Public Engagement

With a new boardwalk under construction in 1996, fundraising got underway for a new facility to welcome and inspire the thousands who visited. Construction began in 1999 to replace the cramped, four-room cabin that had housed offices, admissions, a small gift shop, and storage.

The new Blair Visitor Center became a reality in 2000 largely due to the support of Dorothy Blair, a Minnesota native who moved to Naples in 1976. She was active with Audubon for more than 25 years, donating funds toward construction of the new visitor center, the boardwalk, and other elements, including a life-sized bronze sculpture of Wood Storks near the entrance.

In addition to programs for adults, new facilities for school programs were constructed to enable Audubon to host 2nd and 5th grade classes from Collier County Public Schools. Staff worked with teachers to develop curriculum-based programs

that enhance classroom instruction and provide complementary field trip opportunities to foster a new generation of stewards.

Present for the ribbon cutting and official opening of the Blair Visitor Center in December, 2000 were (L to R): Sanctuary Director Ed Carlson, Carol Ann May, Dorothy Blair, National Audubon Society President John Flicker, Helen Burnham, and John Burnham. Photo: Mike Knight



FORMER STUDENT VISITOR ADVOCATES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION THROUGH FILM

In 2011, Elvis Velasquez was a fourth grader at Pinecrest Elementary School in Immokalee. His first visit to Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary with his school left a lasting impression, as it opened his eyes to the nature we have in the area.

Fast forward to 2023, Elvis was a junior majoring in entrepreneurship at Florida Gulf Coast University. He reached out to us about completing a service-learning project at the Sanctuary as part of his

University Colloquium class. His assignment was to gain experience with a nonprofit or government organization working to address sustainability.

"I am intrigued by the beautiful side of nature and the many ways organizations have tried to make a positive impact on the environment," says Velasquez, who offered his skills in music production and photo/videography for the project that focused on the importance of preserving our environment for future generations.

After spending many hours on the boardwalk with his camera, and later on the computer, Elvis produced an uplifting video with a fresh perspective. He scored the music himself.



We were pleased to share Elvis' production on our YouTube channel and website as inspiration for others to do more to protect the special places that remain in Southwest Florida.

View Elvis' production:
corkscrew.audubon.org/fgcu-student



Founded to protect wading birds, Audubon has worked to protect birds and the places they need across the Sunshine State since 1900.

Great Egret. Photo: Sydney Walsh/Audubon

70 years ago, brave voices in our community spoke up to protect ancient trees from the threat of the axe and saw.

Thanks to their effort, today we protect 13,000 acres in Southwest Florida as a haven for plants, animals, and people.



First 5,680 acres purchased and donated by the local community to establish Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.



Sanctuary designated as a National Natural Landmark by the Department of the Interior.



Western Everglades Research Center established to provide critical data in support of regional wetlands conservation.



Capital Campaign launched to position Audubon as a leader of Western Everglades conservation and education.

1954

1956

1964

2000

2013

2018

2024

Construction completed on the first boardwalk into the swamp, totaling one mile.

Blair Visitor Center and boardwalk extension opened to the public.

1,500+ acre Marsh and Prairie Restoration Project began, kicking off a multi-year, multi-million-dollar effort.



We need you for the next 70 years! corkscrew.audubon.org/70

Audubon's *Flight Plan*: A Powerful and Dynamic Story of Migratory Science, Climate Action, and Community Building

The legacy of conservation that began in 1954 at the Sanctuary continues today with Audubon's strategic Flight Plan. Flight Plan sets five-year milestones in key areas across National Audubon Society to track progress toward our long-term vision to halt and reverse the alarming decline of birds.

On the following pages we outline how Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary is soaring with Flight Plan. Watch for the Flight Plan icons to see where our initiatives fulfill critical milestones.



*A Roseate Spoonbill flies over the restoration area.
Photo: Sydney Walsh/Audubon*

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Fuels Audubon's *Flight Plan*

Habitat Conservation: The Sanctuary team stewards 13,000 acres within the Western Everglades. In 2024, the team applied prescribed fire on 500 acres and implemented invasive and exotic plant treatment on 3,000 acres, advancing a large-scale wetlands restoration project.

Policy Leadership: As a result of Audubon research documenting radical changes in Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's water levels caused by surrounding development, the South Florida Water Management District launched the Corkscrew Watershed Initiative—a three-year public restoration planning project with the Sanctuary at its heart. The restoration plan resulting from this effort will be a road map for a suite of restoration projects that will likely require a significant public investment across the 250-square-mile project area.

Climate Action Audubon is leading efforts to rapidly increase the production and delivery of renewable energy across the country,



HABITAT CONSERVATION

Using science to identify, protect, and conserve 300 million acres of bird habitat across the Americas



POLICY LEADERSHIP

Pairing diplomacy with advocacy to develop and implement bird-friendly solutions



CLIMATE ACTION

Deploying 100 gigawatts of renewable energy and storing 30 billion tons of carbon through natural climate solutions



BUILDING COMMUNITY

Creating a diverse network of bird lovers working together to advance our shared vision

a crucial priority for the hundreds of bird species facing extinction due to climate change. Collaboration with Florida Power & Light Company resulted in the wildlife-friendly site design and installation of 11 industrial-scaled solar projects in 2024 with another 12 projects in progress for 2025. Solar power at sites such as the Blair Audubon Center is a critical part of Audubon's efforts to advance renewable energy.

Community Building: In 2024, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary welcomed 80,000 visitors and provided educational programming for nearly 2,000 learners of all ages—from in-house and off-site programs to weeklong summer camps.



What We Do Today | Research and Conservation

Our mission is to preserve Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and support the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems throughout the Western Everglades. We use science-driven stewardship and education to protect birds, other wildlife, and people.

MAMMAL MONITORING

Audubon staff use camera traps for ongoing monitoring of mammal populations in the Sanctuary. With the help of interns and volunteers, staff conducted a study of the images captured from 2013 to 2019 to establish baseline data on mammals living within the Sanctuary. Over the course of six years, cameras collected more than 930,000 photos, providing information on 18 species and their habitat preferences over time.

Overall, the numbers of medium and large mammals have increased over time. Establishing this baseline description of mammal communities will guide habitat stewardship activities, such as restoration and prescribed fire. Another benefit includes knowing if and how Burmese pythons or other invasive snakes might impact the Sanctuary in the future.

WATERSHED SCIENCE FORUM

In addition to our in-house research program, the Sanctuary welcomes scientists from around the world to conduct research that aligns with Audubon's conservation mission. These research partners increase our collective understanding of plants and animals and our region's unique ecology.

Begun by Audubon staff in 2015, the Corkscrew Watershed Science Forum is a one-day meeting that brings together scientists, engineers, and other professionals working within the Corkscrew Watershed to present their work to their colleagues, policy staff, decision makers, volunteers, and the general public. This meeting provides a platform for scientific presentations, as well as opportunities for networking, productive discussion, and building collaborations.

HYDROLOGIC RESTORATION

Our research team studies water levels and the ways that land use changes around the Sanctuary are affecting our habitats. We use innovative science and cutting-edge technology to study wildlife movement, the rise and fall of water levels, and the impacts of development outside of our Sanctuary's borders.

HYDROLOGIC RESTORATION (cont.)

In Southwest Florida's flat landscape, water normally moves slowly through swamps like Corkscrew. But canals operated to drain water during rainfall events from low-lying communities downstream have also had the effect of pulling water faster out of this increasingly vulnerable wetland of international significance. The length of time that these wetlands remain filled with water has a direct impact on plants and animals in this water-driven ecosystem.

In early 2020, with support from the South Florida Water Management District's Big Cypress Basin, Audubon contracted Water Science Associates (led by Roger Copp and W. Kirk Martin) to complete a hydrologic modeling study aimed at better understanding the causes of the over-drying of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. The modeling team compared the relative impact of three stressors: water use (from agriculture and well fields), an influx of woody vegetation, and drainage for flood control, i.e. canals that drain surface waters downstream of the Sanctuary.

While agricultural and public water supply withdrawals have some negative impacts on the Sanctuary, flood management structures and operations downstream appeared to have the most influence on water loss.

CORKSCREW WATERSHED INITIATIVE

Since 2018, Audubon has worked closely with the South Florida Water Management District to demonstrate these water changes (which also extend to Bird Rookery Swamp and other state-owned land in the area) and partner with them to better understand the problem and seek solutions. The Corkscrew Watershed Initiative includes a public planning process with extensive stakeholder engagement. From 2024 through 2026, the initiative aims to identify, evaluate, and prioritize restoration projects. Restoration work could begin as early as 2026, with Corkscrew canal headwater improvements slated for 2027.

SFWMD and Audubon are focused on the important role the Sanctuary plays for the region's water, as a natural resource in need of protection, and as an integral part of resilience in Southwest Florida.

What We Do Today | Stewardship

With nearly 13,000 acres of wildlife habitat, Audubon staff make natural resource management a top priority. The stewardship program focuses on five elements: fire, invasive species, water, wildlife, and human access.

MARSH AND PRAIRIE RESTORATION

One of the key stewardship efforts currently underway at the Sanctuary is the restoration of marshes and wet prairies. Since 2013, staff have worked to reverse the spread of native-nuisance woody shrubs like Carolina willow that infested our freshwater wetlands. We are pioneering methods to remove woody shrubs, reestablish native grasses and vegetation, and ultimately reintroduce prescribed fire to manage and maintain these wetlands long-term.

To date, we have restored more than 1,400 acres toward an overall goal of 2,000 acres that were identified for restoration.

PRESCRIBED FIRE

In addition to burning as part of the restoration project, the stewardship team also applies fire in other parts of the Sanctuary. In early 2024, the team



Photo: Jacob Zetzer/Audubon Florida

conducted seven burns covering 184 acres, focusing on burn units that are adjacent to the Sanctuary's infrastructure (like buildings and the boardwalk).

Three of these first four units should burn every three to five years but haven't burned since at least 1997! Because of the lack of fire, fuels had become quite dense. Under dry conditions, they increased the risk of wildfire for the Sanctuary's buildings, our cypress forest, and our neighbors.

With the reintroduction of fire, these areas are now more resilient and defensible.

What We Do Today | Public Engagement

On a mission to engage, educate, and inspire both locals and visitors, our public engagement team supports conservation goals and fosters a love of nature in everything we do.

In 2024, public engagement efforts were supported by 104 dedicated volunteers.

OUR ICONIC BOARDWALK

Today, our beloved boardwalk gives all who meander its 2.25 miles an immersive experience within the largest remaining, old-growth bald cypress forest in the world. From the deep bellow of an alligator to the powerful whoosh of Wood Stork wings, the exhilarating sightings of countless species continue to stop visitors in their tracks.



Photo: Liz Hines

GUIDED EXPERIENCES

Staff and volunteers lead programs on the boardwalk and through the remote Sanctuary backcountry to teach participants about the importance of Corkscrew Swamp within the Western Everglades ecosystem. With early birding tours, swamp walks, family night hikes, bike tours in the back country, and more, our public engagement programs offer something for everyone.



Volunteers have been an important part of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's history and success. Audubon recognizes these contributions in many ways, including on a volunteer service hours board displayed in the Blair Visitor Center. Photo: Mike Fernandez/Audubon

STUDENT PROGRAMMING

Specialized school curriculum programs were developed in coordination with the Collier County School District. They include engaging and interactive outdoor lessons, complemented by pre- and post-classroom lessons to support student learning on site. Individuals, foundations, and businesses support program costs through sponsorships.

In the 2023-24 school year, educators reached 2,200 students through class visits and summer camp.

SPECIAL EVENTS AND CEREMONIES

Residents and visitors are now invited to celebrate their special occasion with us surrounded by the majesty of nature, introducing them to the wonders of the Sanctuary. In many cases, it leads event hosts and participants to form a special bond with Corkscrew Swamp. Renovations made inside the Blair Visitor Center have made it an attractive venue space for a variety of special events, including wedding receptions, birthday parties, and more.

We Need You for the Next 70 Years



From the forward-thinking conservationists in the 1950s to our current supporters today, the Sanctuary is built on a legacy of conservation champions ensuring a sustainable future. While we proudly continue this legacy, we need your help to rise to the challenges of the 21st century.

Today, the expanse of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary is more important than ever in a region facing rapid biodiversity loss and the impacts of a changing climate. The value of preserving the Sanctuary, where 500+ year-old trees still stand and endangered wildlife safely roam, is critically important for scientific discovery, ensuring the quality of life for people in Southwest Florida, and influencing conservation across the Americas.

For the past 70 years we have repurposed structures to fit the needs of our work to preserve the Sanctuary, but we have reached a turning point.

It is now time to make strategic investments in the Sanctuary’s infrastructure that will enhance our ability to deliver transformational programming and conduct the science needed to preserve this special place.

Rendering of the future Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary campus.



Our vision is taking flight.

Our re-imagined campus will be comprised of new spaces including the John “Jack” Hayworth Western Everglades Research Center, the Brian and Heidi Miller Land Stewardship Operations Center, the Paul Pacter Outdoor Classroom, and a new volunteer headquarters. Opportunities for recognition are available for leadership gifts.

We have raised 75% of the funds needed to realize this vision. With only \$5M more, our fundraising efforts will be complete and we can launch construction.

Help us reach this goal by June 2025.

Learn more at: corkscrew.audubon.org/vision

Barred Owls. Photo: R J Wiley

How We Will Realize the Full Potential of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

Audubon has the unique ability to showcase best practices in land stewardship while providing the science that describes how and why they work.

- To maximize this leadership, we will become a hub for convening partners and decision makers to influence land conservation and policies.

From the delicate ghost orchid clinging to an ancient bald cypress tree, to a 100-pound panther using scrub habitat for its den, there are endless lessons to learn and discoveries to be made in this world-class natural laboratory.

- A new, state-of-the-art research laboratory and on-site lodging will enhance our scientific abilities among our own staff, as well as our visiting researcher program.

While the swamp speaks for itself, investing in unique and immersive programming spaces will strengthen the visitor experience.

- The redesigned campus will provide impactful learning environments for students and educators, and ultimately inspire our future conservation champions.

We will remove outdated facilities and replace them with LEED certified, cutting-edge spaces, building only in previously disturbed areas. Our new campus will bring our teams together, supporting synergistic operations and collaboration that will strengthen our collective conservation and education impact.

Our Vision Taking Flight | An Enhanced Visitor Experience

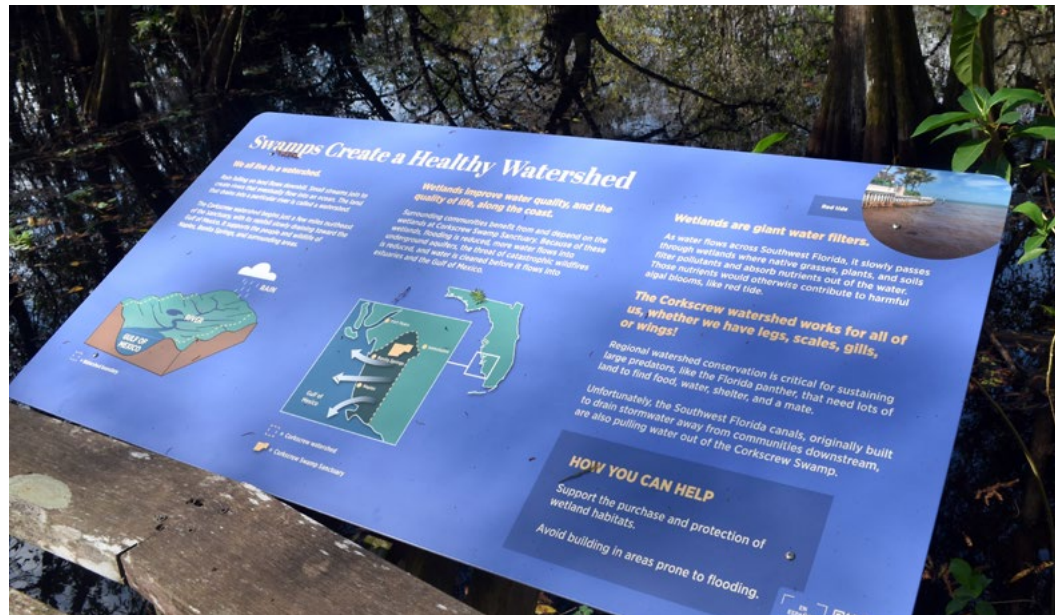
After years of planning, the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary team was excited to launch the first phase of a completely new visitor experience inside the Blair Visitor Center and along the boardwalk. Installed in November 2024, the updated suite of navigational and interpretive signs is the first part of our unprecedented capital campaign.

New exhibits in the Center tell visitors what to expect during their visit, explain the main habitats and wildlife found along the boardwalk, summarize the important conservation work underway across the 13,000-acre Sanctuary, and more.

Visitors will also notice a new “face” on our building, encounter eye-catching navigational signs, and see more than 50 educational displays along the 2.25-mile boardwalk. Each sign has a QR code that leads to the sign content translated into Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Still to come are a new campus entrance, new parking lot navigational signs, and a revamped Spurlino Foundation Discovery Center exhibit hall. The final components of the visitor experience refresh are anticipated to be completed in 2025.

Photo: R J Wiley



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*The Corkscrew Cypress Council is an
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provides core support for the Sanctuary,
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Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's "Super" ghost orchid.
Photo: R J Wiley

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