

Audubon | FLORIDA

State of the
Everglades
Fall 2025

Green Heron. Photo: Greg Courtney/Audubon Photography Awards.



Everglades restoration continues to be a bright spot on the conservation horizon. In the last six months, both the state and federal delegations have recommitted to Everglades restoration through substantial appropriations, which will help us keep more water flowing into the River

of Grass. New partnerships will expedite large projects, like the EAA Reservoir, while ribbon cuttings illustrate the progress we're already making.

Audubon continues to be a voice for birds, the places they need, and Floridians' quality of life as we impact proposed strategic plans, applaud new funding for water quality initiatives, and more.

Sincerely,
Beth Alvi, Senior Director of Policy
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New Faces at the Everglades Science Center

Our Everglades Science Center (Tavernier, FL) has transformed this year welcoming several new staff. Our team of dedicated scientists are always out in the Everglades and Florida Bay monitoring the success of restoration activities on this important ecosystem.

From left to right: Kaliegh Schlender, Jon-Paul Haydocy, Evan Lindo, Shauna Sayers, Kaycee Doherty, Liz Herting, and Emily Kreider. Not pictured: Kevin Ramirez, Jaime Gilrein, Michelle Carranza, Allie Mallouk, and Kim Pause Tucker.

Faster Timeline for the EAA Reservoir

Thanks to a new agreement between the State of Florida and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps), construction of the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir is slated to be complete in 2029 instead of 2034.

Under the new agreement, the State, through the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), will assume leadership over key project components, such as the inflow/outflow pump stations, auxiliary structures, and the Blue Shanty flow way, while the Corps focuses on the reservoir's core basin work. This rebalancing of roles is explicitly designed to speed up permitting, reduce federal bottlenecks, and compress the project timeline by a full five years.

Because these peripheral systems (pump stations, inflow/outflow works, flow ways) often create regulatory or engineering delays, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)'s shift of those responsibilities to state agencies is intended to streamline coordination and reduce costly pauses.

This marks a big shift in Everglades restoration strategy. Granting the state more authority, while

maintaining rigorous environmental safeguards, offers a path to speed up years of incremental progress. Yet, the promise of faster delivery can only succeed if implementation is transparent, science-based, and accountable. Audubon will insist that water quality standards, salinity controls, and ecosystem flow targets for the greater Everglades system are never sacrificed for speed. We will also work to ensure other conveyances and components maintain this speed to prevent bottlenecks, especially in the southern part of the system.

However, questions remain. Will long-term funding, contracting oversight, and public scrutiny keep pace? Audubon Florida plans to remain vigilant, urging regular public updates and adaptive management. If this MOU yields on-time, on-budget results that restore water connectivity southward, it could stand as a bold model — not just for the Everglades, but for large-scale ecosystem restoration nationwide and beyond. Still, keeping this pace of funding will be a challenge for those like us who lobby and advocate for it.

South Florida's Zombie Project is Back from the Dead: South Dade Logistics Center Returns



Miami-Dade's Urban Development Boundary constrains urban development, providing a buffer of agriculture between Miami and the Everglades. The South Dade Logistics Center would set a precedent for ignoring the UDB, paving the way for sprawl to march right up to the edge of the Everglades, as it has done elsewhere in South Florida (shown above). Photo: Kenneth Carlson/iStock

Several years ago, developers proposed a massive South Dade Logistics and Technology District that would have required an expansion of Miami-Dade County's Urban Development Boundary (UDB). This line protects the Everglades, wetlands, and surrounding natural areas from urban sprawl. The project posed major risks to restoration efforts, wildlife habitat, and the region's overall ecosystem.

Since 2021, Audubon Florida, Tropical Audubon Society, and

local partners have opposed the proposal, noting multiple procedural flaws. When developers missed a state-mandated deadline for a second public hearing in 2023, Audubon was the first to alert officials. The state confirmed the lapse, and the courts later upheld that ruling, invalidating the County's approval to move the UDB. This was a major victory for environmental protection and community advocates, for the time being.

Unfortunately, the project has

resurfaced before the County Commission under a new name: the "South Dade Logistics and Technology District Hub" with a smaller footprint. Despite the rebranding, it still lies outside the UDB and could open the door to future sprawl.

Audubon and partners will remain vigilant to ensure strong environmental safeguards and smart growth planning that protect the Everglades and South Florida's remaining natural lands.



Roseate Spoonbill.
Photo: Peter Brannon/Audubon Photography Awards.

Central Florida Water Initiative Regional Supply Plan Falls Short in Addressing Region's Water Woes

At the top of the Greater Everglades watershed, the Central Florida Water Initiative (CFWI) is a multi-county collaboration trying to address the increasing water scarcity of the Greater Orlando area, which because of rapid growth, extreme consumptive use, and overactive drainage, is quickly running out of water. Audubon has been advocating with the initiative for stronger safeguards for aquifers, wetlands, and natural systems, while sounding the alarm that this effort must do more than just list projects if it hopes to succeed — it must actively promote water conservation to build long-term resilience and prevent further ecological harm.

The region's groundwater withdrawals already exceed sustainable limits; Audubon has urged CFWI to adopt a precautionary approach to further withdrawals as the region grows, quantifying environmental water needs with minimum flows and levels. Most importantly, new development should be supplied with water made available by reduced use elsewhere rather than new groundwater withdrawals. One of the biggest opportunities

for water conservation? Reducing excessive lawn irrigation. Audubon is also advocating for stormwater and reclaimed water projects that would protect recharge areas from urban development, evaluate downstream impacts of regional withdrawals and restore ecosystems.

While the CFWI plan approved by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) last month has some good suggestions, its underlying math is still flawed. As long as the region keeps approving consumptive use at rates higher than supply can support, water woes will only continue to grow. The risk is not only to the environment, but to the region's water security as a whole.

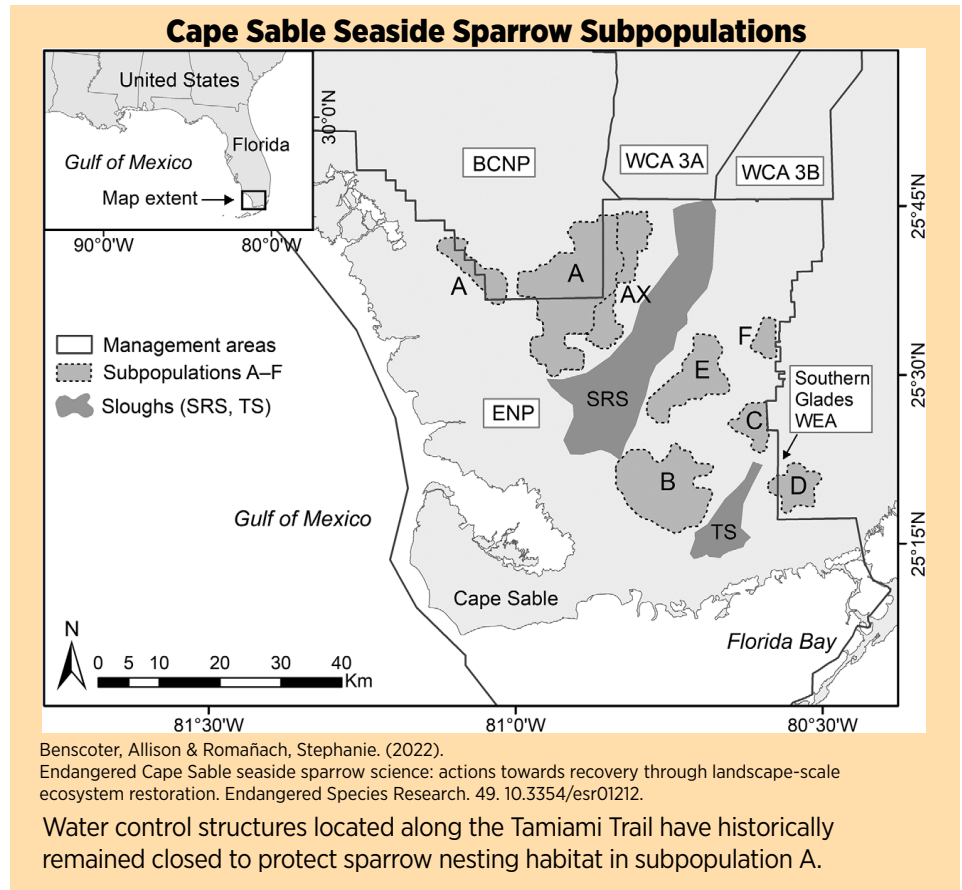
As of December 2025, the plan is pending final approval. Along with SFWMD, the St. Johns River Water Management District has also approved it, but the Southwest Florida Water Management District has not yet. All three districts must approve the plan, which serves as a five-year update to the 2020 plan.

Saving the Rare Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow

The Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow (*Ammospiza maritima mirabilis*) is one of the rarest birds in the continental U.S.

Endemic to marl prairie habitats in the southern Everglades, this sparrow is sensitive to subtle shifts in water levels: Nesting success demands dry enough ground during the February–August breeding window. Over time, altered water flow from water control infrastructure and high water levels have placed severe stress on its habitat, especially in subpopulation A, which continues a downward trend even as other sparrow subpopulations (B through F) have shown relative stability or modest improvement (see map).

According to recent projections, the sparrow’s total population stands at just 2,176 individuals, with only 136 adult males identified. Such low figures underscore the fragility of this already small population and the narrow margin for error in habitat management. The strongest of these populations are sadly the most vulnerable to sea level rise in the near-term, and the bird’s long-term survival will depend upon relocation to suitable marl prairie elsewhere in the Everglades. This will require breeding in captivity to produce the individuals for relocation, a process akin to the recent successful releases of Florida Grasshopper Sparrows in the Northern Everglades. With a population this small however, there is no time to waste.



In a decisive move toward greater protection in late 2024, the South Florida Water Management District approved a five-year pilot conservation breeding program for the sparrow, backed by an initial funding commitment of \$584,322. The idea is to remove a small number of birds into managed conditions to serve as an “assurance” population. This would allow for translocation to an identified suitable marl prairie habitat. In addition, Audubon worked together with the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida to acquire additional federal funding for this program via Senator Moody’s office in the Interior Report. Earlier this summer, Zoo Miami announced that it would

be the lead for the program and serve as the breeding location.

That said, conservation breeding is viewed by Audubon not as a solution, itself, but as a bridge while habitat, water flow, and ecosystem restoration continue. Relocating will also reduce tension between restoring natural water flows and protecting sparrow nesting habitat. Audubon will continue to work with the Zoo and other partners as this moves forward, applying lessons learned from the successful Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Conservation Breeding program.



Photo: Lori Oberhofer/
National Park Service

A Flurry of Ribbon Cuttings Illustrates Everglades Restoration Milestones



Critical Milestone in Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir Timeline

Audubon Florida joined the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and restoration partners in late September to celebrate the signing of the 10A construction contract for the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir. This is a critical milestone for the “Crown Jewel of Everglades Restoration.” The new contract advances key conveyance and protection features that will help move the project from planning to full-scale implementation.

Once completed, the EAA Reservoir and its associated treatment areas will be capable of storing and cleaning billions of gallons of water, reducing harmful discharges to the northern estuaries while sending clean, fresh water south to the Everglades and Florida Bay. This project is essential to restoring natural water flows, improving water quality, and supporting the health of wildlife and communities across South Florida.

Audubon Florida has long championed the EAA Reservoir as a cornerstone of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) and continues to work alongside state, federal, and local partners to ensure its timely completion. The 10A contract represents tangible progress toward a more

resilient, restored, and thriving Everglades for future generations.

Lake Hicpochee Ribbon Cutting

In October, partners gathered in Glades County to celebrate the groundbreaking of Phase Two of the Lake Hicpochee Restoration Project. Representatives from the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Glades County, Audubon, and other local, state, and environmental stakeholders joined together to commemorate continued progress in restoring this critical part of the Northern Everglades.

Located near the headwaters of the Caloosahatchee River, Lake Hicpochee plays a vital role in regional water management. The project, part of the Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program, aims to improve water quality, reduce the frequency and volume of harmful discharges to the Caloosahatchee Estuary, and provide much-needed shallow water storage in the surrounding watershed. Once complete, the restoration will help capture and treat stormwater runoff, promote natural wetland function, and enhance habitat for fish and wildlife.

Phase Two builds on earlier efforts to rehydrate and restore more than a thousand acres of former wetlands surrounding the lake. The new phase will expand water storage capacity, add treatment cells, and improve flow connectivity, designed to mimic the natural hydrology that once characterized this area before it was drained for agriculture.

Audubon Florida's Everglades Science Coordinator, Paul Gray, PhD, spoke at the groundbreaking, noting that "the District and its partners are making record-breaking progress

on water projects that benefit South Florida's watersheds." He also highlighted the unique collaboration driving this success. The District's Governing Board member Ben Butler also spoke at the event, emphasizing that as a farmer, he sees these projects as vital to South Florida's future. His comments dovetailed with those of Audubon. This shared vision underscores a growing consensus across sectors that restoring natural water flow benefits both people and the environment, strengthening the region's resilience to droughts, floods, and nutrient pollution.

Wetlands on ranchlands are important for wildlife like Wood Storks and more. Photo: Paul Gray/Audubon Florida



Funding for Regional Water Quality Projects will Help Farmers, Wildlife, and the Northern Everglades

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services keeps Everglades restoration momentum moving in the right direction through a new funding program. Their Office of Agriculture Water Policy has allocated \$25 million for regional water quality improvement projects. Supported by Commissioner Wilton Simpson, the Agricultural Regional Projects Program addresses nonpoint pollution in areas with heavy agricultural use. This funding allows applicants to apply for projects that promote

nutrient management in selected Basin Management Action Plan areas, including the Lake Okeechobee watershed.

Five million of the \$25 million is required to be spent in the Lake Okeechobee watershed. This allows landowners and agencies to provide nutrient reduction projects, thus improving the water quality and quantity downstream. Because phosphorus and nitrogen move off the landscape through stormwater flows to Lake Okeechobee, nutrient levels

there are magnified. These high nutrient levels cause harmful algal blooms, which can then cause both loss of submerged aquatic vegetation and fish kills.

Audubon commends the Office of Agriculture Water Policy for this commitment to advancing the restoration of the Everglades headwaters. We are working with landowners to support their applications and find more suitable land in the Okeechobee basin through our Wetland Evaluation Tool.

Collier Community Foundation Celebrates Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's Leadership in Conservation and Education with Two Gifts

Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Southwest Florida was awarded \$100,000 as part of the Collier Community Foundation's 2025 Celebration of Philanthropy on October 17. One of four local non-profit organizations selected from dozens of applications, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary will use the funds to expand and transform aging campus spaces to provide immersive learning opportunities in every season.

"With a proud 70-year legacy of education and conservation, we recognize the need to elevate our impact to meet today's challenges and better serve our community," says Sanctuary Director Keith Laakkonen. "The Collier Community Foundation's 40th Anniversary Grant is helping us realize a visionary transformation of our campus—featuring a new Outdoor Classroom and a state-of-the-art Research Laboratory."



Students on a field trip to the Sanctuary explore an insect exploration table set up along the boardwalk. Photo: Mike Fernandez/Audubon.

The Collier Community Foundation also awarded the Sanctuary an additional \$75,000 grant to support conservation within our 13,000-acre property, including critical wetland research and science-based land stewardship initiatives.



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