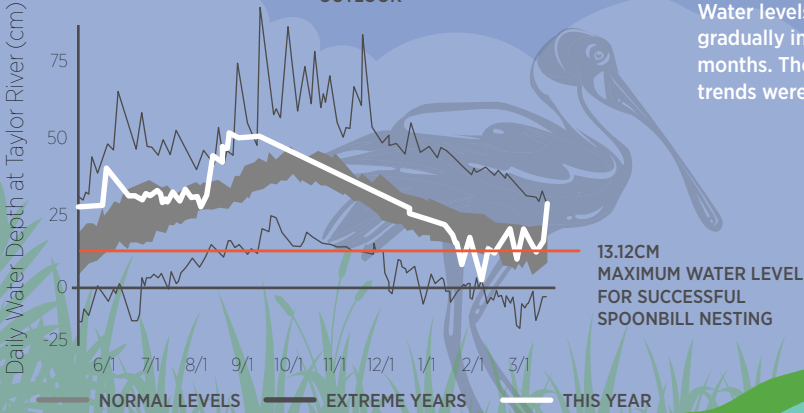


At the southern end of Everglades National Park, a series of sloughs conveys fresh water to the Florida Bay estuary. Audubon researchers track these freshwater deliveries (or lack thereof) and their impacts on the ecology of Taylor Slough and the Bay.

WATER LEVEL

ROSEATE SPOONBILL OUTLOOK



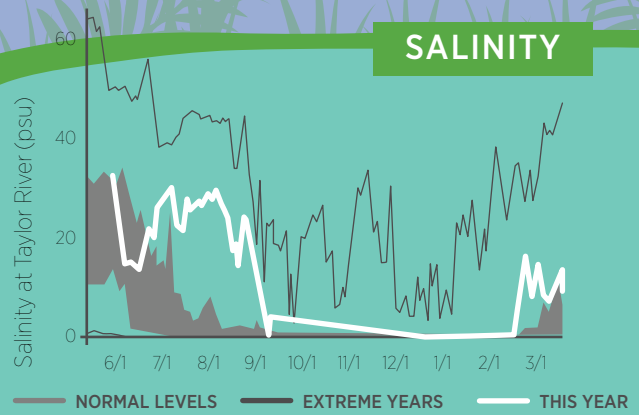
The 2025-2026 water year began with above average water levels in June and average water depths of more than 30 cm (compared to the historic average of below 25 cm). Water levels followed a similar seasonal pattern as previous years, with water depth gradually increasing through September and October, before declining over the winter months. There were no major hurricanes this season, suggesting depth and salinity trends were due to local weather rather than major storm events.

Winter water levels fell to unusual lows this past season. Evidence points to drought-like conditions, with the lowest water levels recorded in February. At that time, the Audubon team observed exposed sediment at Taylor River. Water levels rose again in March but remained below the historical average for that period. These low-water conditions are likely to have important environmental consequences, including reduced growth of underwater plants.

Florida Bay used to receive four times more fresh water from the Everglades ecosystem than it does today. Audubon uses science to accelerate Everglades restoration projects to deliver much-needed fresh water to Florida Bay.

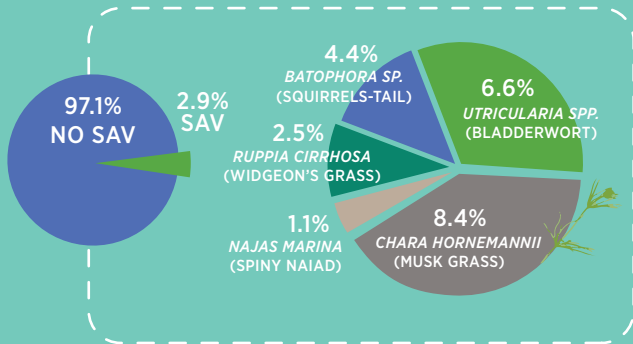
Taylor Slough

SALINITY



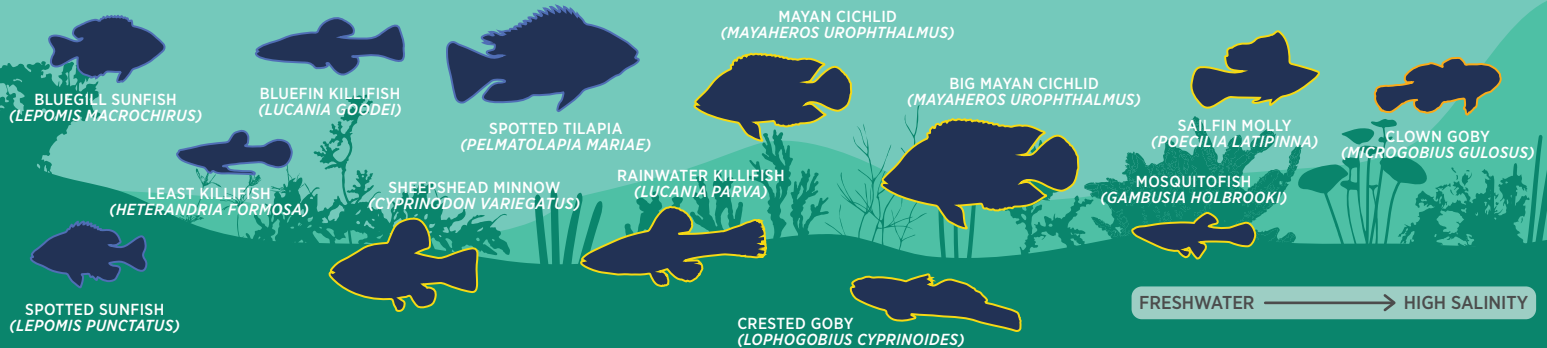
Salinity levels (or the amount of salt in the sea water) were relatively elevated at the beginning of the water year but declined rapidly, transitioning to freshwater conditions around August. Freshwater conditions persisted through the winter and into the spring. This pattern is generally favorable for freshwater fish, including bluefin killifish and least killifish, which prefer low salinity conditions. Other species documented at Taylor River included gobies and invasive Mayan cichlids, although their abundance was down from 2024 numbers.

SUBMERGED AQUATIC VEGETATION (SAV) COVERAGE



Submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) provides important habitat for the prey fishes that comprise wading birds' diets. This water year, SAV declined from 8.4% to 2.9% at Taylor River overall, indicating a reduction in total SAV coverage compared to 2024. This decrease is not ideal and moves us farther away from the desired restoration condition; however, there were notable shifts in community composition. Musk grass, a freshwater algae that is historically associated with productive SAV conditions at Taylor River, increased from 1.1% to 8.4% indicating persistence of key freshwater SAV communities. Other algae species including bladderwort (*Utricularia sp.*) and squirrel's tail (*Batophora sp.*) also increased over the past year. Notably, widgeon's grass (*Rupia maritima*), which was not documented in 2024-2025, reappeared this year, another positive indicator in SAV recovery. The return and persistence of native freshwater SAV species are particularly important, as they contribute structural habitat and foraging resources for fish that wading birds and other predators need to survive.

FISH SPECIES CAPTURED THIS YEAR AT TAYLOR SLOUGH



Taylor River supports many different fish species. In total, the Audubon Everglades Research Station team recorded 951 individual fish, dominated by species adapted to slightly to moderately brackish conditions and comprising approximately 63% of individuals. Freshwater species also represented a substantial portion of the group, accounting for roughly one third of all individuals (n = 323), consistent with the extended period of low-salinity conditions observed throughout much of the year. Species associated with high-salinity or near-marine environments were rarely encountered, collectively making up less than 1% of the total catch.