



Audubon | FLORIDA

# Naturalist

Summer 2026



Northern Bobwhite chicks.

Photo: Joanne Wuori/Audubon Photography Awards



## Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director

After an intense Florida fire season, exacerbated by widespread drought, summer rains have come to the Sunshine State as a welcome relief. Raging wildfires remind us that our environment is still in need of balance, not only by continuing to restore water flow to the Everglades but also the consistent application of prescribed fire to the landscape to rejuvenate ecosystems and reduce fuel for future wildfires (page 8).

It's not just water and fire that flow across our Florida landscape—it's also migratory birds, many of which nest here in the summer months (page 4). It's storm systems that we watch with trepidation as the Gulf heats up each year. It's also our team! Recently, the policy team flew to D.C. to meet with elected officials and their staff to advocate for additional Everglades funding (page 20). Bryant Dossman, PhD, has “flown” into the Keys to take his new role as director and principal scientist for the Everglades Research Station, while McKee Gray has made a short-distance hop to become our Everglades senior policy manager (page 6). With more than 80 staff members spread out across Florida, we can always flock to the places that need us most.

Thank you for your support so far this year advocating for birds and the places they need, from Florida Forever funding (page 13), to our beaches, and so much more. Cheers to a restful and bird-filled summer!

Julie Wraithmell, *Executive Director,*  
*Audubon Florida*



## Carol Timmis, Board Chair

I have big news. Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary is less than \$3 million away from our \$20 million campus transformation campaign goal. These funds will transform our campus into a cutting-edge conservation hub and a leader in Southwest Florida land management (showcased in our recent Corkscrew Watershed Science Forum, page 9). We've already finished our long-awaited

and exciting refresh of the exhibits inside the new Spurlino Foundation Discovery Center, and shovels are in the ground for new LEED-certified buildings. Thank you to the donors, grantors, staff, and volunteers who have made this happen.

These aren't the only changes we've welcomed this year. We've changed the name of the Everglades Science Center to the more descriptive Everglades Research Station, still committed to the long-term monitoring that has informed Everglades restoration policy for nearly 100 years (page 6). Plus, we constantly adapt to changing state and federal policies and legislative sessions, making sure laws and regulations that make us more resilient now and into the future are top of mind.

It may be hot and humid out there, but don't let that stop you from enjoying Florida's natural wonders this summer. Check out the new aviary at the Center for Birds of Prey, take a shaded walk along Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's boardwalk, or explore new public lands in the Panhandle. Happy birding!

Carol Colman Timmis, *Chair,*  
*Audubon Florida*

## 2026 Florida Audubon Society Leadership

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2026

# Audubon Assembly

Protecting What Connects Us—Water, Wildlife,  
and Community.

## OCTOBER 15-17 | TradeWinds Resort

Join us in St. Pete Beach for Florida's premier conservation gathering, where grassroots leaders from around the state join Audubon's professional staff and partners to grow their knowledge and skills to protect Florida's precious natural resources.

We are excited to announce National Geographic Explorer and world-renowned photographer Mac Stone as our keynote!



Black Skimmers. Photo: Jean Hall

Visit [audubon.org/florida/assembly](https://audubon.org/florida/assembly)  
for details and registration.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING of the membership of The Florida Audubon Society. Pursuant to the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, notice is hereby given that the Annual Membership Meeting of the Florida Audubon Society will be held on Saturday, October 17, 2026 at 1 p.m. The meeting agenda will be to receive a financial report and hear any comments of the membership to the Board of Directors. A Meeting of the Board will follow immediately upon the conclusion of the Membership Meeting. For questions, contact Adrienne Ruhl at [Adrienne.Ruhl@audubon.org](mailto:Adrienne.Ruhl@audubon.org).

## Tampa Bay Coastal Team Works Through Film Proposals and Roof Collapses in a Unique Start to the Summer Nesting Season

It's not every day that the coastal team has to negotiate with a film crew to protect nesting sea and shorebirds, but that's the position Tampa Bay Shorebird Program Manager Kara Durda found herself in this spring. The crew filming a mini-series based on the 1984 novel "A Land Remembered" sought to record multiple scenes at Ft. De Soto Park in Pinellas County.

The proposal concerned Audubon staff and our community partners. For some scenes, the film crew wanted to release dozens of livestock animals along a coastline known for American Oystercatcher and Wilson's Plover nesting, as well as in areas with active gopher tortoise nests. Durda and the coastal team worked with the local chapter, St. Pete Audubon, led by Dr. Beth Forsys, as well as park and county staff, to field media requests and convince the film crew to choose another location. Luckily, "A Land Remembered" moved their biggest and most impactful scenes to an alternate site on private property, without vulnerable species such as nesting sea and shorebirds and tortoises. This was a win for community engagement and coastal protection, showcasing that our Florida environment needs to be shared by both people and wildlife.

### ROOF COLLAPSE PROMPTS PARTNERSHIP TO PROTECT NESTING SEA AND SHOREBIRDS

American Oystercatchers, Black Skimmers, and Least Terns have nested on a Tampa Bay-area Winn Dixie (now ALDI) rooftop since 2011. This year, a pair of oystercatchers, X16 and W35, incubated eggs while an interior renovation of the building began. These shorebirds utilize the gravel on the rooftop as a makeshift beach, with plenty of space and fewer predators.



Gopher tortoise. Photo: Charles Lee

Unfortunately, just before the eggs hatched, a Friday night news report alerted our team to a 100-foot-wide hole that had opened on the roof when the structural supports inside the building failed. Audubon volunteers raced to the site the next morning, relieved to find the bird family unharmed. Tampa Bay Shore and Seabird Biologist Abby McKay worked right away with the building owner, the city, and eventually the construction contractors, to alert everyone to the presence of the birds.



4 Audubon Florida



American Oystercatcher chicks survive a Winn Dixie roof collapse. Photos: Abby McKay/Audubon Florida

Thanks to partnership with the ALDI contractor, the FWC, and Audubon, these American Oystercatcher chicks successfully fledged. Photo: Abby McKay/Audubon Florida



“Contractors needed to stabilize the falling roof materials and noticed the oystercatcher family when they were doing so. The project superintendent knew something wasn’t right. Why were there shorebirds on the roof? He stopped work and reached out to Audubon staff to see what the birds needed,” McKay explained.

Since the repairs were likely to disturb or harm the birds, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission worked with the contractor to obtain a permit, and we made sure that the birds had a dedicated monitor when a worker needed to access the roof. Moreover, the project superintendent, John Robison, asked to place

a temporary fence on the roof around the collapse to ensure that the chicks could not fall in. Audubon staff assisted with placement and ensured it was safe for the chicks. Robison checked in almost daily to ask about the chicks’ condition, if they needed anything, and more. “We couldn’t have asked for a better partner,” added McKay.

We continued to monitor the chicks as they grew and are excited that both chicks successfully fledged. We’re thankful for the strong partnerships that help us manage unexpected challenges during nesting season.

## Santa Rosa County Enacts Reduced Speeds to Protect Nesting Seabirds

Black Skimmers and Least Terns are once again nesting along the Navarre Bridge Causeway—a narrow strip of sand between the roadway and the waves. Audubon staff have been diligent in monitoring and fencing off the habitat, but Santa Rosa County stepped in to help further by voting to reduce the speed limit on the causeway from 35 mph to 20 mph during the breeding season. Thank you to the Santa Rosa County commissioners!

The coastal team and their volunteers installed chick fencing to protect these seabird babies in the Panhandle. Photo: Brian Cammarano/Audubon Florida



# Audubon Welcomes New Leadership to Everglades Policy and Science Teams



In December, McKee Gray joined Audubon Florida as our new senior manager of Everglades policy. Gray brings nearly a decade of experience in environmental regulation, with deep expertise in coastal and wetland resource management. Most recently, she served as a division chief II at Miami-Dade County's Department of Environmental Resource Management, overseeing the Coastal Resources, Wetlands Resources, Tree and Forest Resources, and Water Control sections. She has also represented the county on the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force since spring 2024 and on the Biscayne Bay and Southeastern Everglades Ecosystem Restoration project delivery team since 2020.

Gray earned two undergraduate degrees at the University of Georgia and holds an M.S. in marine affairs and policy from the University of Miami, where she developed a strong interest in the intersection of science and policy to support South Florida's ecosystems. She lives in Key Largo and is an avid backcountry angler who loves spending time on the water.

“Over the past six months, I have had the privilege of working alongside legislators, agency leaders, and our conservation partners to advance critical Everglades restoration and conservation priorities. Through productive meetings at both the state and federal levels and strong collaboration with NGO partners, Audubon continues building momentum for policies that support a healthier Everglades ecosystem and a more sustainable future for Florida.

– McKee Gray, Senior Manager of Everglades Policy



“I'm excited and honored to lead the long-term science at AERS during such a defining moment for Everglades restoration. Building on this station's extraordinary research legacy, I'm committed to ensuring that science drives the decision making that allows this globally significant landscape to thrive for future generations.

– Bryant Dossman, Director and Principal Scientist of the Audubon Everglades Research Station

Bryant Dossman, PhD, joins Audubon as the new director and principal scientist of the Audubon Everglades Research Station (AERS) in Tavernier. As a behavioral and population ecologist, Dossman focuses on understanding the mechanisms driving migratory species responses to global change from a full annual cycle perspective, with an emphasis on animal movement as a critical link between individual behavior and population processes. His research combines cutting-edge tracking technologies, long-term field studies, experimental designs, and innovative quantitative approaches to investigate the causes and consequences of individual movement and behavior.

He holds a Ph.D. from Cornell University, an M.Sc. from The Ohio State University, and a B.A. from Bowdoin College, coming to AERS from a postdoctoral position at Georgetown University and a research associate appointment at the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. Now stationed in the Florida Keys, Dossman is eager to build on the station's rich research legacy to advance the science and conservation of South Florida's iconic resident bird communities as well as the migratory populations that connect this region to the broader hemisphere.

## Censusing Reddish Egrets

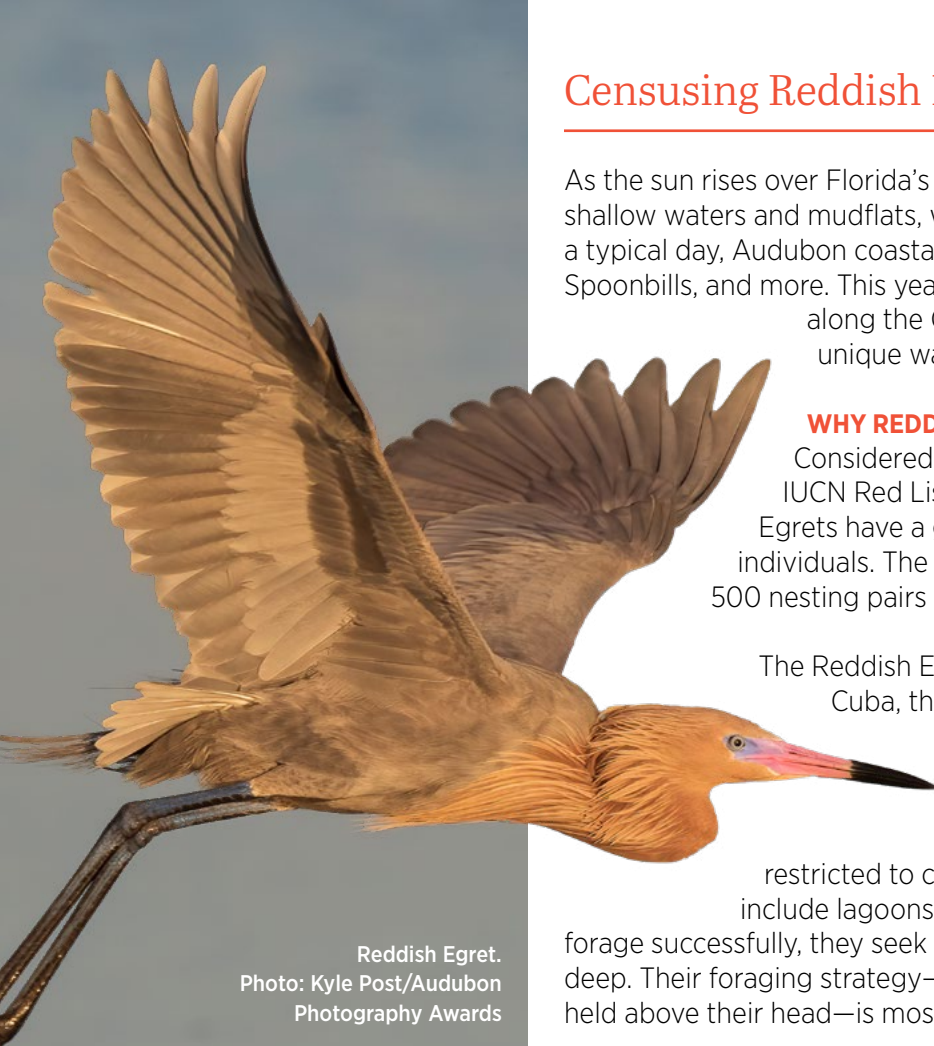
As the sun rises over Florida's coastline, thousands of birds descend on its shallow waters and mudflats, where they forage for fish and other prey. On a typical day, Audubon coastal staff spot Ospreys, White Ibises, Roseate Spoonbills, and more. This year, however, teams in both Florida Bay and along the Gulf Coast have kept a special eye out for a unique wading bird: the Reddish Egret.

### WHY REDDISH EGRETS?

Considered North America's rarest heron, the most recent IUCN Red List Assessment (2020) estimates that Reddish Egrets have a global population of just 5,000-9,999 mature individuals. The last statewide census in 2016 showed roughly 500 nesting pairs in Florida.

The Reddish Egret lives year-round in coastal Florida, Cuba, the Bahamas, and coastal Texas and Mexico.

Despite their widespread range, Reddish Egrets remain rare sights due to their low numbers and patchy population distribution. These habitat specialists are restricted to coastal, undisturbed, saline landscapes that include lagoons, beaches, marshes, islands, or tidal flats. To forage successfully, they seek out water levels ranging from 5 cm to 20 cm deep. Their foraging strategy—capturing fish while leaping with their wings held above their head—is most effective in shallow waters.



Reddish Egret.  
Photo: Kyle Post/Audubon  
Photography Awards

Many of Florida's Reddish Egrets reside in Florida Bay, a lagoon that makes up one third of Everglades National Park and is located at the very southern tip of the Florida mainland, situated between the Everglades and the Florida Keys. The bay is comprised of mudflats exposed at low tide, intermixed with pockets of deeper water and seagrass beds. Florida Bay receives fresh water that flows down through the Everglades, mixing with tidal salt water from the Gulf and the Atlantic, creating a lagoon that supports biodiversity hotspots. Combined with untouched, protective mangrove islands, the bay is an ideal place for a Reddish Egret to call home and an excellent location for the Audubon's Everglades Research Station team to focus their research efforts.

### BEYOND FLORIDA BAY: TAMPA

Reddish Egrets also raise their families in the urban estuaries of Tampa Bay and along the Southwest Florida coast. Extirpated from the region in the early 1900s due to hunting for the plume trade, Reddish Egrets recolonized Tampa Bay in the mid 1970s. Many of the islands that they rely on in the region are dredge spoil islands. Healthy coastal environments with good water quality and enough small fish to support Reddish Egrets are essential to their survival.



Reddish Egret.  
Photo: Lorraine Snipper/  
Audubon Photography  
Awards



Reddish Egret chicks.  
Photo: Allie Mallouk/  
Audubon Florida

## MONITORING

Unsurprisingly, research on this species is limited and ongoing. The biologists at the Audubon Everglades Research Station in the Florida Keys and Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries in the Tampa Bay region are determined to better understand these mysterious birds. The teams have spent much of 2025 and 2026 climbing through remote mangrove islands in search of Reddish Egret nests across dozens of sites.

## CONSERVATION CONCERN

A 2022 assessment identified climate change, coastal engineering, human disturbance, and development as the top threats facing Reddish Egrets worldwide. Across most of its range, sea level rise would eliminate valuable foraging habitat due to erosion and inundation. Furthermore, increased frequency and intensity of storms would physically damage nesting habitat, taking years to recover. In some cases, habitat is lost forever. Increased coastal development results in direct loss or alteration of nesting and foraging habitat. Activities such as dredging, shoreline armoring, shipping, and construction change the hydrology of the landscape, release contaminants, and decrease water quality of the wetlands Reddish Egrets inhabit. In addition to climate change impacts, coastal development and engineering irreversibly damage Reddish Egret habitat. Audubon surveys in Tampa Bay suggest recent declines there, making this statewide census that much more important. Our research attempts to tease out whether the decline is due to a decline in breeding success or birds moving to other parts of the state.

## WHAT IS AUDUBON DOING TO HELP REDDISH EGRETS

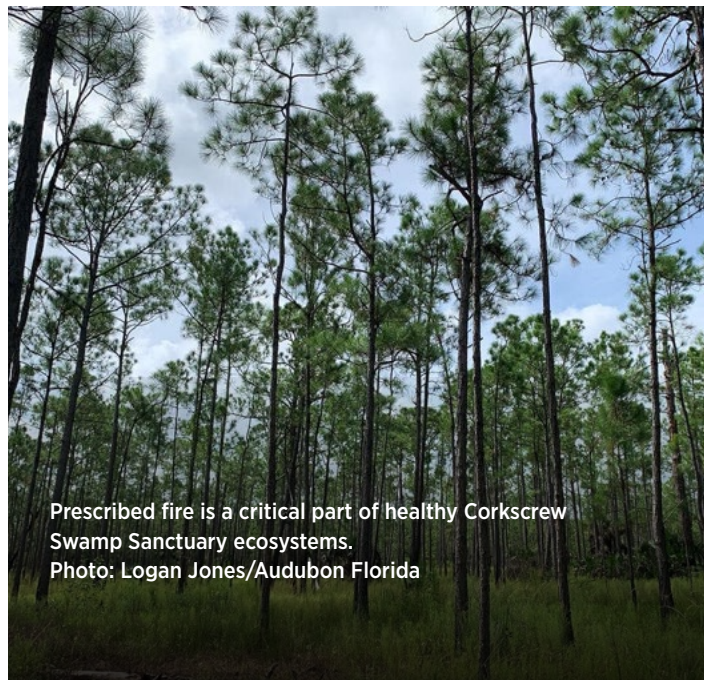
The Reddish Egret, with its low population numbers and stealthy behavior, continues to keep biologists on their toes. Researchers believe that more satellite tracking studies are essential to understand their population dynamics and guide best conservation practices. This year's special effort in collaboration with FWC is part of a statewide census to evaluate their population status.

Audubon Florida is protecting their nesting habitat from erosion and human disturbance and working with partners to protect and enhance foraging habitat as well. We are reducing threats from entanglement by cleaning more than 15,000 feet of fishing line from rookery islands each year. Our team conducts annual nest counts and collects data on productivity (nesting success).

## Birth and Regrowth Follow Fire in Florida

Fire is a critical force driving the ecology of South Florida. Historically sparked by cloud-to-ground lightning strikes or ignited by Indigenous peoples, frequent fire reduces fuel loads, protecting people and property while supporting a diverse landscape that helps wildlife thrive.

At Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples, a variety of habitats and wildlife evolved to depend on fire. With primary goals of reducing hazardous fuels and maintaining a healthy ecosystem, prescribed fire is an important tool in the conservation team's toolbox for managing the 13,000-acre Sanctuary. Audubon staff burn hundreds of acres of pine flatwoods, wet prairie, and marsh each year.



Prescribed fire is a critical part of healthy Corkscrew  
Swamp Sanctuary ecosystems.  
Photo: Logan Jones/Audubon Florida

In addition to reducing downed limbs, leaf litter, and other flammable natural debris, prescribed fire also stimulates the regeneration of plants by opening up areas for sunlight to penetrate. Some plants that benefit include:



Spring Ladies' Tresses (*Spiranthes vernalis*), an important nectar source for a variety of pollinators.



Carolina Wild Petunia (*Ruellia caroliniensis*), a host plant for common buckeye butterflies.



Fewflower Milkweed (*Asclepias lanceolata*), a host plant for monarch butterflies.

Without frequent fires, competing vegetation chokes out many important native species, making fire a crucial element for their survival.

A variety of animals also rely on fire to open areas for travel and to provide a source of new growth for foraging, especially white-tailed deer, Florida black bear, and several species of birds. Fire creates essential habitat for Wild Turkeys, which forage for insects in burned areas. But few birds are as fire-dependent as the Northern Bobwhite. Known as “fire birds,” these quail rely on the nesting cover and regrowth of native grasses that fire brings. With an increase in fire frequency in recent years, bobwhites are being seen more frequently in the Sanctuary and active nests were found this year for the first time in decades.

“ Many Floridians know prescribed fire is important, not only for habitat health, but to protect our communities from catastrophic wildfire.

– Allyson Webb, Land Stewardship Manager

While lightning-strike-induced fire has shaped Florida’s landscapes for millennia, natural fires today are extinguished quickly due to the growing presence of human communities in fire-prone locations. The benefits of prescribed fire extend well beyond wildlife habitat. Using frequent, low-intensity fires to prevent high-intensity wildfires is one of the most important things Audubon can do for wildlife and people.

## Ninth Annual Corkscrew Forum Convenes Scientists and Stakeholders around Watershed Science

Knowing more about threats and their impacts on the ecosystem is critical for managing land while protecting wildlife, plants, and water resources in a changing landscape. Created by Audubon staff, the annual Corkscrew Watershed Science Forum improves our ability to protect crucial habitats that Audubon manages for the benefit of the greater Corkscrew Watershed.

Hosted on May 7, 2026, at the UF/IFAS Extension in Collier County, the ninth annual event welcomed 100 participants and more than a dozen speakers, including Audubon conservation staff. The day-long event unites Audubon staff with other environmental professionals working within the Corkscrew Watershed, inviting them to present their work to colleagues, policy staff, decision makers, municipal staff, and other partners. The result is a regional forum for networking, productive discussion, and building collaborations aimed at informing and advancing conservation efforts across Southwest Florida.

The 2026 event highlighted many ways scientists are working to combat demonstrated impacts from development in the watershed to benefit wildlife and ecosystems, and opportunities to safeguard the things that are important to birds and people. By protecting the important wetlands in the watershed, this event also strengthens the ties between the places birds need across the hemisphere.

# Florida Legislative Session Gives Us the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

## THE GOOD

On June 29, 2026, Governor DeSantis signed Florida's \$117.6 billion state budget for 2026–27. The final budget is smaller than last year's, despite strong state revenue and rising costs. Legislative leaders framed the lower spending plan as a way to keep taxes low, pay down debt, and prepare for the future.

**The good news for conservation advocates:** The budget includes full funding—\$645 million—for Everglades restoration projects, supporting major efforts such as the EAA Reservoir, the Lower Kissimmee Basin Stormwater Treatment Area, the Western Everglades Restoration Project, the Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program, and the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Plan.

The Agriculture and Environment budget totals about \$8.9 billion and includes significant investments in clean water infrastructure, restoration work, and conservation programs across the state.

Some examples include:

- Alternative water supply projects to help meet Florida's growing water needs.
- Springs restoration and protection.
- Water quality improvements for Biscayne Bay, the Indian River Lagoon, and the Apalachicola region.
- Harmful algal bloom and red tide research, management, and mitigation.
- Drinking water and wastewater infrastructure improvements, including assistance for small and rural communities.
- Flood resilience, sea level rise adaptation, beach renourishment, and coral reef restoration projects.



Northern Bobwhite. Photo: Carole Wiley/  
Audubon Photography Awards

## CONSERVATION LANDS BILL

Conservation Lands, **HB 441** by Rep. Kendall (R-St. Johns) and its Senate companion, **SB 546** by Sen. Mayfield (R-Melbourne), increase transparency when the state proposes to sell or exchange conservation lands. Filed in response to last year's controversial proposal to swap land at the Guana River Wildlife Management Area, the bills require the state to give the public at least 30 days' notice before any deal and to post key information online, including which lands are involved, how they are valued, and why the transaction benefits conservation.

In simple terms, the legislation ensures that the state clearly explains and publicly discloses plans before making major decisions about lands that belong to the people of Florida, helping prevent rushed or behind-the-scenes deals that could permanently alter important natural areas. **HB 441** was signed into law in April.

## BIOSOLIDS BILL

Biosolids, **SB 1294/HB 1245** by Sen. Bradley (R-Fleming Island) and Rep. Shoaf (R-Quincy), was vetoed by Governor DeSantis. This was a very necessary bill that would have updated Florida's rules for the use of Class AA biosolids—treated sewage sludge that is sometimes used as fertilizer on farmland.

Class AA biosolids are a growing problem in Florida. As Class B biosolids application is phased out, the state is creating a new problem by allowing Class AA biosolids, which can carry many of the same nutrient concerns as Class B, to be applied with little regulatory control.



Disposing of biosolids on agricultural lands—shown here—causes nutrient pollution to waterways and fuels harmful algal blooms. Photo: Paul Gray/Audubon Florida

The bill would have required biosolids to be applied only at agronomic rates, meaning only in amounts crops can actually use. It also would have prohibited over-application, required operators of bulk biosolids application sites to keep records for five years on the type, amount, and timing of biosolids applied, and directed the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to develop new rules for the distribution and marketing of these materials.

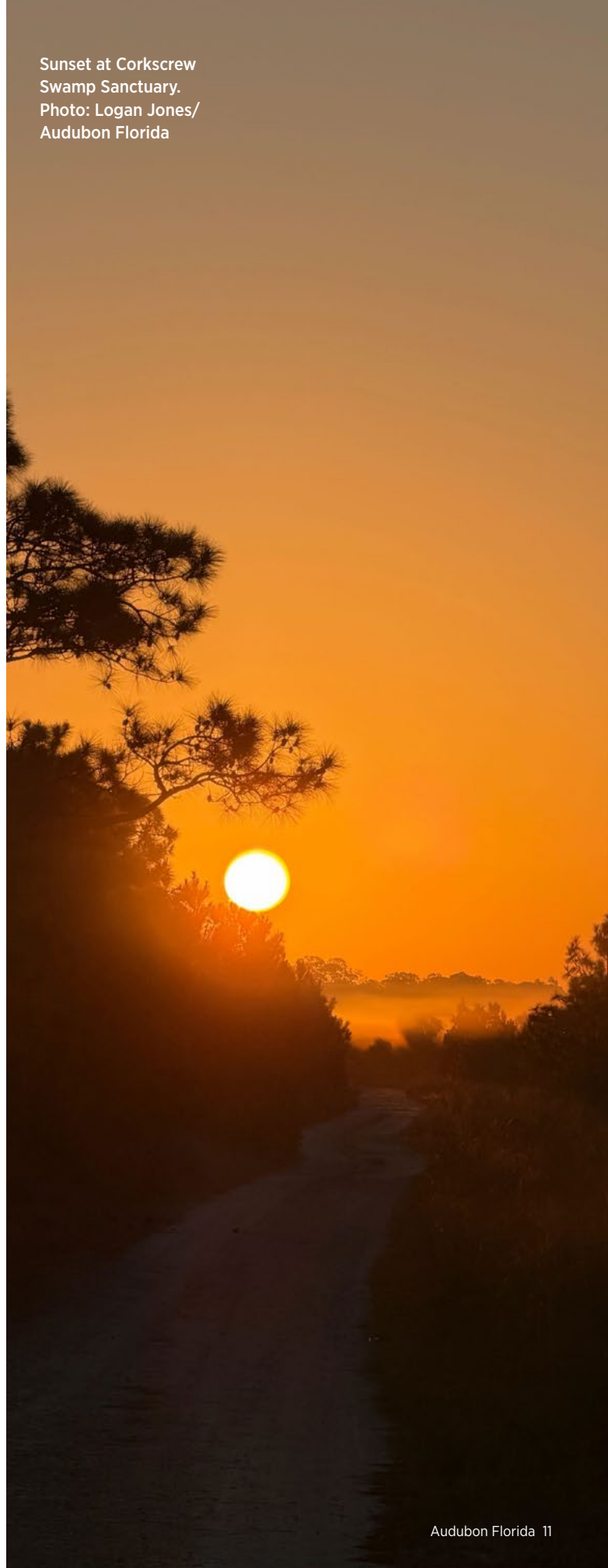
By vetoing this bill, the Governor rejected a practical and needed step toward stronger oversight. This was a short-sighted decision that leaves Florida’s water resources and nearby communities vulnerable to continued nutrient pollution from land-applied biosolids.

### COASTAL RESILIENCE BILL SIGNED BY GOVERNOR

Coastal Resilience, **SB 302** by Sen. Garcia (R-Miami) and **HB 1035** by Rep. Mooney (R-Key Largo), strengthens protections for Florida’s aquatic preserves while allowing limited restoration work to improve coastal resilience. It restricts dredging and filling in sensitive waters, expands the use of nature-based shoreline projects like living shorelines, and directs the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to create statewide rules for nature-based coastal resilience projects by 2027.

An amendment by Sen. Boyd (R-Bradenton) adds specific protection for the Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve in Tampa Bay, prohibiting dredging or filling there unless it is necessary for a public purpose or water quality improvement. The bill also allows limited dredging in the Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve when it is needed to restore natural systems and strengthen coastal resilience.

Sunset at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.  
Photo: Logan Jones/  
Audubon Florida



## THE BAD

### THE 2026 FLORIDA FARM BILL SIGNED BY GOVERNOR

The 2026 Florida Farm Bill, **SB 290**, by Sen. Truenow (R-Tavares), makes changes to numerous programs within the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), but unfortunately weakens key protections for Florida's environment.

Provisions in the bill allow conservation lands other than state parks, state forests, and wildlife management areas bought after 2023 to be reviewed for agricultural "suitability" and possibly sold off for farm use, with the state retaining a Rural and Family Lands easement to prevent future development. Sale proceeds would go to fund the FDACS' Rural and Family Lands Program instead of being returned to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Florida Forever program. This would create a pipeline in which some lands acquired in fee title under the Florida Forever program could be converted to agricultural use and then remain protected only by the terms of a Rural and Family Lands easement, permanently weakening Florida's conservation system and excluding public access from lands shifted to agriculture.

**SB 290** includes an amendment by Sen. Harrell (R-Stuart) that prevents lands necessary for Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan projects from being considered surplus to agriculture. Biosolids regulations are also loosened, moving toward Class AA applications without clear permits or DEP oversight, raising risks to water quality and public lands. Audubon called attention to these harmful provisions.

On a positive note, the bill's sponsors in both the House and the Senate made statements on the floor during debate that all such surplus decisions would be reviewed by the Acquisition and Restoration Council and could be approved only by a public vote of the Governor and Cabinet.

### LOCAL LAND PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT BILL SIGNED BY GOVERNOR

Land Use and Development Regulations, **SB 208** by Sen. McClain (R-Ocala) and **HB 399** by Rep. Borerro (R-Miami), makes several changes to Florida's growth management and land-use review process, accelerating housing development and limiting local government discretion in development decisions. It requires local governments to clearly define how they evaluate compatibility between residential uses in their comprehensive plans and land development regulations.



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

Photo: Ben Gerrard/Audubon Photography Awards

Helpful amendments adopted in the Senate blunted some of the worst parts of the bill by further clarifying compatibility review standards, outlining procedures for documenting mitigation measures during development review, and reinforcing zoning parity for off-site constructed housing.

Environmental and planning advocates have raised concerns that the bill further limits the ability of local governments to manage growth and address development impacts. By restricting how communities can evaluate compatibility and requiring approval of certain housing types in single-family areas, the measure could make it more difficult for local governments to consider infrastructure capacity, environmental constraints, and community planning goals when reviewing new development.

### ONSITE SEWAGE TREATMENT AND DISPOSAL BILL SIGNED BY GOVERNOR

Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal Permits, **SB 698** by Sen. Martin (R-Ft. Myers) and **HB 589** by Rep. Nix (R-Port Charlotte) change how septic systems are permitted for single-family homes in Florida. Local governments can no longer require homeowners or builders to obtain a state septic system construction permit from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection before issuing building or plumbing permits. Instead, applicants only need to show proof that they have applied for the septic permit.

The bill also clarifies that local septic inspection programs cannot require repairs or upgrades unless a system is actually failing, and it provides a 90-day grace period before new state septic rules apply to permit applications.

**Environmental concerns:** Critics warn the change could allow home construction to move forward before septic systems are fully reviewed or approved, potentially increasing the risk of poorly sited systems that contribute nutrients and pollution to Florida's groundwater, springs, and waterways.

## THE UGLY

While the final budget includes significant investments in some conservation priorities, including Everglades restoration and water quality, it notably neglects to provide any new dedicated funding for Florida Forever. This is the only program that creates new state parks, forests, and wildlife management areas, with the primary mission of preserving Florida's natural resources.

Instead, the budget provides a hefty \$200 million line item to the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program (RFLPP). This program of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services purchases conservation easements on working farms and ranches to prevent future development and protect agricultural landscapes.



Northern Parula.  
Photo: Mary Catherine  
Miguez/Audubon  
Photography Awards

In addition, Section 151 of the budget sweeps unspent land acquisition funds from a prior Florida Forever appropriation. Of this funding:

- An additional \$225 million is appropriated to RFLPP for conservation easements on large agricultural properties that have not previously received funding through the program.
- The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is directed to purchase unspecified "public access conservation lands in Okaloosa County," effectively skirting the science-based prioritization and transparency and accountability of the Florida Forever process.
- Any amount remaining may then be used for approved Florida Forever projects within the Caloosahatchee Big Cypress Corridor and the Ocala to Osceola Wildlife Corridor, and finally for projects on the Florida Forever priority list. Of the acquisitions in this third category, the legislation requires that at least 50 percent of those remaining funds be spent on conservation easements rather than outright land purchases. Easements do not allow public access.
- While Audubon has long supported RFLPP as an important and valuable component of Florida's broader conservation strategy—protecting working farms and ranches through conservation easements—Florida leaders historically recognized that both programs are essential because they serve different purposes in preserving the lands and waters that define our state. Florida Forever protects irreplaceable natural landscapes from development, while RFLPP helps sustain agricultural lands and rural heritage. One cannot replace the other.

**By pitting these programs against each other, the Legislature has broken faith with the people of Florida and abandoned a longstanding bipartisan commitment to balanced conservation.**

We will continue working with elected officials, agency leaders, and conservation partners ahead of the next legislative session to ensure Floridians understand what is at stake. Protecting these lands is not only vital to our wildlife and natural heritage, but also to our economy, water quality, resilience, and quality of life for future generations.



Changes to property taxes could have negative impacts on local parks, nature-based infrastructure projects, and more. American Goldfinch. Photo: Jean Hall/Audubon Photography Awards

## Property Tax Amendment on November Ballot Poses Immediate and Lasting Threat to Florida's Environment

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In a special session this May, the Legislature voted to place a constitutional amendment bringing sweeping property tax reforms on the November ballot. They had only received it days earlier from Governor DeSantis and voted it through without any real analysis of the budget implications for cities, counties, and water management districts, or the public services that would be eliminated. In the weeks since, Florida's nonpartisan Office of Economic and Demographic Research has completed its analysis of the amendment, predicting that if passed by voters in November, it will reduce local government revenues by \$5 billion annually in FY 27-28, rising to nearly a \$12 billion reduction annually by FY 31-32.

The amendment on November's ballot—which will require 60% approval to pass—would significantly increase Florida's homestead exemption, raising it to \$150,000 in 2027 and \$250,000 in 2028 for current Florida homeowners, and further restrict tax increases on businesses and rental properties. If approved by voters, this proposal would not only significantly reduce the amount of funding cities and counties have available to support their communities, but it also narrows the range of services they can fund with the property tax revenues that remain.

**This raises significant questions about the future funding of programs such as parks and recreation, libraries, civic centers, pollution control efforts, land-use planning, and other local government services that communities rely on.** Without definitions for terms such as "natural resource projects" and without language making clear that the examples provided in each category are illustrative rather than limiting, it is possible that local conservation land acquisition programs, land management, habitat restoration, and other environmental initiatives may not qualify for funding. Local governments may increasingly need to

rely on state appropriations or federal revenue sources to address needs that have traditionally been funded and managed at the local level.

Because rural counties have smaller budgets to begin with and higher proportions of their tax base are homesteaded properties, the amendment will hit the budgets of these communities harder than others.

And while the amendment does not directly reference water management districts, the reduction in ad valorem assessments will reduce water management district budgets as well, which are supported by a percentage (millage) of property tax collections. This will affect everything from flood control to Everglades restoration, springs protection to combatting saltwater intrusion and protecting water supplies. The Northwest Florida and Suwannee River water management districts will be most severely impacted due to the higher percentage of homestead eligible properties within their boundaries, but all the districts will see painful reductions at a time when Floridians are clamoring for more services from them, not fewer.

While no one relishes paying taxes, Floridians are hungry for better growth management to address the accelerating conversion of Florida's wildlands and farms; better water management to protect communities from flooding, wildfire, harmful algal blooms, and saltwater intrusion; more parks and preserves for wildlife and recreation; and greater ability for local communities to shape their own quality of life, instead of one-size-fits-all decisions being made for them from Tallahassee.

Ultimately, voters will have to decide this issue in November. It will be a priority of Audubon to help ensure they understand the lasting implications of that vote.

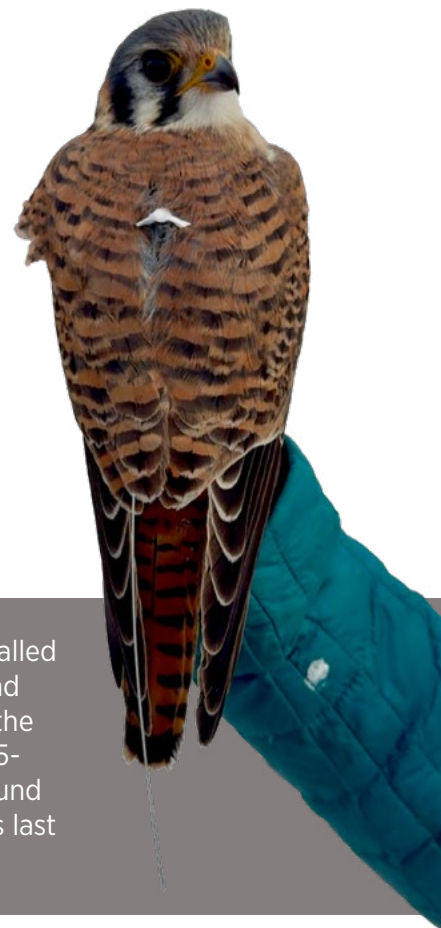
# Center for Birds of Prey's First Motus Visitor?

## A Bird of Prey!

In January, the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey joined a growing global network for tracking bird migration with the installation of a Motus station on our property. As spring migration approached, we awaited the first “ping” of a bird passing within the range of our station. On April 3, it happened: An American Kestrel—the smallest falcon species in North America—became the first radio-tagged bird to pass within the station’s range.

Motus, a program of Birds Canada in partnership with the National Audubon Society, is an international collaborative research network that uses radio telemetry to track the movement and behavior of birds and other small animals, like bats and insects. There are roughly three dozen Motus stations across Florida, including one at Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples, recording data about any tagged animal that passes within approximately seven miles.

The kestrel, an adult male, was tagged in July 2024 as part of a research project called American Kestrel Massachusetts, led by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and Mass Audubon. Motus data show the kestrel migrating up and down the East Coast from Massachusetts to Florida each year. In both the 2024-25 and 2025-26 migration cycles, this individual’s southernmost ping was recorded at Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge in Martin County, on the southeastern coast of Florida. Its last recorded movement there was on October 11, 2025.



▲ American Kestrel.  
Photo: Emma Buck

We don’t know where this kestrel spent its winter, despite numerous Motus stations south of the Hobe Sound location, including in the Florida Keys, Cuba, the Cayman Islands, and Mexico, but none picked up the kestrel’s tracker from October through April. Thanks to the new station at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey, we have a new piece of the puzzle that comprises its spring migration journey in 2026. It has not yet been picked up by another station on its continuing journey north.



Photo: Steve Parker/Audubon  
Photography Awards ▲

Studying migration can help scientists answer questions about species in decline and advocate for their conservation. The American Kestrel is experiencing a loss of nesting and feeding habitat across the country, and in Florida and several other states, they are a State-designated Threatened species. By tracking individual kestrels’ migration patterns, we can identify exactly which parts of our state are critical habitat for them and need protection the most.

**Learn about the many threats kestrels face  
across their range at the Bird Migration Explorer:  
[Explorer.audubon.org](https://explorer.audubon.org)**



Purple Martin.  
Photo: Keith Kingdon/Audubon  
Photography Awards

▼ Purple Martin. Photo: Bec Hallstedt/  
Audubon Photography Awards



From the Panhandle to South Florida, 17 chapters manage Purple Martin projects, collectively providing 144 individual nesting cavities across 29 sites. Below are just three examples of the extensive work of our Florida chapter network.

Photo: Mick Thompson/Audubon



## Chapters Create Critical Nesting Space for Purple Martins

Purple Martins grace the skies of Florida every spring and summer, but development and habitat changes have reduced their natural nesting sites. Audubon chapters around Florida have stepped up to install artificial martin houses and gourds (known collectively as cavities) to provide the space needed for the next generation of this charismatic species.

### Audubon Everglades

manages 689 Purple Martin nesting cavities at 12 partner sites spanning 40 miles across Palm Beach County.

Through collaborations with public parks, wetlands, and nature centers, the program combines habitat stewardship, scientific monitoring, and contributions to national Purple Martin research. Year-round outreach, volunteer engagement, youth mentorship, and support for current and prospective martin landlords help build a community of conservation advocates while supporting the long-term success of Purple Martins in South Florida.

### Seminole Audubon Society

and the City of Sanford have built a strong partnership to support 72 Purple Martin nesting gourds along Lake Monroe, a high-traffic park in downtown Sanford.

Seminole Audubon monitors the colony, tracks nesting activity, and contributes scout arrival data to national research efforts, while the City of Sanford provides ongoing stewardship by maintaining, installing, and storing the gourds each year. An educational kiosk funded through a National Audubon Society grant helps connect residents and visitors with Purple Martin conservation. The project demonstrates how local government and community conservation organizations can work together to create lasting benefits for both wildlife and people.

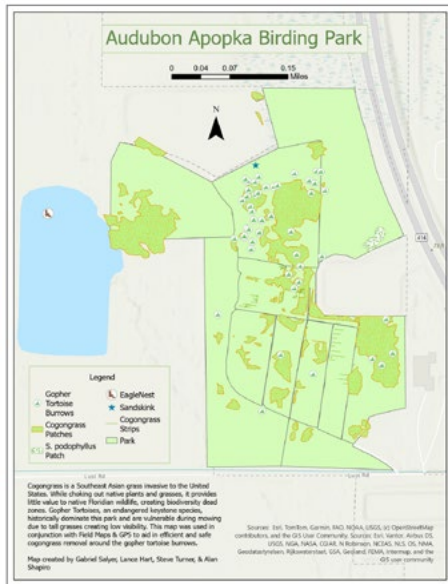
### Audubon of Southwest Florida

manages 18 Purple Martin nesting gourds at CREW Flint Pen Strand Trails in Bonita Springs, where the colony is situated within a 300-acre restored marsh featuring two large lakes. Their project is made possible through a Lee County Electric Cooperative Environmental Funding Award.

The chapter conducts weekly nest monitoring throughout the breeding season, tracking nesting progress from eggs through fledging. Located within the larger CREW conservation landscape, the project highlights the value of habitat restoration and long-term stewardship in supporting Purple Martins and other wildlife. Audubon of Southwest Florida maintains the colony housing each year and is exploring future opportunities to expand research efforts through bird banding partnerships.

# Leading Conservation: CLI Students Unveil Year-End Projects

Audubon Florida's Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) is an immersive program that connects undergraduate students with Audubon chapter leaders for a unique, intergenerational learning experience. Each fall, 25 students from across Florida are selected to join the program through the academic year, where they explore real-world conservation topics like habitat restoration, community science, environmental advocacy, and nonprofit leadership. At the end of each program, participants complete a student-led project in collaboration with their chapter. Through their projects, students hone their skills while contributing toward local conservation efforts.



We feature three exciting initiatives below!

## **Gale Salyer: University of Central Florida Chapter: Orange Audubon Society**

Orange Audubon Society works to restore native vegetation at their newly acquired Apopka Birding Park to provide better habitat for wildlife. In an effort to remove invasive cogon grass, they embarked on an ambitious mowing program. There's just one problem: Species like skinks and gopher tortoises can hide in the grass! To avoid them while mowing, Salyer created a GIS map for Orange Audubon showing (very clearly) where gopher tortoise burrows and other sensitive wildlife areas are. With GPS, the mowing team can easily avoid these points while restoring the habitat.

## **Miguel Arguello: Florida International University Chapter: Tropical Audubon Society**

How can chapters work with the next

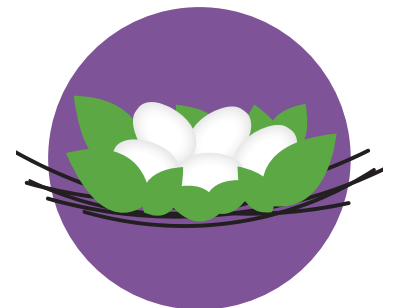
generation of conservation leaders to protect birds and the places they need? That's the question Arguello tackled as his CLI project, as he worked with both student groups and Tropical Audubon Society to connect students with conservation opportunities. He explored internship opportunities, liaised with student groups, linked his work with the FIU Arboretum Initiative, reached out to undergraduate leadership, and even formed Florida's newest Audubon on Campus chapter.



Photo: FIU

## **Thandi Kirk: Florida A&M University Chapter: Apalachee Audubon**

To increase Purple Martin populations across the Sunshine State, chapters are flocking together to create martin gourd arrays and other artificial nests (see page 16). Many of the houses are installed in public parks and green areas, but many people don't know what they are, so Kirk decided to address education as her CLI project. Noting that some people erroneously thought of the arrays as giant bird feeders, she created a series of educational signs that showcase the impressive migration of this little bird and the importance of these new nesting habitats. Leon County liked her signs so much that they reached out to install them in other parks that feature Purple Martin arrays!





## From Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Member to Coastal Advocate: Rogerio DaSilva

It all started with an Audubon membership. Rogerio DaSilva, a Naples-area nature photographer, became a member of and donor to Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. While he loved photographing the wading birds and songbirds of the Sanctuary, he had a dream: to capture in his lens the impressive nesting behaviors of coastal Black Skimmers and Royal Terns.



**Florida's beaches and barrier islands are critical nesting habitat for this species, and the morning was alive with their energy—resting, preening, courting, and launching into the Gulf breeze.**

**– Rogerio DaSilva, Photographer**



In April, DaSilva got the opportunity to spend a morning with Director of Leadership Giving Anny Shepard and Southwest Florida Shorebird Program Manager Megan Hatten to see the nesting birds in action. They spent hours on the water, keeping a respectful distance and ensuring their presence did not change the birds' behavior—per ethical photography guidelines. DaSilva explains: “What unfolded was far more than a birdwatching excursion. It was a window into why this work matters, and why the people who fund it make a genuine difference on the ground.”

For DaSilva, photographing a Royal Tern courtship dance became a trip highlight: “Crests fully raised, orange bills catching the Florida light, they circled and postured in a ritual that has played out on these shores for millennia.” The Black Skimmers also did not disappoint.

“Black Skimmers dominated the shell flats in numbers that took the breath away,” says DaSilva.

We must flock together to protect these vulnerable birds and their special nesting habitat now and into the future. Audubon has an ambitious plan to raise \$1.5 million for Audubon's coastal work by 2032. Together, we can ensure that Florida remains a place to see and admire sea and shorebirds for future generations.

Photos: Rogerio Teixeira DaSilva





It takes a team to protect birds and the places they need across the Sunshine State.





Heidi, Beth, and McKee in front of the U.S. Constitution. Photo: Matt DePaolis, SCCF

# Audubon Flocks to Washington, D.C.

Board Chair Emeritus Heidi McCree, Senior Policy Director Beth Alvi, and Senior Manager of Everglades Policy McKee Gray met with members of Florida's Congressional Delegation in Washington, D.C. this June to advocate for full funding for Everglades restoration. The whirlwind trip included time spent with the offices of Florida members of Congress, including Rep. Patronis (FL-1), Rep. Castor (FL-14), Rep. Donalds (FL-19), Rep. Giménez (FL-28) and Rep. Salazar (FL-27).

A healthy River of Grass means a healthy environment and healthy economy in Florida. We're grateful as always for the bipartisan commitment of Florida's delegation to this critical work.



Everglades advocates with Ryan Walker and District 1 staff. Photo: District 1 staff



Everglades advocates with Representative Giménez. Photo: District 28 staff



Everglades advocates with Representative Castor. Photo: District 14 staff

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