



# The Crane

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## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Alachua Audubon Society Members

I hope you found time over the holidays to enjoy birds and nature. I would like to share with you some of our accomplishments in 2023 and our roadmap for the new year.

Environmental education is the cornerstone of Alachua Audubon's initiatives, and we are excited to learn, share our knowledge, and inspire others about nature, conservation, and birds. AAS has ramped up our involvement with students, including supporting the bird club at Rawlings Elementary – a Title 1 school; supporting the bird club at Gainesville High School under the guidance of awesome teacher, **Maggie Paxson**; funding bus transportation for 4<sup>th</sup> graders to nearby nature parks; providing bird programs as requested for home schoolers and public school students; and starting a Young Birders Club of Alachua County thanks largely to UF student, **Bella Gonzalez**. A special shout out to AAS board members **Kate Hellgren** and **Felicia Lee** for leading many of these school educational programs. **Gary Gossman** continues to organize and run the popular Birding Class through Santa Fe College, introducing adults to the world of birding (see [page 9](#)).

Alachua Audubon is continuing our very popular college internship program, making a difference in the lives and future careers of many young adults. Six very smart and motivated students just completed the fall semester internship where they learned about the ecology of the Southeastern American Kestrel by tracking fledglings, native plant gardening, and environmental education by staffing our booth at several fall festivals. Thank you AAS board member, **Katie Sieving**, for your motivation and vision in implementing this very successful college internship program.

Alachua Audubon has long been recognized for our many bird outings that have been led by knowledgeable and friendly bird experts. In 2023, we led over 130 bird walks, through the weekend outings, Wednesday walks at Sweetwater Wetlands Park, Santa Fe College birding classes, Birds and Brews, Bird Rambles, and various requested educational outings. For those of you who have so generously given of your time and expertise to guide these walks, you are sincerely appreciated for sharing your knowledge, and inspiring others to care about conservation and birds. One bird leader in particular stands out for his non-stop birding enthusiasm, and he is largely the reason why our Audubon chapter is known state-wide as one of the most active and cohesive birding communities. Thank you, **Tim Hardin**, for being Alachua County's Birding Ambassador, eBird reviewer, and for mentoring so many local birders.

Audubon volunteers shared our enthusiasm of birds and conservation by assisting at the Audubon booth at four local festivals this fall. Kudos to **Eric and Sherri Amundson** and the many volunteers who assisted with the AAS festival booth.

We have expanded the Southeastern American

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Kestrel research project by partnering with Avian Research Conservation Institute to track and monitor post-fledgling kestrels. This project was recently featured in the Mainstreet Daily News and can be viewed here: <https://www.mainstreetdailynews.com/news/audubon-society-help-florida-kestrels>. Shout out to **Bob Simons** and **Eric Amundson** for leading this program, and other board members and volunteers who have assisted.

Under the guidance of UF student and AAS board member **Zachary Holmes**, we have implemented a new Prothonotary Warbler nest box monitoring program that will aid in the science and conservation of this stunning wetland cavity nester.

Alachua Audubon is entering the 6<sup>th</sup> year of banding birds at the Prairie Creek Preserve Bird Banding Lab. This lab is run by **Jonathan Varol** and **Katie Sieving**, and assisted by many volunteers, including **Felicia Lee**, **Tim Hardin**, and **Bettina Moser**.

Alachua Audubon's Conservation advocacy is led by a five-member team consisting of **Adam Zions**, **Anne Casella**, **Bob Simons**, **Jose-Miguel Ponciano**, and **Zachary Holmes**. Through their conservation role, they have attended meetings, reviewed development plans, written letters and emails, and overall, ensured that Alachua Audubon's voice is heard whenever there is a threat in our local community to nature, conservation, and birds.

One of our partnership projects with **Alachua Conservation Trust** was finally completed this past year with the construction of the observation platform at Tuscawilla Prairie. I invite you to visit this lovely location and savor the expansive beauty of the Tuscawilla Marsh.

**Karen Brown** continues to produce our stellar bi-monthly newsletter and, if you have ever been involved in producing a complex document of this size, you can appreciate the hours required to solicit articles, edit, format, produce, and distribute an on-going newsletter.

There are many behind-the-scenes tasks that are required to keep an organization running and these volunteer board members deserve special recognition: **Elizabeth Mance** for upgrading and running our complex accounting system; **Peter Davis** for maintaining our website; **Karen Brown**, **Tim Hardin**, and **Kayla Erlich** for social media tasks; **Karen Brown** for membership; **Anne Casella**, **Elizabeth Mance**, and **Gary Gossman** for revising the Policy and Procedures Manual; and **Jonathan Varol** and **Elizabeth Mance** for marketing.

#### **What is on the horizon in 2024 for AAS?**

**Zach Holmes** has planned interesting evening programs including a new monthly photo competition. Of course, we continue our ambitious field trip schedule, including more out-of-town and multi-day field outings to renowned birding hotspots. We will also continue our emphasis on education with grade school, home schoolers, a Young Birders Club for middle and high schoolers, high school birding club, college interns, and whatever group that requests our birding expertise. Expanding the Purple Martin nesting system continues at the Lake City Wetlands where we had over 150 fledged martins in 2023. And our biggest project to date will be partnering with **Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park** to help fund the extension of the La Chua Trail boardwalk.

Please remember that the Alachua Audubon Society is run by an 18-member Board of Directors who are all volunteers, most of us having other jobs and all of us having external commitments. Our funds are derived from generous donations and through your memberships to the National or local Audubon Society.

We are sincerely grateful to all of you who contribute to our organization through your volunteer activities and financial assistance. We frequently have needs for more volunteers so let us know if there is an AAS activity that interests you.

I would be remiss if I didn't recognize a few of the many volunteers who have been particularly generous and devoted to Audubon-sponsored programs: **Lee Bloomcamp** and **Sherri Amundson** for maintaining the native plant garden at Prairie Creek Preserve; **Andy Kratter** and **Bob Carroll** for running the Gainesville CBC; **Rex Rowan**, **Becky Enneis**, and **Bob Carroll** for leading the month-long June Challenge; **Michael Brock** for leading the monthly Birds and Brews bird walks; and **Bubba Scales** and **Darrell and Sue Hartman** for leading monthly bird walks at Sweetwater Wetlands Park.

Wishing you and your family a new year that is full of nature, conservation, and lovely birds.

By Debbie Segal



## Evening Program

### Tips for Tricky Flycatchers January 23rd at 7 PM

Join us as we talk about one of the most tricky groups of birds for birders: flycatchers! Renowned bird guide and flycatcher expert Chris Benesh from Field Guides Birding Tours will be joining us to present on some of Alachua County's rare flycatcher visitors and how they compare to some of our more common species. We will discuss flycatcher ecology in general and how best to identify some of the trickier flycatcher species.

Zoom link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/86327319419>

*Ash-throated Flycatcher. Photo by Dottie Dreyer.*

## AAS Young Birders Club

Calling all young bird enthusiasts! Alachua Audubon has recently launched a local chapter of the Florida Young Birders Club (FYBC)! The FYBC is a statewide initiative designed to connect and empower birders and future conservation leaders from the ages of 9-17. Members will have the opportunity to attend monthly local birding trips and participate in a variety of bird-related activities.

The FYBC is planning a number of exciting activities for new members to take part in! Any interested young birders are encouraged to reach out to Alachua Audubon for information on joining the chapter. Send an email to [contact@AlachuaAudubon.org](mailto:contact@AlachuaAudubon.org).

By Bella Gonzalez



## Florida Young Birders Club



The Florida Young Birders Club is welcoming people ages 9 - 17 in Florida who have an interest in birds or birding. We have active chapters in Tampa Bay, Orlando, and St. Augustine plus new chapters forming in Sarasota, Charlotte Harbor and Gainesville.

### Our club offers:

- Unique field outings
- Monthly virtual guest speaker events
- A chance to communicate with other young birders in a secure space
- Member discount on Vortex optics



Scan the code to join!



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## Highlights from Last Year's National CBCs

National Audubon just published the results of last year's 123<sup>rd</sup> Christmas Bird Count and our local Gainesville count, organized and compiled by Andy Kratter and Bob Carroll, placed prominently in the national results. The entire article can be found at this link. <https://www.audubon.org/news/123rd-christmas-bird-count-summary>.

Christmas Bird Counts are hugely popular and encompass volunteers with a wide range of birding interests. From ultra-obsessed birders to casual/occasional birders to the strictly backyard enthusiast, last year over 79,000 people participated in 2,625 CBCs that stretched from Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States and Canada, and to the Pacific Islands. It is clear from these numbers that there is a tremendous number of birders who devote their time and energy to conducting Christmas Bird Counts. And equally as important, there are a couple thousand volunteer compilers who organize and implement these counts and conscientiously submit the collected data.

When compared from one year to the next, the CBC data can reveal important trends in bird populations. Scientists have been sounding the alarm on the decline of grassland species, and the data from last year's CBC confirms this decline, particularly for Northern Bobwhite and Loggerhead Shrikes. Interestingly, Common Ravens are expanding their range southward while Limpkins are expanding northward.

Although CBCs in recent years have attracted record high participation, the increased number of birders searching and listening for birds has not translated into higher total numbers of birds. The declining number of birds is attributed to several factors – a decline in the very large blackbird roosts that historically produced tens of thousands of birds; a decline in other typically common species; habitat destruction; global bird flu that has recently affected seabirds (particularly Northern Gannet), waterfowl, American White Pelican, vultures, raptors such as Bald Eagle and Red-tailed Hawk, Great Horned Owl, and American Crow; and other factors.

Sadly, bird abundance is down considerably and last year's CBC reported the fewest number of birds in over 35 years.

How did Gainesville rank in the 2022/2023 metrics? Last year's Gainesville CBC confirmed 174 species of birds, which was the highest species count in Florida and 27<sup>th</sup> nationwide. This high species count is largely attributed to the high number of dedicated participants – 135 volunteers – who participated in last year's Gainesville CBC. In fact, Gainesville ranked second in Florida in the number of volunteers behind Sarasota, who had 164 volunteers (and 160 species).

Another noteworthy achievement is that last year's Gainesville CBC tallied the highest number of individuals for 18 species, and was the only count with the highest abundance for over 15 species. What were those 18 high-count species?

Ring-necked Duck 12,500, American Bittern 21, Snail Kite 275 **All-time National High**, Red-shouldered Hawk 195, Sora 87, Common Gallinule 1000, Limpkin 304, Barred Owl 74, Vaux's Swift 1, Blue-headed Vireo 76, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher 675, Ruby-crowned Kinglet 750, Ovenbird 16 (tied with Homestead, FL), Black-and-white Warbler 146 **All-time National High**, Common Yellowthroat 320, Palm Warbler 1600, Yellow-throated Warbler 63, Baltimore Oriole 49.

Fast-forward to the most recent CBC and the inclement weather that plagued the Gainesville count – five inches of rain that finally ended that morning only to be replaced with relentless winds. The winds were so strong that the two airboats that typically are used to survey the prairie basin had to be cancelled. Previous airboat surveys over several thousand acres of prime wetland habitat attributed to the high counts of wetland-dependent species that were noted in last year's CBC, including Ring-necked Duck, American Bittern, Snail Kite, Common Gallinule, and Limpkin. Despite the weather-induced set-back, the 2023 Gainesville CBC tallied an astonishing 173 species, only one shy of last year's Florida record of 174 species.

By Debbie Segal



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## The John Hintermister Gainesville Christmas Bird Count 2023 – A Recap

**J**ust like every year, in 2023, about 10 days before the John Hintermister Gainesville Christmas Bird Count, I started scanning the weather forecasts, trying to get some idea of what kind of conditions we would be dealing with come count day. In those pre-count days, we also were out scoping fields and marshes, pinning down those hard-to-find species, and in 2023 we had discovered many great species – like Tropical Kingbird, Red-throated Loon, Short-eared Owl, LeConte’s Sparrow – leading up to count day. However, it’s hard to predict what Mother Nature is going to throw at you in mid-December, whether it be blustering wind, crackling thunderstorms, suffocating fog, driving rain, freezing cold, or, more hopefully, one of those north Florida-famous cool calm mornings with an afternoon of abundant blue sky.

For the past few decades this count has been fortunate to have mostly benign weather conditions. This all ended in 2023. Ten days out the weather looked grim, with all-day rain-predicted. Over the following days, that forecast persisted or worsened, with most daylight hours showing 80-90% precipitation along with a good bit of wind. A few days out, the forecast for the afternoon at least brightened. Come CBC eve on Saturday night the rain started and continued steady until dawn. Unfortunately, those meteorologists were right: morning hours – prime birding time – were mostly wet, with a steady stiff breeze to exacerbate efforts to find and hear birds. Those seers also were right that the afternoon was much nicer, with little or no rain and even a spell of blue sky. The winds, though, continued.

All this meteorology provides probably the most crucial backdrop of how easy it will be to find birds and what sort of results the CBC will produce. If conditions are good, it is more like a footnote and the results speak for themselves. But when you are dealing with the nasty condition we faced Sunday morning, it was our foremost topic of conversation when the day ended. So how did we fare? Our results were much better than I ever could have imagined.

Although we missed the kingbird and loon mentioned above, many other rarities were pulled out of the mist, and we managed to find almost all regularly occurring species. The truly amazing final count is 173 species, just two off our all-time high of 175! The top bird of this CBC was a Short-eared Owl at Bolen Bluff (Team 4) which had only been seen once before on this count (in 1991). Other rarities found were one Vaux’s Swift, one Yellow-crowned Night Heron, six American Avocets (seen on just two previous counts in 1990 and 1991), four Black-bellied Plovers (seen on just two previous counts in 1989 and 2000), one White-faced Ibis, two LeConte’s Sparrow, and two Gray-headed Swamphens, all by Teams 1 or 2 in the prairie basin. Team 2 also dug up an Ash-throated Flycatcher at its regular spot on Persimmon Point and five Bachman’s Sparrows at Boulware Springs, two of the latter were also found by Team 10 at Morningside Nature Park. And at suburban feeders in NW Gainesville Team 9 found a Nashville Warbler, a Western Tanager, and a Rufous Hummingbird.

With the inclement weather, many species showed lower than expected numbers. Our usual forays into the prairie by two teams in airboats were cancelled because of safety concerns associated with high afternoon winds, resulting in much reduced waterbird numbers (e.g., Limpkin, American Bittern, Ring-necked Duck, Snail Kite). The weather particularly affected our ability to find passerines, with most species showing lower abundance compared to our usual numbers, which often lead the country. However, this fall’s drought conditions (count day excepted) resulted in lots of exposed mudflats on the prairie and our intrepid prairie teams recorded record-high numbers of shorebirds (154 Dunlins, 273 Long-billed Dowitchers, 160 Least Sandpipers). This habitat is also perfect for large waders, and 800 Wood Storks (almost double our previous high), 3451 White Ibis, and 942 Glossy Ibis all exceeded previous highs. The most- eye-catching number of all was 48 Roseate Spoonbills; our previous high was 12 and the species was not even recorded on the count until 2012. Given the conditions,



*Andy Kratter, dressed for the weather.  
Photo by Tedd Greenwald.*

46 Virginia Rails was truly unexpected; our previous high was 28.

Of the 163 regularly occurring species on our list, we did quite well and failed to find only five. The most surprising misses were Field Sparrow (not missed since 2000), Ruddy Duck (not missed since 2007), and Snow Goose (we were having a great fall with up to 40 on the prairie until count day). Horned Grebe and Fox Sparrow are rather uncommon in the count circle and are more frequently missed.

I want to give huge thanks to my co-compiler Bob Carroll, who steadfastly helped me steer this count the past seven years into being the juggernaut that it is today. Bob is an organizational guru, a task I will never excel at. He has taken the boring but just as important half of CBC data-crunching, figuring out the effort (party hours, party miles, by foot, owling, etc.) that goes into counting all those 173 species and 57,700+ individuals. The scientific contribution of CBCs is wholly dependent on providing accurate data on effort. This is Bob's last year as co-compiler, but we will hopefully continue to see him for many more years as one of our crack bird finders and counters.

Bob also helped to stage the compilation, where 65+ bedraggled and wet bird counters assemble to socialize, eat pizza, drink our favorite beverages, and tabulate our day's results. And over the past 42 years, those life-restoring eats and drinks have been flawlessly delivered to the compilation by Griselda Forbes, a wonderful woman and past president of the Alachua Audubon Society. This is her final year in this role, but we plan to see her at many more compilations. Thanks to Bob and Griselda!

**Species list** (bold-faced species = rarity; bold-faced count = high count):

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck **9001**, Muscovy Duck 212, Wood Duck 251, Gadwall 44, American Wigeon 30, Mallard 2, Mottled Duck 321, Blue-winged Teal 1584, Northern Shoveler 22, Northern Pintail 171, Green-winged Teal 126, Redhead 1, Ring-necked Duck 1855, **Greater Scaup 1**, Lesser Scaup 11, Bufflehead 12, Common Goldeneye 1, Hooded Merganser 183, Red-breasted Merganser 5, Northern Bobwhite 14, Wild Turkey 174, Pied-billed Grebe 52, Rock Pigeon 42, Eurasian Collared Dove 1, Common Ground-Dove 28, Mourning Dove 269, White-winged Dove 1, Whip-Poor-Will **6**, **Vaux's Swift 1**, Ruby-throated Hummingbird 6, **Rufous Hummingbird 1**, King Rail 17, Virginia Rail **46**, Sora 44, **Gray-headed Swamphen 2**, Purple Gallinule 2, Common Gallinule 279, American Coot 424, Limpkin 61, Sandhill Crane 4069, **Black-bellied Plover 8**, Killdeer 428, **American Avocet 6**, Dunlin **154**, Least Sandpiper 225, Wilson's Snipe 438, Long-billed Dowitcher **257**, American Woodcock 10, Spotted Sandpiper 3, Greater Yellowlegs **152**, Lesser Yellowlegs **68**, Bonaparte's Gull 16, Laughing Gull 1, Ring-billed Gull 543, Herring Gull 1, Forster's Tern 31, Common Loon 1, Wood Stork **800**, Double-crested Cormorant 544, Anhinga 341, American White Pelican **500**, American Bittern 10, Least Bittern 9, Great Blue Heron 248, Great Egret 403, Snowy Egret 293, Little Blue Heron 505, Tricolored Heron 111, Cattle Egret 90, Green Heron 11, **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron 2**, Black-crowned Night-Heron 51, White Ibis **3451**, Glossy Ibis **942**, **White-faced Ibis 1**, Roseate Spoonbill **48**, Black Vulture 464, Turkey Vulture 1155, Osprey 59, Snail Kite 52, Bald Eagle 135, Northern Harrier 51, Sharp-shinned Hawk 13, Cooper's Hawk 11, Red-shouldered Hawk 153, Red-tailed Hawk 31, Barn Owl 2, Eastern Screech-Owl 8, Great Horned Owl 35, Barred Owl 27, **Short-eared Owl 1**, Belted Kingfisher 40, Red-headed Woodpecker 6, Red-bellied Woodpecker 203, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 42, Downy Woodpecker 118, Northern Flicker 33, Pileated Woodpecker 60, American Kestrel 45, Merlin 2, Peregrine Falcon 4,



*This Great Blue Heron makes a stunning tree topper for the Christmas Bird Count.  
Photo by Tedd Greenwald.*



Eastern Phoebe 312, Vermilion Flycatcher 1, **Ash-throated Flycatcher 1**, Loggerhead Shrike 31, White-eyed Vireo 37, Blue-headed Vireo 48, Blue Jay 130, American Crow 654, Fish Crow 7, Tree Swallow 28, Carolina Chickadee 272, Tufted Titmouse 399, Brown-headed Nuthatch 1, House Wren 150, Sedge Wren 39, Marsh Wren

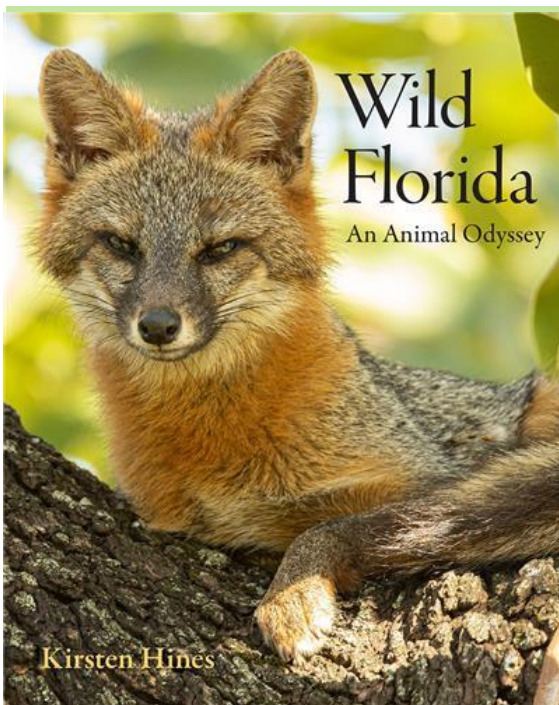


*Aninga with a Wood Stork. Photo by Tedd Greenwald.*

20, Carolina Wren 352, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher 388, Golden-crowned Kinglet 1, Ruby-crowned Kinglet 524, Eastern Bluebird 280, Hermit Thrush 30, American Robin 1178, Gray Catbird 97, Brown Thrasher 17, Northern Mockingbird 100, European Starling 11, Cedar Waxwing 130, House Sparrow 20, American Pipit 1, House Finch 105, American Goldfinch 97, Ovenbird 13, Northern Waterthrush 8, Black-and-White Warbler 108, Orange-crowned Warbler 79, **Nashville Warbler 1**, Common Yellowthroat 138, American Redstart 2, Northern Parula 1, Palm Warbler 866, Pine Warbler 219, Yellow-rumped Warbler 1159, Yellow-throated Warbler 50, Prairie Warbler 2, Wilson's Warbler 2, Yellow-breasted Chat 2, Eastern Towhee 58, **Bachman's Sparrow 7**, Chipping Sparrow 1222, Vesper Sparrow 2, Savannah Sparrow 181, Grasshopper Sparrow 6, **Le Conte's Sparrow 2**, Henslow's Sparrow 4, Song Sparrow 27, Lincoln's Sparrow 3, Swamp Sparrow 307, White-throated Sparrow 41, White-crowned Sparrow 22, Summer Tanager 3, **Western Tanager 1**, Northern Cardinal 707, Indigo Bunting 1, Paint-

ed Bunting 7, Red-winged Blackbird 5910, Eastern Meadowlark 106, Rusty Blackbird 79, Common Grackle 1669, Boat-tailed Grackle 1673, Brown-headed Cowbird 2730, Baltimore Oriole 35.

By Andy Kratter  
 Co-compiler John Hintermister Gainesville Christmas Bird Count  
 Collections Manager, Ornithology  
 Florida Museum of Natural History



### Book Review: Wild Florida—An Animal Odyssey

Wild Florida—An Animal Odyssey by Kirsten Hines is a finely crafted book. Ms. Hines is a writer, nature photographer, biologist and conservationist. With each personal encounter illustrated with one or more excellent photographs, she shares her experiences with Florida's wildlife through engaging creative writing. The book can be opened to any page for a short, personal essay but it will be hard to stop at just one. Using a hand-held camera to enable close and quiet encounters with her subjects, she captures intimate moments. Each species vignette includes natural history and ecology. Wild Florida also describes the unique ecosystems where her subjects are found from Ocala National Forest to Big Cypress National Preserve and Dry Tortugas National Park. This book is accessible to all ages and will encourage readers to appreciate wild Florida in all its natural beauty and diversity.

Published by University Press of Florida, 800-226-3822, [upress.ufl.edu](http://upress.ufl.edu). \$42, hardback.

## Feeding Frenzy and Snail Kite Surprise

**M**ost visitors to Paynes Prairie, especially those from out of state, have only seen it flooded. In 2017, Hurricane Irma brought a flood that had begun to recede earlier this year. At La Chua trail it began with a tentative baby step when the water withdrew to the water control station beyond the end of the boardwalk. However, it quickly returned during pre-summer heavy rains. Then during a prolonged drought, it withdrew once more to the same spot. People were happy not to be confined to the boardwalk and a small grassy lawn to the south of it. The water in Alachua Sink and the canal was still high. But starting in November, the water dropped noticeably, exposing beaches on the edges of the sink and along the canal leading south toward the once popular observation deck that is now high and dry (but still out of reach to visitors), as observed from the Alachua Lake overlook.

This drying up has made it possible for the alligators to concentrate on the beaches on either side of the canal and around the Sink. The water control station has become an increasingly popular fishing spot for gators and many aquatic birds. The attraction is huge numbers of gizzard shad, a medium-sized fish with a deeply forked tail and silvery body with a bluish tint when the sun hits it just right. Among the diners are Wood Storks, Black Vultures, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Little Blue Herons, Great Blue Herons, and Black-crowned Night Herons. Fly-over hunters include Ospreys, gulls, Snail Kites and more.

This day, the fish were so plentiful that many were dropped if the prospective diner's eyes were bigger than its throat. Even so, fights broke out over fish and favorite fishing spots. I saw three Black Vultures tearing at each other's heads, necks, and feet over a discarded fish. One Wood Stork spit out its catch to reposition it, when a thieving stork swooped in and stole it after a short chase. Snowies were duking it out over a favorite fishing spot, storks were clapping their beaks as a warning to birds that invaded their personal space. One Great Blue was minding its own business on what looked like a large stick nest on the wall of the water control station, when it had to squawk at an intruding vulture. On and on went the feeding frenzy...

Then, as I was watching another Osprey flying over the canal, it dipped into the water rather gracefully and came up with a fish. It continued its flight in my direction, at the corner of the control structure and landed in some flimsy dead vegetation across the canal from me. Nah, nay, an Osprey is too heavy for such a perch! And they dive for their catch!



I focused my camera on it and, no, that ain't right! It's got a Gizzard Shad! ...but that hooked bill and the orange talons and the bright white band on the tail...It's a Snail Kite! A Snail Kite with a Gizzard Shad, and it settled down to tear into it with gusto! Could this be true? Was it an isolated fluke or a new trend?

At home I Googled the question "Do Snail Kites eat anything besides Apple Snails?" The Wikipedia answer was a resounding NO. Bob pulled out his Cornell subscription on Snail



Kites. In the diet section of the booklet, it stated that on rare occasions in Florida, after a prolonged drought, when their normal snail resource becomes scarce, the Snail Kite will catch other foods. Many of these may resemble the apple snail in size and shape. These foods include small turtles, such as mud and musk turtles, baby cooters and softshell turtles, crayfish, small snakes, and speckled perch. Dang! I thought I had made a unique discovery! Well, now I can add Gizzard Shad to their menu. That's something.

Snail Kites have been in Alachua County and farther north in historic times. For many years, due to habitat destruction, they were restricted to the Everglades. Then, with the invasion of the South American Apple Snails, they came back to Alachua County in 2015 and were first sighted at Sweetwater Wetlands Park. Since then, they have thrived. The 2022 Alachua County Christmas Bird Count revealed 215 Snail Kites! They may never lose their endangered classification, but their story spells SUCCESS!

Photos and text by Erika Simons



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## Santa Fe Audubon Melrose Circle CBC

**S**eventy-three birders with binoculars, telescopes and cameras took to the roads, fields, forests, and lakes on December 15, 2023, for the 34<sup>th</sup> annual Christmas Bird Count of the Melrose Circle. Covering over 175 square miles in a circle centered at the intersection of SR 100 and CR 219, the same area has been surveyed by local volunteers on a single day each December since 1990 as part of a National Audubon Society project that “constitutes the longest running and geographically most widespread survey of bird life in the Western hemisphere.”

This year 127 species and 27,627 individuals were tallied. It was the second highest number of species ever counted locally and the third highest number of individual birds. The most widely spread species was the Northern Cardinal with 17 of the 19 teams reporting cardinals. Tree Swallows, with 6,070 recorded, constituted this year’s highest count of individuals, closely followed by American Robins at 5,499. Three other species breaking the 1,000 mark were Ring-billed Gulls, Ring-necked Ducks and Red-winged Blackbirds.

Exciting finds this year included two Eared Grebes, normally found west of the Mississippi, and two Ruby-throated Hummingbirds who have chosen to winter in the area. Other rarities include the Franklin’s Gull, Black Scoter and Field Sparrow.

Counts of woodpeckers were up from last year, as were warblers and hawks, but there were fewer Cedar Waxwings.

In 2022, the Melrose Circle led the state with American Robins at over 100,000 (a huge record that will be tough to break) and was over 1/3 of all American Robins seen in the state. The Melrose Circle also led the state in the rarer Golden-Crowned Kinglet with 10 individuals counted. The 2023 robin count was robust, but nowhere near last year’s record and our count of Golden-crowned Kinglets dropped to two birds this year.

Santa Fe Audubon Society thanks all participants, including employees at some of the restricted properties and volunteers from the wider region – Gainesville, High Springs, Penney Farms and others – who join the local observers. Thanks, also, to the many private property owners who allow us to cover their properties from parts of Gold Head Branch State Park and Camp Blanding to the Lake Region from Keystone Heights, Florahome, Melrose, Earleton, and Grandin to Melrose Landing and including, among many others, Lake Santa Fe, the Santa Fe Swamp, and Lakes Geneva and Brooklyn.

by Joy Segal and Laura Berkelman

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## BIRD WATCHING CLASS

***Calling all bird enthusiasts!*** Santa Fe College in partnership with Alachua Audubon will again be offering our popular bird watching course. Develop your skills in identifying the birds in our region. Whether you are a beginner or have some experience in bird watching, this field course will increase your knowledge of our local feathered friends. The course consists of 4 field trips to local natural environments on consecutive Saturdays, guided by experienced birders. Prior experience is not necessary, but you must bring binoculars. Field trips begin at 8:30 AM, and each trip will last 2-2.5 hours. Registration for the 2024 Winter and Spring Terms begins on January 8<sup>th</sup>.

Register online at the Santa Fe College Community Education website: <https://www.sfcollege.edu/cied/communityed/index> or call (352) 395-5193. Course Fee: \$49.00. ***Note: Must be at least 18 yrs old to register. Register early as this class fills quickly.***

### **Winter**

February 17  
February 24  
March 2  
March 9

### **Spring**

April 6  
April 13  
April 20  
April 27

**Registration for the 2024 Winter and Spring Terms begins on January 8<sup>th</sup>. Register early as this class fills quickly.**

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## Reports from the Fall 2023 Interns

### Anna Mavrodieva

Being an intern with Alachua Audubon has helped me learn so much about birds, their habitats, and the wonderful community dedicated to protecting them.

I learned a lot from Lee Bloomcamp, who I helped several times in the Native Plant Garden. I spent a few mornings in the garden weeding, mulching, planting, and watering. I loved getting to know the lovely grasses and flowers that grow in the garden, which I had seen many times before but never familiarized myself with. It was an honor to be able to give back to the land and the plants in return for everything they do for us.

I also loved learning about kestrels and their habitats from Eric Amundson and Miguel Olvera on our frequent drives out to Watermelon Pond and surrounding areas. I hadn't known about kestrels and the importance of protecting them until I started this internship, and I am very grateful to have received this knowledge. Scaling up tall ladders to look inside kestrel boxes was very exciting, as was seeing dozens of incredible animals such as screech owls, flying squirrels, bald eagles, red-tailed hawks - and of course, kestrels - out in the field.

Participating in community education projects was also a valuable learning experience for me. I am an emerging environmental educator very passionate about my work, so I valued every chance I got to both educate and learn during this internship. It was really fun to help Kate Hellgren lead a bird walk for a group of young home-schoolers hoping to learn more about birds. I also loved tabling at multiple festivals with Eric and Sherri Amundson, including a festival hosted and organized by an organization I co-direct, the Young Leaders for



*Similar to the way they act as keystones in ecological communities, I have learned that birds are responsible for bringing together a beautiful community of humans here at Alachua Audubon and beyond.*

Wild Florida. It was exciting to draw connections and build bridges between the different environmental organizations I am lucky to be a part of.

Learning from and working alongside dedicated individuals was truly one of the biggest highlights of this semester. Thank you so much to Debbie Segal, Katie Sieving, Eric and Sherri Amundson, Lee Bloomcamp, Miguel Olvera, Kate Hellgren, and others at Alachua Audubon for everything I have learned during this internship.

### Riona Lahey

I thoroughly enjoyed my time as an intern for Alachua Audubon Society. It is so valuable to participate in hands-on activities that directly benefit my favorite group of animals - birds. Collaborating with Audubon board members and interns was a continuous source of excitement throughout the semester. From tending to the native plant garden, to tracking kestrels at Watermelon Pond, and engaging with visitors at the Lubee Bat Festival, joining these projects became unforgettable experiences for me.

Under the guidance of Lee Bloomcamp and Sherri Amundson, I acquired skills in native plant landscaping. The garden at Prairie Creek is rich with plant and invertebrate diversity, and thus attracts and feeds many birds. What made this even more enjoyable was the caring people who united this fall to improve





the garden.

Another project I was involved in was monitoring what happens to be my favorite falcon species, the South-eastern American Kestrel. Visiting the areas with nest boxes and birding with Eric Amundson and Miguel Olvera was a lot of fun. We used radio telemetry to track kestrels and pole cameras to check inside their nest boxes.

Community outreach through tabling at festivals is so rewarding. I loved getting people excited about birds with a fun activity and engaging in educational conversations. Some of the kids that came to the table are going to be future birders and conservation leaders!

It has been an honor to be involved with Alachua Audubon's ongoing conservation efforts. I'll cherish this experience throughout my career. Thank you so much!

### **Bella Gonzalez**

The past semester is one that I will never forget. From assisting with kestrel nest box monitoring to sharing the joy of birdwatching at public outreach events, my time as an intern with the Alachua Audubon Society has provided me with countless unforgettable experiences. I entered this internship hoping to develop skills and knowledge with respect to avian biology and conservation. It is safe to say that these goals were realized; I learned more than I ever could have imagined. More than this, I had the opportunity to work alongside a number of individuals whose drive and dedication to avian conservation was unparalleled.

I am incredibly grateful to all those who were willing to share their knowledge and experience with me. Thanks to them, I was able to develop on both a professional and personal level. I learned a great deal about the care and maintenance of native plants, the biology and conservation of American Kestrels, and the art of conservation outreach. I was lucky enough to share a moment with a kestrel pair, who watched us seemingly as intently as we watched them. I experienced the joy that comes along with admiring birds both common and rare alongside an incredible group of people.

While my internship has come to an end, the experiences I had and memories I made will last a lifetime. Thank you to the Alachua Audubon Society and all those who make it a beacon of wildlife conservation and appreciation.

### **Spencer Zeitoune**

My time as an AAS intern was an incredible experience! Throughout the course of the semester, I got to participate in awesome opportunities to develop skills and help with the chapter's projects.

My favorite activity was going out with Eric and Miguel to track American kestrels that had been tagged in previous years. We went out to beautiful sites and searched for the kestrels with radiotelemetry equipment. Once we found them, we'd observe them for a while with scopes and binoculars, which allowed us to observe their behaviors. Later in the semester, we also started doing maintenance for the nest boxes set up for the kestrels. It was super cool to climb up the ladders and take care of the boxes. We even found eastern screech owls and flying squirrels in some of them which was adorable to see!





Aside from the kestrel work, I really enjoyed helping table for AAS at community events. I really enjoy doing outreach and loved sharing my passion for birds with members of the public! It was really rewarding to get to take what I learned from this internship and pass it on to kids and adults of all ages that came to our table during these events.

All in all, I really valued my time as an intern with AAS this semester. This was my last semester and it was an awesome closer to gain more experience and help set myself up for a career conserving birds! I'm very grateful for everyone who made this internship possible!

### Zion Szot

During my fall internship with the Alachua Audubon Society, I had an unforgettable time developing surveying skills, collaborating on various AAS projects, and getting to know fellow interns and AAS personnel.

A significant portion of my experience this semester was through the American Kestrel tracking and nesting project. We participated in radio tracking and surveying for kestrels through previous and current territories to determine which were being used and any movement patterns of nearby adults. I learned a lot about why kestrels pick territories, maintain them, or move elsewhere and how this information informs our current conservation efforts: nest box deployment. I visited and cleaned nest boxes with other interns to learn about kestrel life cycles, maintenance, and potential disturbance reasons. Working on this project helped me solidify my research interest in raptor ecology, something vital as I apply for further work and study opportunities beyond my upcoming graduation. I also loved hearing about the history of the project and how it can continue to develop.

I also assisted with festival tabling and educational programming. I had an amazing time teaching students of all ages as well as adults about how to get into birding at various community events. I worked with other interns and board members to discuss our specific conservation efforts with the public, as well as with other nature-oriented organizations to inform visitors about various wildlife disciplines. Towards the end of the semester, I had the chance to assist with giving homeschool groups hands-on birding experience – an effort near to my heart as a former homeschooler. Education is a key aspect of conservation, and I greatly appreciated the chance to build skills in communication and collaboration in a field where both of those are so important.

Overall, my fall semester with the Alachua Audubon Society was an amazing senior year experience that I highly recommend for students of any year wanting to get involved with local wildlife conservation, investigating hot topics in avian research, and working on an awesome team with fellow students and field professionals. I look forward to using what I've learned over the past few months in my future work!



### Preparing for PUMAs

AAS volunteers Winnie Lante and Rick Williams cleaned out the Purple Martin gourds at Sweetwater Wetlands Park in mid-December and prepared them for the anticipated return of martins from their wintering grounds in Brazil. The earliest scouts, which are typically adult males, can be seen in early February. Five nesting pairs nested in the 7-gourd system at Sweetwater Wetlands Park in 2023 and we are hoping for full occupancy in 2024.

Photo and text by Debbie Segal



## AAS FIELD TRIPS!

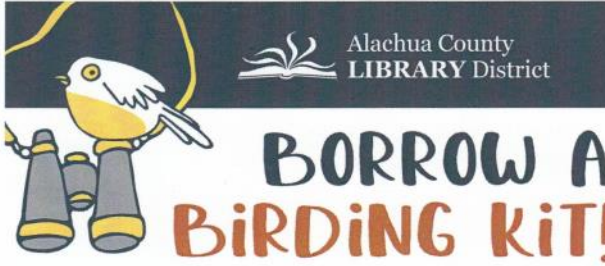
Many of you have noticed the changes in how our field trips are announced. For many years, they were planned months ahead of time and were on the front page of every newsletter. Here's our explanation. Some of our most dependable trip leaders have retired or passed on. With unpredictable weather, uncertain trip leader availability, surprising rare bird appearances keeping our keenest birders busy, and other restraints, it has gotten more difficult (and less sensible) to plan field trips more than a week or two ahead of time. Please bear with us as we explore new strategies. For now, our website calendar, Facebook page, and WhatsApp (see below) are your best sources for keeping up with our exciting forays into nature to look for birds. Please let us know if you have difficulties with any of these methods and we will do our best to help keep you informed about upcoming field trips. Send questions to [contact@AlachuaAudubon.org](mailto:contact@AlachuaAudubon.org).



### NEW! WhatsApp for Alachua Audubon Birders

WhatsApp is a messaging app that lets users text, chat and share media. Tim Hardin has created WhatsApp groups for several important AAS notifications: Evening Programs, Field Trips, Rare Bird Alerts, Newsletter, Social Media, and general chat. WhatsApp messages are end-to-end encrypted which means it is safer than regular text messages, and it can be used on your phone, computer or tablet. To learn more, download WhatsApp (free), then visit <https://bit.ly/AAScommunity>, or use the QR code here. It's actually fairly simple, even for the technically faint of heart!






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### Monthly Birds and Brews

The AAS Birds and Brews event continues to be popular with both new and experienced birders. Meet the first Sunday afternoon of the month at [First Magnitude Brewery](#), 1220 SE Veitch St. Arrive early as parking can be scarce. There will be an Alachua Audubon table set up and **loaner binoculars will be available**. It is a lovely time of day for a leisurely stroll around the Depot Park ponds to look for birds. Then we'll return to First Magnitude for an optional brew and conversation.

*All birding skill levels are welcome!*

Next event: Sunday, January 7th at 4:15 p.m.





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Alachua Audubon Society**  
Present  
**Wednesday Bird  
Walks at the Wetlands**



**When:** Every Wednesday @ 8:30 am  
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**Where:** Sweetwater Wetlands Park -  
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Bring water, binoculars, sunscreen, and walking shoes







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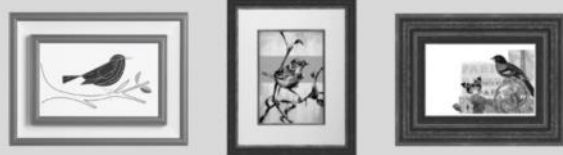


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**Alachua Audubon (AAS)** is an official chapter of **National Audubon** and **Audubon Florida**. If you belong to National Audubon and live in this area, you are automatically a member of AAS.

**To join National Audubon, please go to [AlachuaAudubon.org/join/](http://AlachuaAudubon.org/join/) where you will be directed to their membership page.**

A portion of your introductory membership will be credited to our local chapter and you will become an annual member of the [National Audubon Society](http://NationalAudubon.org), [Audubon Florida](http://AudubonFlorida.org) and [Alachua Audubon](http://AlachuaAudubon.org), with one-year subscriptions to National *Audubon* magazine, *Audubon Florida Naturalist* magazine, and Alachua Audubon’s bi-monthly newsletter, *The Crane*. To **renew** your National membership, click [here](#).

Please send any questions to [AlachuaAudubonMembership@gmail.com](mailto:AlachuaAudubonMembership@gmail.com)

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*The Alachua Audubon Society’s mission is to foster appreciation and knowledge of birds and other native wildlife, to protect and restore wildlife populations and their habitats, and to promote the sustainable use of natural resources.*

Submissions to ***The Crane*** are welcomed. Deadline for the March – April issue: February 15th. For advertising information, contact the editor at [Contact@AlachuaAudubon.org](mailto:Contact@AlachuaAudubon.org)

Annual subscription to ***The Crane*** is included in National Audubon and/or Alachua Audubon membership.

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