



The Crane

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FIELD TRIPS

Saturday, March 2, 2024 8:00 am

Watermelon Pond Wildlife and Environmental Area (WEA)

Meet field trip leaders Pelin Karaca and Raci Ulusoy at the Watermelon Pond boat ramp parking lot at the south end of SW 250th Street, Newberry. We will stroll along the dirt road heading west from the parking lot in search of the Hairy Woodpecker that has been seen and heard in the adjacent stand of oaks and pines. From there, we will drive north a short distance on SW 250th St., stopping to scope from the road for Burrowing Owls, and then stopping again to search for Bachman's Sparrows. Bring water as it can get hot quickly in the sandy uplands. Difficulty: 1-2

Sunday, March 10, 2024 8:00 am

Cones Dike from the Paynes Prairie Visitor Center

Meet field trip leader Tim Hardin in the Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park Visitor Center parking lot. We will hike approximately 4 miles from the visitor center towards Camps Canal along the edge of Paynes Prairie. We will be looking for raptors (including Swallow-tailed Kites, Sharp-shinned Hawks, and the Krider's Red-tailed Hawk wintering at that part of the prairie), sparrows, lingering waterfowl, and early migrating shorebirds. Difficulty: 3.

Sunday, March 17, 2024 8:00 am

Longleaf Flatwoods Reserve

Meet trip leader Michael Drummond at the Longleaf Flatwoods Reserve on CR-325. We'll hope to see Bachman's Sparrow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Red-headed Woodpecker, and others, but they won't be our primary quarry; we'll be looking at everything – trees, wildflowers, insects, reptiles, whatever we find.

Drive east on Hawthorne Rd. to CR-325, then right on CR-325 for 2.3 miles. Difficulty: 3.

Saturday, March 23, 2024 8:00 am

Hague Dairy

Meet field trip leader Tim Hardin at the Hague Dairy (13515 NW CR-237, Alachua (Hague)) where we will search for grassland birds in the overgrown pastures, shorebirds in the lagoon, and early migrants throughout the dairy. Difficulty: 1.

Sunday, March 24, 2024 8:00 am

Prairie Creek Preserve

Meet field trip leaders Adam and Gina Kent at Prairie Creek Preserve (7204 SE CR 234, Gainesville) where we will search for sparrows and other wintering birds, as well as early migrants. This is a known wintering location for Henslow's Sparrow which we will focus on finding. Follow signs for Prairie Creek Cemetery, and park at the cemetery parking lot. Difficulty: 2.

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Saturday, March 30, 2024 7:30 am

Boulware Springs Park

Meet Andy Kratter at Boulware Springs Park at 3300 SE 15th St., Gainesville. There are two entrances to the park. We will enter at the northernmost entrance and meet in the parking lot. From there we will stroll westward into the restored wooded area where we will look and listen for Bachman's Sparrows, Northern Bobwhites, Red-headed Woodpeckers, various sparrows, and other avian targets. We will also watch for migrating loons and learn about this fascinating migration pattern from the loon migration expert, Andy Kratter. Difficulty: 2.

Sunday, April 7, 2024 8:00 am

Buck Bay Flatwoods Preserve

Meet field trip leaders Matt and Kaysea Bruce at Buck Bay Flatwoods Preserve (6502 N. CR 225), one of Alachua County's newest preserves. We will hike along the wide trails through pine flatwoods and oak woodlands in search of Brown-headed Nuthatch, Northern Bobwhite, and other target species. This will be the height of loon migration so we will frequently check the sky for bowling pin-looking birds that are winging northeastward. Difficulty: 3.

Saturday, April 13, 2024 6:30 am

Cedar Key

Meet field trip leaders Maggie Paxson and Tim Hardin at the Target parking lot on Archer Road where we will car pool to Cedar Key. This quaint coastal town always yields a large diversity of birds and can be especially exciting during spring migration. Likely birding locations at Cedar Key will be the Trestle Trail, cemetery, museum, downtown park, Number 3 Bridge, and Shell Mound. A scope will be especially useful for shorebirds and distant water birds. Difficulty: 1.

Saturday, April 20, 2024 8:00 am

Turkey Creek Preserve

Meet at the Turkey Creek Preserve main trailhead at 6300 NW 93rd Ave, Gainesville for a stroll along the wide trails through the lovely woodland forest. This preserve is a known local hotspot for migrants where we could find various warblers, grosbeaks, and tanagers. Brown-headed Nuthatch and Red-headed Woodpeckers nest at the north end of the preserve in the longleaf pine forest and will also be targets. Difficulty: 3

Sunday, April 21, 2024 6:15 AM

Shired Island, Dixie County Coast

Meet Steven Goodman at the Jonesville Publix parking lot (14130 W Newberry Rd, Newberry) to carpool to Shired Island. This is a coastal hotspot that often presents a wide diversity of waterbirds, shorebirds, and even forested species. A scope will be useful for seeing the large flocks of shorebirds that often congregate nearby. And because this field trip coincides with the peak of spring migration, we are likely to find warblers, grosbeaks, tanagers, and other migrants. Bring lunch, drinks, sunscreen, and insect repellent. There are restrooms but no potable water. Difficulty: 1.

Saturday, April 27, 2024 8:00 am

Palm Point and Lakeshore Drive

Meet field trip leader Jose-Miguel Ponciano at this local favorite migrant trap where almost anything is possible. 7401 Lake Shore Dr, Gainesville. We will search the canopy and understory for all types of songbirds, and scan the lake for swallows and waterbirds. Difficulty: 1.

Sunday, April 28, 2024 8:00 am. **Bolen Bluff Trail**

Meet field trip leader Tim Hardin at this local favorite migrant trap where a large number of warblers, as well as grosbeaks, tanagers, cuckoos, vireos, and other migrants, are often seen. Difficulty: 3.

Birding Class Offered

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. The course consists of 4 field trips on consecutive Saturdays to local natural environments, guided by experienced birders. Spring field trip dates: April 6, 13, 20, 27. Field trips begin at 8:30 AM, and each trip will last 2-2.5 hours. You will be contacted with field trip location information after you have registered. Prior experience is not necessary, but you must bring binoculars. Registration for the 2024 Spring term is online at the Santa Fe College Community Education [website](#) or call (352) 395-5193. Course Fee: \$49.00. *Note: Must be at least 18 yrs old to register.*

An Interview with Bob Simons

Bob Simons, who has served on the Board of the Alachua Audubon Society for over 52 years, is stepping down after providing so much wisdom, expertise and energy to our organization. AAS is so very grateful for his leadership as he has been the leading advocate on the Board for Alachua Audubon's conservation initiatives. His knowledge of ecosystems as a professional forester has been invaluable in providing expert guidance to Alachua Audubon and to so many other organizations. Some of our Board members recently recorded an interview with Bob and we will post it on our website soon.

Bob earned his BS in forestry from the University of Florida and then went to North Carolina State to work on a PhD. Before he could finish, he was drafted to serve in the Vietnam war. After serving Bob returned to North Carolina State to work on a variety of projects. He then returned to Gainesville and, with his wife Erika, began attending AAS field trips to learn bird identification from experts like John Hintermister and was quickly invited to join the Board. In the early 1970s, the Florida legislature created the Environmentally Endangered Lands program. O'Leno State Park and Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park had already been purchased and preserved, and the largest ecologically sensitive tract in the county that Bob

believed needed protection was San Felasco. Bob recalls mapping and assessing the ten parcels that were privately owned and working with the landowners to convince them to sell their land to the state. Bob and Helen Hood, the President of Alachua Audubon in the 1970s, doggedly pursued state acquisition of the land. For over two years, Bob worked on the acquisition of the ten parcels that now comprise San Felasco. He attended legislative and cabinet meetings in Tallahassee to convince the state to buy the land, and through the hard work and commitment of Bob and others, San Felasco State Park was created. This is surely one of Bob's biggest legacies, and Alachua Audubon's as well, but Bob continued to contribute to conservation for many more decades to come.

Following this success, Bob volunteered with the Florida Defenders of the Environment and was involved in advocating for the acquisition of McLeod Ranch, the River Rise section of O'Leno State Park. He also worked tirelessly on the acquisition of Silver Springs State Park. His conservation involvement stretched across the state, where he was involved in efforts to convince the state to purchase Tosohatchee Preserve east of Orlando, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve in south Florida and Pinhook Swamp which connects Osceola State Forest and Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

Bob noted that once forest managers realized that he was willing to provide expert advice free of charge, he was invited to participate on a number of advisory boards. He served on the Suwanee River Advisory Board and on a Forestry Forum for the state to develop best management practices for state forests. Before Bob began advising state and federal foresters, they resisted conducting growing season burns, although these are one of the most effective measures to improve forests and wildlife habitat. As a forester, land manager and ecologist, Bob helped educate and inform the receptive national forest managers, and



Carol Lippincott, Bob Simons, Debbie Segal and Bob Knight on a recent forest walk. Photo by Erika Simons.

the management of those forests notably changed. Management considerations for snags and stumps, prescribed fire, site preparation and ecosystem maintenance all improved, as did habitat quality, helping a broad spectrum of native species.

Bob influenced the careers of many UF students by leading field trips for Dr. Archie Carr and assisting UF graduate students in identifying field sites for their research. He took various academic botanists, such as Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Daniel Ward, to see rare and unusual plants so that they could document their range and, as a consequence, is mentioned in several published floras of Florida. As a forestry consultant for the Nature Conservancy, he identified natural areas for potential purchase. He nominated many of the big trees that are included in the FL Division of Forestry's champion tree database. In Alachua County, Bob was involved in a comprehensive inventory of natural areas and served for many years, from its inception, on the Land Conservation Board for Alachua County, helping identify natural areas to purchase for conservation. He also served for many years on the City of Gainesville's Tree Advisory Board.

In the 1990s, Bob became involved in a project to protect Southeastern American Kestrels with Dr. John Smallwood. With funding from the state, over 300 kestrel nest boxes were erected and resulted in an increase in the kestrel population. Among the key findings of the project were that fire ants were the largest threat to nesting success of the species and that kestrels require large tracts of approximately 1000 acres of open land to successfully reproduce. Over the last 20 years, Bob has continued the kestrel nesting project and has installed more than 100 kestrel boxes in suitable habitat. Following the initiation of the AAS internship program, Bob has given many interns a high-quality conservation experience by working with the kestrel nest box program. During the pandemic, he and his wife, Erika, singlehandedly prepared the nest boxes for nesting and monitored nesting success.

Bob has reviewed numerous management plans for public lands and provided input on behalf of AAS. He read voluminous documents related to the Plum Creek plans for development in east Gainesville and led Alachua Audubon's opposition to their plans, testifying at meetings and providing input. When DEP advanced a proposal ten years ago to initiate grazing, timbering and hunting on state park lands, Bob was the first to volunteer to represent Alachua Audubon on the Protect Payne's Prairie coalition that included membership from the Sierra Club, the Friends of Payne's Prairie, Alachua Conservation Trust and the Gainesville Garden Club. Three years ago when Florida Power and Light asked for guidance in planting native plants and trees on their solar farms in Putnam County, Bob provided his expertise. This earned AAS a grant from FP&L for a telescoping monitor and field camera for another one of Bob's projects - nest boxes for Southeastern American Kestrels. The County Commission was considering closing part of the Barr Hammock trail at the request of a local landowner and Bob advocated to the county to keep the trail open, including taking Commissioner Charles Chestnut to the preserve to demonstrate the negative impacts that trail closure would have caused. Thanks to Bob and other trail advocates, the Barr Hammock trail has remained open and fully accessible.

One of Bob's good friends, Jim Buckner, told us: "One reason, and a significant one, that Bob has been so successful in influencing land managers on public, and some private, lands in Florida, is his easy-going personality. People readily feel comfortable with him. He never comes across as being judgmental or condescending. He is demonstrably knowledgeable and experienced, but he is also nice, friendly, intelligent, and kind. He is modest to a fault. Bob is generous, wise, and an outstanding mentor. He even has a great sense of humor. He is well-known, well-liked, and well-respected, particularly in forestry and conservation circles. But on top of all that, he is not perfect - which to the rest of us mortals fortunate enough to know him well, probably makes him seem . . . just about perfect".

Alachua Audubon is so very grateful to Bob for his more than five decades of involvement with our organization and everything that he has done to preserve and protect natural areas. Alachua Audubon enjoys a strong reputation in the Gainesville conservation community and is a respected conservation advocate, and that is, in large part, due to the contributions of Bob Simons.

Exciting New Program for Bluebirds

Would you like more opportunities to learn about birds? How to improve your property for birds? How to get involved with hands-on projects? How to be directly involved with bird conservation?

Florida Wildlife Care, Dudley Farm Historic State Park, and the Alachua Audubon Society have teamed together to enhance nesting opportunities for Eastern Bluebirds. This project is the start of a county-wide project that will provide volunteer opportunities for avian conservation.

The plan for an Eastern Bluebird Trail was developed by Leslie Straub, Director of Florida Wildlife Care, to help solve a nesting season dilemma, while also benefiting a local population of bluebirds. Each nesting season, Florida Wildlife Care receives calls about orphaned nestling bluebirds. Leslie envisioned having a network of bluebird boxes with multiple nesting pairs where baby birds could be placed into surrogate nests. The boxes will be monitored throughout the breeding season to determine nest success by recording occupancy, hatching rates and fledging rates. The open dry pasture areas with scattered trees at Dudley Farm provide suitable habitat for several pairs of bluebirds. One of the benefits of selecting Dudley Farm for the Bluebird Trail is the educational opportunities to teach park visitors about conservation of bluebirds and other cavity nesting species.

We knew Dudley Farm Historic State Park would be a great place to start due to the approval and support of the Florida Park Service for the project. Although the park has had bluebird boxes set up for decades, many were in disrepair and needed to be replaced. Alice Tyler, a past board member of the Alachua Audubon Society, monitored and maintained them up until her passing in 2009.

AAS volunteer Austin Gregg, a master woodworker, volunteered to construct four nest boxes for the Dudley Farm Bluebird Trail, and four additional boxes that AAS will install at other locations in conjunction with youth educational programs. AAS paid for the lumber and hardware that were used to construct the nest boxes.

After the nest boxes were constructed, Austin, Leslie, and AAS board member Gary Gossman installed the four nest boxes at appropriate bluebird nesting locations around Dudley Farm. AAS board member Eric Amundson provided set-up advice. Sandra Cashes, Park Manager, will develop signage about the bluebird trail.

Once the Eastern Bluebird Trail Program has fully launched and is operational, we hope to expand it to other locations around the county. We welcome interns and volunteers from across the community, including the University of Florida, Santa Fe College, public schools, Scouts, local environmental groups, and the general public.

The goal of this program aligns with the commitment of both Florida Wildlife Care and AAS to the conservation of Florida's native wildlife and their habitat including these specific objectives:

- increase nesting sites for bluebirds and other cavity nesting birds;
- increase the number of monitored bluebird nest boxes;
- provide bird natural history information to the public;
- offer opportunities to be involved in hands-on field work and public presentations; and
- provide opportunities to the community to have a greater positive impact on nature.

The Eastern Bluebird is a well-recognized and beloved bird by many. It easily adapts to human activity and will utilize nesting and hunting opportunities in most backyards, fields, and grassy open areas. Facing a severe population decline from the 1920s to the 1970s, a dedicated movement emerged to restore their numbers. Using the bluebird as a symbol to focus attention on threats facing our bird populations today, we will continue that effort and invite all of you to join us in our quest. This initiative will expand on practical and fun ways to make a difference for our native plants, pollinators, insectivorous birds, cavity nesters and native wildlife in general.

The education program will cover a range of topics related to natural history and current issues concerning cavity nesting birds and how you can make a difference. There will be plenty of opportunities for discovery and exploration for everyone of all ages and backgrounds. We are excited to share all of this with you, your family and the community.

As a reminder, if you have nest boxes on your property, now is the ideal time to ensure they are cleaned out,

structurally sound and safe for the approaching spring breeding season which may start a bit earlier than usual due to the warm winter we are experiencing. Also, it is recommended to sprinkle an ant bait such as Amdro on the ground around the nest box poles (please follow the directions on the container) since fire ants are one of the deadliest predators of nestling bluebirds. A little proactive maintenance can make a significant difference in supporting our feathered friends this spring!

To learn more about Dudley Farm Historic State Park, visit their website [here](#). For more information regarding volunteering and donating, please fill out the online form. (<https://forms.gle/yteZTiGAeui85EVP8>) or contact [Leslie Straub at Florida Wildlife Care](#).

By Leslie Straub

Evening Program

Birds of Ecuador's Chocó-Andes and Amazon, April 4th at 7 PM

Zoom Link: <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/84958610671>

Based in Gainesville, Holbrook Travel is celebrating 50 years of educational travel, providing a true connection between our travelers, nature and people of countries across Latin America, Africa, and destinations beyond.

Join Holbrook Travel birding specialists Debbie Jordan and Jill Hays for a presentation on the incredible birds of Ecuador's Chocó-Andes and Amazon. Learn about the Amazon, cloud forest, rainforest, páramo, and the eastern and western slopes of the Andes Mountains as they share a photographic journey of some of the country's 1,640-plus bird species.

Debbie Jordan's 31-year career with Holbrook Travel began in 1986 with company founder Giovanna Holbrook. Debbie



Chestnut-breasted Coronet at San Isidro.

rejoined Holbrook in 1996, and her passion for birding and nature travel has led her to organize hundreds of group expeditions that directly support habitat conservation in Central and South America. Now working part-time, she enjoys the duties of Holbrook Ambassador.

Jill Hays joined Holbrook Travel in 2023. A favorite travel memory was her first trip to Costa Rica in 2012, visiting Selva Verde and seeing Trogons and Toucans for the first time. Later she began leading international birding trips through Holbrook. Her great joy is sharing the love of birding and nature and helping others realize their travel dreams.



Flame-faced Tanager at Amagusa.

Past AAS Programs Available Online

AAS evening programs are recorded and posted on our YouTube channel. Watch them online at your leisure from the [Programs](#) page of our website at www.alachuaudubon.org/programs/ or visit our [YouTube Channel](#).

Audubon Florida EagleWatch Program

For 30 years, the Audubon Florida EagleWatch program has played an important role in the conservation of Florida's Bald Eagle population. Florida boasts one of the largest populations of nesting eagles in the lower 48 states with about 2,500 active nests according to an estimate by the US Fish & Wildlife Service in 2021. As the human population continues to grow, much of Florida's natural landscape is being altered to accommodate the needs of people, and Florida's eagles have been forced to adapt.

The ways in which eagles are adapting and their success at doing so are of great importance for the future of the species and are key areas of interest for EagleWatch. Current threats include habitat loss, increased toxins in the environment, car strikes and electrocution, territorial fights for nest sites, human disturbance, and climate change. Through monitoring, data collection, education, outreach, and advocacy, the program has helped to promote a

healthy population of eagles within the state. As the only ongoing, statewide nest monitoring effort in Florida, state and federal wildlife biologists rely on EagleWatch data to track the health of the population.

EagleWatch recruits and trains community science volunteers to collect and compile data that document nest activity and identify potential threats to nesting success and surrounding habitat. Twelve volunteers are currently monitoring 21 eagle nests in Alachua County.



Eagle parent with chick. Photo by Bob Glover.

We are currently in the last few months of the 2024 nesting season, which ends in May. At the end of each season, the data are summarized to track productivity statistics and identify emerging trends. The summary from the previous 2023 nesting season is below:

- Productivity (fledglings per occupied nest) for the 2023 season was up from the previous season: 1.22 fledglings per occupied nest, up from 1.16 for the 2022 season.
- Nests on artificial structures fledged the same number of young as nests in trees for the 2023 season.
- The number of hatchlings that survived to fledge was 91% in 2023, up from 82% in 2022.
- For the 2023 season, 83% of active nests (where incubation was confirmed) went on to fledge young, up from 78% in 2022.

Over the last 15 years, eagles in Florida have been increasingly nesting on cell towers and other artificial structures. Twenty percent of the nests monitored by EagleWatch now occur on artificial structures. Through the Juvenile Bald Eagle Auxiliary Banding Project, EagleWatch is investigating the success of nests on these structures to predict future trends and identify potential threats. To this end, the EagleWatch Program partners with the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey Raptor Trauma Clinic to auxiliary band juvenile Bald Eagles that come through the clinic

for treatment and are released back into the wild. The band color indicates the type of nest the young eagle hatched in: green for nests in trees and black for nests on artificial structures. Audubon is evaluating if the nest type chosen by parents affects their offspring's future nest choice. In addition to banding, the juveniles are DNA sexed to identify any correlation between future nest-site choice based on the sex of the bird.

The Raptor Trauma Clinic banded and released 19 juvenile Bald Eagles during the 2023 season: 5 from nests on artificial structures and 14 from nests in trees. Ten of the juveniles were males and 9 were females. This is a multi-year study, with banded birds added to the sample during each successive breeding season. To date, Audubon has banded 105 juvenile eagles as part of this study. Since inception, the study has received just over 60 resight reports of auxiliary banded birds, including 12 from out of state on their migration north.

This season we are excited to report that two of the fledglings banded the first year of the project have been documented as nesting! One eagle came from a tree nest in south Orlando and is nesting in a tree in Tarpon Springs. The other eagle came from a cell tower nest in Polk County and is nesting on a cell tower in Orlando. With only two data points, we can't make any assumptions yet, but it has been interesting to see that these two eagles chose the same type of nest structure from which they hatched.

Ultimately, if the study finds that natal nest type influences nest choice as an adult, we could see an exponential increase in the number of eagles nesting on artificial structures over time. EagleWatch will share study findings with power and communication companies to help guide management strategies towards finding ways to help eagles safely and successfully nest on their structures. In addition, knowledge gained from the study may be used to direct natural resource management practices to protect nesting habitat for future generations of eagles to use. Finally, many studies that looked at post-fledging survival and movement of Florida's juvenile Bald Eagles are now 20 years old. This study has the potential to provide new insights on these topics.

By Shawnlei Breeding,
Audubon Florida EagleWatch Program Manager

Your Membership Matters to AAS

If you are reading this, you may already be a member of Alachua Audubon. Or you may be one of the many people to whom we send a complimentary notification because you are an important part of the local birding community; or because your membership has expired but we are hoping you will renew. Your membership gives us a stronger voice when we write letters and give testimony on conservation-related issues (see letter to the City of Gainesville regarding proposed changes to Tom Petty Park on [page 15](#)). AAS sits on several stakeholder committees such as Sweetwater Wetlands Park, Audubon Florida's Regional Conservation Committee, and local state parks.

AAS is a very busy organization. Among our key activities are

- operating a bird banding lab at Prairie Creek Lodge,
- installing and monitoring American Kestrel nestboxes and Purple Martin houses in appropriate habitat,
- providing outreach and education to Alachua County public schools at all three levels,
- funding buses to transport fourth graders to nature parks for education,
- leading over 100 field trips each year,
- offering four sessions of beginning birding classes through the Santa Fe College Community Education program,
- running a very active college internship program, and
- offering bird-related evening programs.

If these activities appeal to you and others you know, please consider joining, renewing or purchasing a gift membership for friends and family and recommending AAS membership to other like-minded people. Your membership helps us to expand our capacity to carry out these projects. You can find a membership form on the last page of this newsletter or you may join from our website at [Join - ALACHUA AUDUBON SOCIETY](#).

AAS Potluck Dinner, Membership Meeting and Welcome to New Board Members

Join us on Friday, April 19th at 6:30 pm for Alachua Audubon's first annual potluck dinner and member meeting since Covid. Please help us welcome our newest AAS Board Members. This event will be held at the Mill Pond Clubhouse at 240 NW 48th Blvd, Gainesville. Please bring some food to share and your drink of choice and enjoy visiting with other Alachua Audubon members and the Board of Directors.

This will be a fun gathering and an opportunity to learn more about AAS for members.

The Alachua Audubon Society is a busy all-volunteer organization, and we are always looking for more help with our many activities. The Board of Directors is comprised of four officers and 15 members. Officers are President Debbie Segal, Vice President Tim Hardin, Secretary Felicia Lee, and Treasurer Elizabeth Mance. Returning board members are Anne Casella, Karen Brown, Katie Sieving, Adam Zions, Gary Gossman, Eric Amundson, Kate Hellgren, Jose Miguel Ponciano and Jonathon Varol. Alachua Audubon sincerely thanks outgoing board members Bob Simons, Christina Opett-Soistman, Zachery Holmes, Kayla Ehrlich, Scott Morris, and Peter Davis. Incoming board members will be introduced during the meeting. Please join us on April 19th to celebrate Alachua Audubon and welcome new board members.

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.

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!



Christmas Bird Counting at Sweetwater Wetlands Park

The 100 plus volunteers who participated in the Gainesville Christmas Bird Count on December 17th likely recall vividly the pouring rain that marked the beginning of a wild weather day. The weather conditions were no kinder for the five-member birding team at Sweetwater Wetlands Park. A lull in the downpour luckily occurred as we met ranger Scott at the entrance gate at 5:45 am and then positioned our three teams across Cells 1, 2, and 3 to begin nocturnal birding. But intermittent downpours for the next two hours caused us to retreat to our cars until the next lull occurred. Three Great-horned Owls were heard calling during that rainy pre-dawn morning. To our delight, the rails were not fair-weather birds and called frequently from their hiding spots in Cells 1, 2, and 3. We even spotted a few typically elusive King Rails braving the open edge along the berm. Collectively, the three birding teams tallied 16 King Rails, 45 Virginia Rails, and 36 Soras.

Another common nocturnal voice that emanated from the wetlands was that of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks. During the transition between darkness and dawn, outlines of ducks whistled across the wetland cells. Small flocks were leaving their nocturnal feeding grounds somewhere within Sweetwater's constructed wetland cells or from the adjacent Paynes Prairie marsh, and heading northward to their diurnal roosting spot. But far more whistling ducks remained on Paynes Prairie throughout the day and many of these could be seen and counted by the birding team at Sweetwater. Collectively, we tallied over 4,000 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, with the largest concentrations located on Paynes Prairie just south of Cells 2 and 3. "Clouds" of whistlers would frequently rise up from their diurnal roosts throughout the day, possibly in response to an overhead predator such as a Bald Eagle or Peregrine Falcon, and then settle back down and out of sight.

By mid-morning, gusting winds moved in and replaced the line of showers. This allowed us to search in earnest for birds, although with the challenges of strong winds and shivering bodies. As expected, wading and other wetland-dependent birds were numerous at and around Sweetwater Wetlands Park. Over 500 Sandhill Cranes were tallied as they winged eastward and westward across the prairie. White Ibis were almost as numerous, with many flocks cumulatively totaling over 400 birds. Wood Storks and American White Pelicans were particularly abundant on and around Paynes Prairie in 2023, presumably in response to the low rainfall-induced drawdowns that concentrated their food source. Almost 100 Wood Storks and an equal number of American White Pelicans were tallied by the Sweetwater birding team, many as they sailed high overhead.

Although wetland habitat far exceeds the upland habitat at Sweetwater Wetlands Park, almost one-third of the tallied bird species were upland-type species. These included woodpeckers, vireos, Eastern Phoebe, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American Robin, Gray Catbird, American Goldfinch, Northern Cardinal, and others.

Several rare species were discovered or rediscovered at Sweetwater during the CBC. A male Wilson's Warbler was spotted as it searched for insects along the shrubs next to the bridge between Cells 1 and 2. Two Le Conte's Sparrows were found in the grassy flow-way, while a pair of Gray-headed Swamphens were lured out from their hiding spots near the middle deep zone in Cell 3. And at least 76 Rusty Blackbirds continue to join the evening winter blackbird roost at Sweetwater.

The tall wetland plants that flourish in the wetland cells provide protective nocturnal cover to thousands of blackbird species. On winter afternoons and early evenings, Red-wing Blackbirds, Common and Boat-tailed Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and even rare Rusty Blackbirds fly to Sweetwater to spend the night. Many of the birds aim straight for the protective reeds where they drop in like a weight and instantly disappear from view, while hundreds of others gather on the powerlines on the west side of Cell 1. The Rusty Blackbirds target a few specific trees in which to gather, and from there they too



Wilson's Warbler. Photo by Debbie Segal.

select their nocturnal roosting areas somewhere within the safety of the wetland plants. This evening routine of blackbirds gathering for their nocturnal roost is a relatively drawn-out process, starting during mid-afternoon when the early arrivals start trickling in. Standing along the western berm of Cell 1 an hour or so before darkness sets in, observers can witness the incoming procession of blackbirds. But come morning, the process is quite different, more explosive, as flocks rise up and wing onward in whichever direction takes them to their morning foraging site.

Although the weather conditions during the 2023 Christmas Bird Count were extremely challenging for finding and counting birds, at 89 species, Sweetwater Wetlands Park once again produced an extraordinarily high number of birds. The extensive wetland habitats, diversity of habitats, ease of viewing birds from the raised berms, and its adjacency to the bird-rich Paynes Prairie all contribute to consistently high annual Christmas Bird Counts at Sweetwater Wetlands Park. We are grateful to the City of Gainesville for their assistance, including early entry into the park, and to Gainesville Regional Utilities and other City entities for designing an environmental park that provides exceptional wildlife habitat while also emphasizing public use.

By Debbie Segal

Youth Outreach and Education is a Joy for All

There's nothing sweeter than venturing into Sweetwater Wetlands on a cool, crisp December morning with a group of elementary school kids. Youth Outreach Coordinator, Kate Hellgren, and Alachua Audubon Interns Zion Szot and Anna Mavrodieva led a homeschool group over the boardwalks and along the gravel trails of the park while observing the beautiful birds that require the wetland's resources. We discussed habitat, adaptations, and enjoyed the bounty surrounding us. The students were engaged and enthusiastic. With charismatic water birds (and alligators) as their focus, how could they be otherwise?!

Public and home school groups as well as an after-school Science Club and a weekly, early morning Bird Club will keep us engaged with our community's youth. Alachua Audubon is especially privileged when we work with Title 1 (lower income) schools. Connecting a child with nature through birds and bird habitat is very rewarding. Take a child on a nature walk!



The Purple Martin And our Colony Project at the Lake City Wetland

The dark blue, iridescent male Purple Martin is hard to confuse with others. That color across its whole body, its slightly forked tail, broad breast, and large size make it stand out from any of our other Swallows. Females may at first resemble some of those others, but the slightly forked tail, gray “collar”, and the size difference should help distinguish them too. Check the resources linked below to reinforce your recognition of this beautiful bird’s field marks.

Purple Martins feed in flocks with swift, darting movements. Like other Swallows, they feed and drink on the wing, taking flying insects from mid-air. Their size permits them to often take larger insects like dragonflies, and they often feed at higher altitude than some other Swallow species. But that doesn’t mean they won’t feed on other flying prey, from bees and beetles to butterflies and moths and many, many more. As such, people have welcomed them to our neighborhoods.

Purple Martins have been nesting in housing provided by humans for a long, long time. According to Cornell’s AllAboutBirds.org website, John James Audubon used the presence and condition of such houses to choose his lodging places as far back as at least 1831. In fact, in the East most of the birds nest in human provided structures (while in the West they still prefer woodpecker holes).

Their insect diet and attraction to provided structures helped convince Lake City to approve the installation of Purple Martin gourds at the then new Lake City Wetland in 2018. Alachua Audubon and Four Rivers Audubon have partnered on the project from the beginning. The first set of gourds was so successful that a second, larger set was added. Then a third. And this year a fourth set was added in time for the birds’ return from their southward migration this month.

All those additional gourds were added due to the great success of the colony. For several years that success has been monitored in late April or early May. When checked in 2020, 53 eggs and 23 hatchlings were found in the 17 (of 20) gourds in use by the birds. By 2023, all 32 of the installed gourds were occupied. When checked, they contained 134 eggs and 32 hatchlings. Debbie Segal estimates that around 150 young were fledged in 2023. We can claim that colony as a success!

But that every gourd was in use could mean only one thing – we needed to add another set of gourds. Our Audubon chapter partnership collaborated again and another dozen nest gourds are available for use in 2024! As Debbie Segal points out, “This is such a successful Purple Martin conservation project thanks to the collaboration of the staff at the Lake City Wetlands as well as both Audubon chapters. The Martins quickly took to the first nesting gourds that we installed in 2020. And each year, as we add more nesting gourds, the colony just keeps growing.”

We hope our successful partnership will serve as a model for others, and that you may be inspired to install your own Martin housing. Perhaps if we continue this important conservation work, the beautiful



A Male Purple Martin Perched Near Its Nest Gourd. Photo ©Tedd Greenwald



Installing Additional Gourds at Lake City Wetlands. Photo ©Tedd Greenwald.



Hatchlings Inside a Gourd at Lake City Wetlands (or the three tenors). Photo ©Tedd Greenwald

chorus offered by colonies of Purple Martins may offer humans a serenade for generations to come.

The [Purple Martin Conservation Association](#) is a great resource to learn about these birds and their conservation.

Learn about identification, behavior, and more about [Purple Martins at AllAboutBirds.org here.](#)

By John Middleton,
newsletter editor
Four Rivers Audubon

The John Hintermister High School Scholarship Program

To encourage youth activities consistent with the Alachua Audubon Society mission, AAS is pleased to announce the availability of scholarships (\$250) to Alachua County high school seniors who demonstrate an interest in wildlife or conservation. The expenditure of scholarship funds is not limited to academics and may be used however the student wishes. The number of awards may vary annually.

The award will be based upon the following criteria:

- Keen interest in the environment, nature, and/or conservation
- Involvement in extracurricular environmental/nature activities
- Academic record
- Teacher/counselor recommendation.



To be considered for a scholarship, an applicant must:

1. Be a resident of Alachua County
2. Be a student at the 12th grade level
3. Be in good academic standing.

To learn more about the program and to apply online, go to www.alachuaaudubon.org/scholarship/. **The deadline to apply is March 15, 2024.** Scholarships will be awarded in April 2024.



College Student?

Check out the GREBEs—the University of Florida Audubon Campus Chapter focused on teaching college students about the importance and beauty of the avian world. Our mission is to guide students in bird identification, explain the role of birds in daily ecosystem functions, and emphasize how to conserve them through local birding trips, community outreach, lectures from professionals in ornithology, and hands-on field experience such as banding workshops. UF and Santa Fe College students are eligible to join. Contact them via email at grebeuf@gmail.com.

Spring is Coming! Time to Create Your Own Park!

If you haven't watched Doug Tallamy's entertaining and enlightening presentation, *Creating a Homegrown National Park*, you really should. Dr. Tallamy is engaging and upbeat. He has great pictures and a lot of them. It was presented by Orange Audubon Society and is available on YouTube [here](#).

Although our natural world is declining, he presents hopeful solutions that each one of us can do starting today. He states that living *with* nature, and not separate from it, is the only viable option left to us. Nature must be able to thrive in human dominated landscapes. We can't rely on isolated parks to do the work of nature for us. 85% of the land east of the Mississippi is privately owned. Therefore, we must create homegrown parks in our own yards. He cites examples such as a couple who replaced invasive plants with natives on their 0.6 acre, installed a water feature, and have now recorded 149 bird species (including 35 warbler species). A woman on 0.1 acre close to an airport and an expressway and not connected to any preserved land added 60 native plant species and a water feature and has recorded 117 species of birds.

Caterpillars dominate nestling diets in 16 out of 20 bird families. Tallamy points out that caterpillars transfer more energy from plants to other animals than any other plant-eaters. He describes a study that compared native landscapes to yards dominated by non-native plants; the non-native landscapes produced 75% fewer caterpillars, were 60% less likely to have breeding chickadees (in spite of installed nest boxes), chickadee nests contained fewer eggs and were 29% less likely to survive. Carolina chickadees rear their young almost exclusively on caterpillars. To rear one clutch of nestlings until they fledge, chickadees must catch from 6 to 9 thousand caterpillars. They need landscapes with plants that support more caterpillars. We typically garden for plants that always look nice and we avoid plants that are eaten by caterpillars. This is supported by the nursery industry that offers non-natives that don't support insect life for this very reason.

According to E.O. Wilson, "Life as we know it depends on insects."

Where to start? Shrink your lawn (there are 40 million acres nationwide). Use "keystone plants": ecologically productive, 5% of our native plants make 75% of the caterpillar food that drives food webs; *native* oaks, cherries, willows, blueberries, hickories, maples, and elms are keystone tree species that support huge numbers of insects; Goldenrods (*Solidago*), Aster genera, sunflowers (*Helianthus*), nightshade (*Solanum*), morning glory (*Ipomoea*), plantain (*Plantago*), wild lettuce (*Lactuca*) are keystone herbaceous plants. Put flower beds under your trees or let leaves accumulate to allow caterpillars to complete their life cycle in the soft soil (this is also better for the soil, the trees and the birds).

Tallamy makes it clear that nature is not just important, *it is essential*. Nature and humans must co-exist (and not just in parks). *All* humans are responsible for good earth stewardship because *all* humans are dependent on earth's ecosystems. One person can't save the world's biodiversity but we can save it where we live. This idea empowers each one of us and makes the problem something manageable for us. So shrink your lawn, remove non-productive invasive plants, plant keystone plant species, add a pollinator garden. You will have helped to make the world a better place for all.

Helpful sources:

Florida Friendly Landscaping Guide/App: <https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/resources/apps/plant-guide/>

Audubon Plants for Birds www.audubon.org/plantsforbirds

National Wildlife Federation Native Plant Finder www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder

A Step-by-Step Guide to a Florida Native Yard by Ginny Stibolt and Marjorie Shropshire. University Press of Florida, 136 pp.

Florida Native Plant Society www.fnps.org

Plant Real Florida www.plantrealflorida.org/

Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard by Doug Tallamy. Timber Press. Available in hardcover, audiobook, Kindle and audio CD. 257 pp.

By Karen Brown

Save the Trees and Birds at Tom Petty Park

Alachua Audubon learned that the City of Gainesville is planning to expand the recreational facilities at Tom Petty Park in Northeast Gainesville. As many birders know, this is an important urban location for Red-headed Woodpeckers and other species. Because the construction plans indicate that some of the mature trees could be removed, AAS is advocating for protection of the trees and the associated wildlife. Below is the letter that the AAS Conservation Committee submitted to the City of Gainesville.

The Alachua Audubon Society and our 900 members are pleased that the City Commission is interested in improvements to Tom Petty Park that will better serve residents for recreation. However, we are very concerned that the footprint of the improvements on [the map showing the plans](#) includes new courts south of the current tennis courts. This area includes a number of large pines and native trees that support birds and other wildlife. **Most notably, these trees are used by breeding Red-headed Woodpeckers, a declining species, and Tom Petty Park is one of the only places these birds can be found in the city.** We urge you to retain these trees as they provide important foraging and nesting sites.

The park is also home to breeding Eastern Bluebirds, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, Northern Cardinals, Carolina Wrens, House Finches, Northern Mockingbirds, Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers. The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's online database, eBird, documents 89 species having been observed at the park. This bird-rich urban park is a haven for wildlife and Gainesville residents. Since there is already an existing large swath of lawn with no trees to the west of the parking lot, this seems to be a better spot to site additional courts. We hope that you will consider relocating some of the proposed courts to this grassy area so that the park's ability to support its current resident birds will not be impaired.



Red-headed Woodpecker.
Photo by Becky Enneis.

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www.aclib.us/birdingkits

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, March 3rd at 4:45 p.m.



Sweetwater Wetlands Park & Alachua Audubon Society

Present

Wednesday Bird Walks at the Wetlands



When: Every Wednesday @ 8:30 am
from September - May

Where: Sweetwater Wetlands Park -
Entrance Pavilion

Walks are free with park admission fee (\$5/vehicle)
Bring water, binoculars, sunscreen, and walking shoes



Sweetwater Wetlands Park Stakeholders Committee Results

AAS President Debbie Segal and board member Anne Casella sit on the stakeholders committee for Sweetwater Wetlands Park. At the January quarterly meeting, some of the projects long suggested by AAS were finally approved.

When mowing begins in the spring, the park will pilot a trial of reduced mowing on the inside of the berm around Cell 1. The city has agreed to leave a one mower width swath unmowed at the bottom of the berm surrounding Cell 1 to provide grassy wildlife habitat and a buffer for wildlife such as King Rails.

The city is starting to work on the educational signs for Cells 2 and 3 that AAS has agreed to fund.

And, we finally received approval for a short forested nature trail off the paved road that visitors first encounter when they enter the park. Coming soon!



King Rail at SWP. Photo by Saeed Khan.

Intern Report

My time interning for Alachua Audubon was an incredible experience. I had the opportunity to participate in exciting and insightful activities that also helped me achieve experience for future career opportunities!

The highlight of my time with Audubon was getting to track American Kestrels with Eric and Miguel. We would go out to the Watermelon Pond area and keep a sharp eye out for any potential signs of Kestrel activity to see how they're fairing in this environment. Florida's population of American Kestrels is considered threatened, and it is important that they are monitored in order to better protect them. Miguel would bring tracking equipment as one of the kestrels we would spot has a tracking device attached. This Kestrel would fend off others that entered his territory, leading me to name him 'The Boss'. Kestrel nest boxes were also monitored during these outings, and I assisted with predator guards, and lined the perimeters of the ground below each nest box with ant block to prevent any issues with fire ants. In addition to American Kestrels, we would spot other birds, too, such as Sandhill Cranes, Killdeer, Meadowlarks, Red-Tailed Hawks and even Bald Eagles!

I also had the opportunity to participate in tabling events where we helped raise public awareness, promoted the organization, and provided fun bird-themed activities. A native plant garden was also a big part of this internship for me, where we helped set up plots with native foliage in hopes of promoting indigenous biodiversity. The garden attracts the attention of all sorts of birds, and a myriad of colorful insects. Digging holes and spreading mulch also helps you feel the satisfaction of a hard day's work!

The program ended for me at the December social, where I imitated the calls of certain bird species, and everybody would guess which bird it was. People really liked my calls, and it was a fun way to wrap things up.

In the end, it was an outstanding experience and I have hopes that this program will be the prelude to an exciting career!

By Gordon Goldhaber, Winter 2023 College Intern



Native plant restoration
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Check out the Paynes Prairie Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society [here](#). Meetings take place on third Wednesdays – September through May (excluding December) – 7:00 pm at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at 4225 NW 34th Street, Gainesville in Phillips Hall. The public is welcome to attend. Join their chapter to attend monthly field trips.



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Sliding scale memberships welcome. Send what you can afford.

Join online with PayPal at AlachuaAudubon.org/join/ or send your application (print from the website) and check payable to **Alachua Audubon Society** to PO Box 140464, Gainesville, FL 32614-0464. Include your name, address and email. *The Crane* is distributed via email. Your email address will not be shared with other organizations.

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/ 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, Audubon Florida and Alachua Audubon, 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

Alachua Audubon is a 501(c)3 organization. A copy of our official registration and financial information may be obtained from the Florida Division of Consumer Services by calling toll-free (800-435-7352) or visiting their website at fdacs.gov/Consumer-Resources. The state registration does not imply endorsement, approval, or recommendation by the state.

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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

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

Alachua Audubon Society, Inc. is one of more than 40 Audubon chapters in Florida and is chartered by the National Audubon Society and Audubon Florida.

Alachua Audubon offers all our neighbors respect, inclusion, and opportunities to participate and be heard in our organization. Please read the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion statement on our website [here](#). Comments and suggestions are welcomed.