

# The Crane

Volume 65 Number 5 May–June 2024

## FIELD TRIPS

**Saturday, May 4, 2024. 9:00 am**  
**Stewardship of Purple Martins and Yard Birding with Winnie Lante**  
**11529 SW 99 Ave, Gainesville 32608**

Meet field trip host Winnie Lante at her farm in western Alachua County to learn about the conservation of Purple Martins, the aerial acrobats that will readily nest in man-made structures. In fact, the eastern population of martins is completely reliant on humans for their nesting structures.

Winnie has an incredible yard feeding network and was one of the most popular locations at the last AAS Backyard Birding Tour. We will learn about both attracting Purple Martins and creative yard techniques for attracting songbirds. Purple Martins are native swallows that are one of America's most beloved songbirds. Their chattering songs, aerial acrobatics, insect-eating habits, and tolerance of humans, make them one of the most welcomed nesting species in yards and farms. Depending on conditions, the nesting gourds may be lowered and monitored during the field trip. We are hoping to inspire more people to become Purple Martin landlords so we can increase the successful nesting of this declining species.

Feel free to bring a friend who may also want to learn about the conservation of Purple Martins and attracting more yardbirds. Please carpool if possible to facilitate parking. Difficulty: 1.

What should you bring on a field trip? Binoculars, water, insect repellent, hat, sunscreen, snack, phone.

**Hague Dairy**  
**Sunday, May 5, 8-11 am.**  
**13515 NW County Rd 237, Alachua 32615**

From Gainesville go N on US 441, 5.5 miles past SR-121, turn right onto CR-237 and go 0.6 miles to the entrance. The driveway will fork at the white building; pull left into the lawn and park. We will meet in the parking lot.

This trip will be group led. If you've never been to the UF Dairy Farm, be prepared to see cows, barns and birds. We will likely visit the lagoon, loved by shorebirds, where waste from the cows is held until it is sprayed on crops. Species seen in May include a variety of sandpipers and doves, grassland birds, lingering migrants and more.

Difficulty: 2 but variable based on rain, some uneven terrain, potential for extreme heat and sun exposure since there are no shade trees. There are good paths throughout. Since this is an active dairy farm, there can be strong smells in some areas.

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**Trip Difficulty 1:** Trip within easy access to the vehicle and/or level terrain; one mile or less. **2:** May involve uneven terrain; one to two miles. **3:** May involve elevation change, uneven terrain, and/or greater than two miles.

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### 83rd Street Bike Trails

Saturday, May 11, 8-11 am

Gainesville, park in the lot at: (29.6931891,-82.4361501)

Meet trip leader Tim Hardin at the trail that starts at the NE corner of the parking lot. Last year's May sightings included 12 warbler species (the highlight being the rare Connecticut Warbler), Yellow-Billed Cuckoo, Scarlet Tanager, and three types of thrush. Please stay on the trail. Ticks possible. Difficulty: 2 due to mileage (approximately 3 miles round trip), some elevation change and some roots. The trail is almost entirely shaded.

### Poe Springs Park

Saturday, May 18, 8-11 am

28800 NW 182nd Ave, High Springs, FL 32643

After paying your admission fee (\$6 per vehicle, bring cash) at the entrance kiosk, take your first right and go all the way down to the last parking lot. Make a left there and go all the way down and park. There you will meet trip leader Maggie Paxson. Poe Springs is a lovely Alachua County park located on the banks of the Santa Fe River. This park can be one of the better warbler spots in the county during fall migration but can also be impressive during our brief spring migration period. No guarantees, but hard to find in-county warblers such as Canada, Golden-winged, Kentucky, and Cerulean Warblers have been recorded here, as well as Northern Waterthrush. Difficulty: 2. It can be muddy in places so waterproof footwear or old shoes are recommended. Restrooms on site.

### Butler Plaza Retention Ponds

Sunday, May 19, 8-10:30 am

2711 Clark Butler Blvd, Gainesville 32608

Take the entrance off Clark Butler Blvd to the parking lot behind and past Olive Garden. Meet trip leader Christine Zamora in the lot closest to the ponds first. We will then head to the second pond located behind Ashley Homestore. From there, we will make our way to the newer 4th pond. Northern Rough-winged Swallows are likely. There is also a chance of Least, Spotted, or Solitary Sandpiper. Semipalmated Sandpiper has also been recorded here. Difficulty: 1.

### San Felasco Hammock Preserve

Date TBD.

11101 Millhopper Rd, Gainesville, FL 32653

Meet in the parking lot on Millhopper Road (NW 53rd Ave—4.5 miles west of NW 43rd Street). \$4 entrance fee - use cash for honor box or pay online. We will walk the Moonshine Creek trail. Likely targets include Hooded Warbler, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, and potentially Acadian Flycatcher. 15 warbler species have been seen at San Felasco Hammock in past Mays, including a very rare Kirtland's Warbler in 2013 and a Connecticut Warbler in 2010. Difficulty: 3; uneven terrain, roots, elevation changes, over 2 miles.

**June 2024**

### The June Challenge Kickoff

Saturday, June 1, 6 am-11:30 am (opportunities to leave earlier or stay longer)

Start at Longleaf Flatwoods Reserve (on CR-325 2.3 miles south of SR-20, AKA Hawthorne Road), Hawthorne 32640

Meet Rex Rowan in the parking corral of Longleaf Flatwoods Reserve to kick off our annual summer birding contest. The June Challenge. We'll try to find Chuck-will's-widow, Common Nighthawk, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Bachman's Sparrow at Longleaf (your chances for Chuck-will's-widow are better if you get there at 5:45). Next we'll go to Windsor to scope Newnans Lake for Bald Eagles and Laughing Gulls. If time allows, we'll also visit Powers Park and/or Palm Point for additional views of Newnans Lake and possibly some late migrants. Our last stop will be Sweetwater Wetlands Park (\$5 per vehicle entry fee, payable on smartphone app) to search for Limpkin, King Rail, Least Bittern, Gray-headed Swamphen, and Purple Gallinule. We'll be done by lunchtime with 40-50 species on our June Challenge lists. Difficulty: 3.

### Burrowing Owls at Watermelon Pond

Saturday, June 8, 7-10 am

County gate on SW 250th Street, Gainesville, FL

We'll meet at the county gate on SW 250th Street where we will be guided half a mile into the viewing area. Beyond the gate is typically not publicly accessible. The surrounding area is good for birds such as Orchard Oriole, Eastern Meadowlark, American Kestrel, Common Nighthawk, Northern Bobwhite, Bachman's Sparrow and, sometimes, Eastern Kingbird.

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Driving directions from Gainesville: Go west on State Road 26 (Newberry Road) to the town of Newberry. Where SR 26 intersects with US-41 at a stoplight, turn left onto 41 and proceed 2.9 miles to SW 46th Avenue. Turn right onto 46th and go 1.2 miles to SW 250th Street. Turn left onto 250th, a dirt road, and go 3.0 miles to the gate. Park as best you can on the roadside. Difficulty: 2 (some uneven terrain).

### La Chua Owl Prowl

Sunday, June 9, 8-930/10 pm

4270 SE 15th St, Gainesville, FL 32641

*Make sure to be in the park before 8 pm.* Meet on the boardwalk. Mosquitoes are a certainty. Bring repellent and long sleeves. We will wait for the sun to set and hopefully get a glimpse of some of the most elusive nocturnal birds: the Yellow-crowned Night Heron and the Barn Owl. Anticipated sightings include Barred Owl and Great Horned Owl. Eastern Screech Owl will likely be calling as it gets later. Difficulty: 2 (some uneven terrain).

### June Challenge Potluck Party & Winners Announcement! Awarding of the Trophy!

Date and time TBD.



*Bob Simons installing one of his Southeastern American Kestrel nest boxes in earlier days. Photo by Erika Simons.*

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## AAS Annual Meeting, Potluck Dinner, and Tribute to Bob Simons

In April, Alachua Audubon enjoyed our first annual membership meeting and potluck dinner since the pandemic. It was a fun event and a great opportunity to visit with members and friends. Several important and pleasant matters of business were taken care of including the farewell to several board members who have stepped down after serving AAS. Alachua Audubon sincerely thanks outgoing board members **Bob Simons, Christina Opett-Soistman, Zachery Holmes, Kayla Ehrlich, Scott Morris, and Peter Davis.** We voted to approve new board members **Ellen Frattino, Danielle Zukowski, Renee Slaw, Tonya Becker and Glenn Israel.** We look forward to working with these new board members and having fresh minds and shoulders to help with our many ongoing projects.

The Spring 2024 college interns were on hand and gave a special tribute to Dr. Katie Sieving and Jonathan Varol in appreciation of their experiences at the bird banding lab. See their stories on [page 6](#).

Several wonderful tributes were given to Bob Simons, our beloved board member who has stepped down after more than 50 years! Read on to learn of just some of Bob's many accomplishments.

### From Dan Pearson, Biologist, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks, District 2

I just wanted to say a few words about the incredible contributions that Bob Simons has made over the years in helping to acquire and preserve public lands, particularly state parks and preserves such as San Felasco Hammock, Paynes Prairie, Waccasassa Bay, and River Rise Preserves.

Way back in 1972 Bob Simons and Helen Hood, working with Alachua Audubon, put together a proposal to acquire San Felasco Hammock through the Environmentally Endangered Lands program – the forerunner of the CARL and Florida Forever programs. This was in the wake of Paynes Prairie being purchased as Florida's first state preserve in 1970.

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Audubon enlisted local celebrities such as Archie and Marjorie Carr, Kathy and Jack Ewel and many others to prepare a proposal, and they garnered support letters from politicians up and down the chain of command. Without their efforts, I am sure that San Felasco would be a subdivision today, as is much of the rest of Millhopper Road.

Beyond that Bob has served as a mentor to all of us over the past 50 years. I think the first time I met Bob was in the Fall of 1985 when I was a graduate student in the Zoology Department. I was taking Community Ecology and back then, Archie Carr used to lead the Friday field trips to nearby natural places. On this one he brought along a younger Bob Simons who spent the day with us, all running to try and keep up with Archie's long shadow, to show us San Felasco Hammock. We got to see Big Otter Ravine, Chert Swamp, and Planer trees out in the swamps. This was the first time I had ever been there. I didn't realize I'd end up spending the rest of my life working there and many other great places around here. I know that those experiences played a huge role in my decision to stay and work in Florida Conservation. And Bob has been a valuable source of knowledge over my whole career ever since that first field trip.

Bob's contributions to public land conservation cannot be overestimated, and I think the words of Archie Carr from the San Felasco Hammock acquisition proposal sum it up well:

*"The case for making San Felasco a faunal reserve has another aspect which alone would seem to justify preserving this expanse of incomparable wild country between the spreading edges of the towns. This additional motivation is the sense of noblesse oblige, the recognition of a responsibility to keep at least some of the original earth in an unspoiled state for the generations to come. For many people it is an increasingly rare privilege to be able to walk in a wild place and see unrestrained animals in natural habitat. One might even argue that this consideration is more important than any other as justification for saving San Felasco."*  
Thank you, Bob.

#### **From Jacqui Sulek, Audubon Florida**

In preparation for honoring Bob, I channeled Charles Lee who is now in his 52nd year with Audubon Florida. Charles is the Director of Advocacy with an extensive history with land conservation in FL. I also contacted Julie Wraithmell, the Executive Director of Audubon Florida who has known Bob since her days with The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission where she helped create the Great Florida Birding Trail.

From Charles Lee:

"Soon after I came to work at Florida Audubon, former Executive Director Hal Scott instructed me that 'Bob Simons is the voice to listen to in the Gainesville area'. It did not take long until I learned just how extensive Bob's skills were. He has been an important force behind the drive for environmental land acquisition in Alachua County and a consistent guardian of natural areas in North Central Florida."

From Julie Wraithmell:

"For more than 50 years, Bob Simons has been a force of, and for, nature in Alachua County, always willing to lend his hands and recruit others to a worthy conservation cause. While his commitment to science is a hallmark of his leadership, his legacy lies in the community he has helped build, helping others find a place in, and make their own unique contribution to, conservation. These generations of birds, birders and conservationists stewarded by Bob are the true measure of his outsized impact on Alachua County natural resources. He is one of the most modest conservation giants I've ever had the pleasure to learn from. Thank you, Bob."

Jacqui's final comment was this: "As we like to say at Audubon, *you* are what hope looks like to a bird".

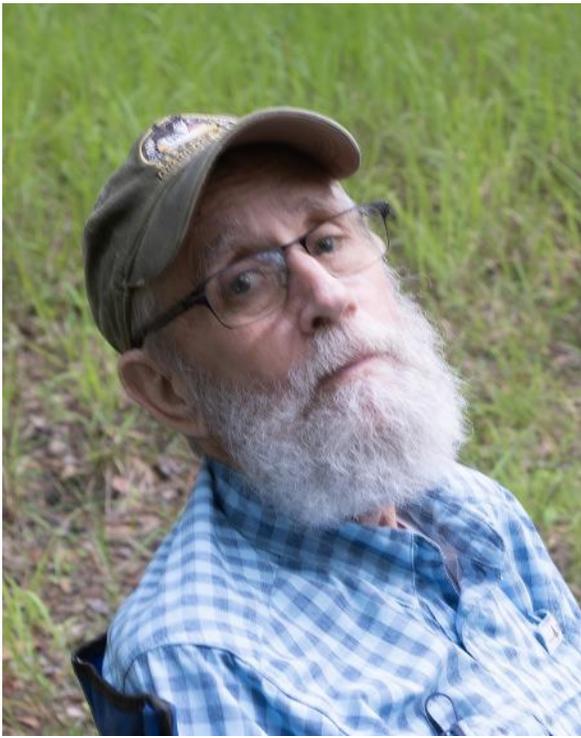


*Ron Robinson and Bob Simons prepare to install a newly built kestrel nest box and post.  
Photo by Erika Simons.*

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**From Ken Meyer, Executive Director, Avian Research and Conservation Institute (ARCI)**

I met Bob in 1996 or so while studying Swallow-tailed Kites on commercially managed forest lands. He contributed logistically, but also by helping me understand Swallow-tailed Kite behavior and the nesting and foraging opportunities associated with sustainable forest management. He was very gracious sharing his time and abundant knowledge. He also has a great sense of humor.



Four years ago, ARCI started using telemetry to learn more about how Southeastern American Kestrels use the landscape, letting the birds tell us what they need, particularly parents foraging for their young, and fledglings dispersing to their first breeding areas. Nest boxes are an asset, but where should we concentrate them? And where can we manage for more natural nest cavities? We need to know such things for this unique subspecies, which once occupied nearly the whole Southeastern United States before declining by 60 to 80% over the last few decades. The remaining small numbers are limited mainly to Florida, making our state essentially the only hope for recovery of this resident breeding population of American Kestrels.

Bob saw this happening and responded accordingly. I was reunited with him a few years ago when Alachua County's Andi Christman introduced me to Eric Amundson, Alachua Audubon's current Kestrel nest-box program manager, and gave us permission to work together on the County's Watermelon Pond conservation area.

With support from Debbie Segal and AAS members, Bob's experience and passion for Kestrel conservation has informed and enabled increased breeding productivity in over 400 nest boxes that he has set in place, maintained, and monitored for nearly 30 years.

In addition, his guidance and the opportunities he has created have enriched the learning experiences of dozens of Alachua Audubon's college interns. A good example is Miguel Olvera, whom I met on my first visit with Eric and Bob to Watermelon Pond. Having been trained by Bob on the AAS Kestrel project, Miguel now works as a tech on Alachua Audubon's nest-box program and part time for ARCI on our Kestrel, Burrowing Owl, and Crested Caracara studies – all with an eye toward a professional career in bird conservation biology.

Who is the common thread in all this? Bob Simons. As I learn more about all that he has accomplished, I keep coming back to this theme: How does someone with Bob's knowledge, skills, and drive make so many exceptional contributions to bird conservation and natural-resource protection AS AN AVOCATION, NOT A JOB!!! I find this wonderfully inspiring, and I know many others must as well.

I, and my ARCI co-director Gina Kent, ask that you join us in thanking Bob for his decades of abiding contributions to the conservation of the Southeastern American Kestrel, and for his extraordinary successful efforts to protect vast tracts of Alachua County's most beautiful natural areas.

Thank you, Bob! And thanks to Erika and to Alachua Audubon for all your contributions to these efforts.

**From all of us at Alachua Audubon, now and for the past 50 years, *THANK YOU, BOB!***



## Spring 2024 AAS Intern and CLI Reports

The results are in! The Spring 2024 AAS college interns and Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) students had a great experience! Read their individual reports below to learn just how much this program means to these young people on the cusp of choosing and pursuing their careers. And it is just as rewarding for the AAS board members who mentor these students—a win-win for conservation, birds, AAS and future conservation professionals! From left: Mia Keriazes, Jonathan Varol, Katie Sieving, Richard Escarcena, Kimberly Puente, Delaney Cassidy, Natalia Fuentes.

Photo by Jacob Alberts.

### Kimberly Puente

My time as an intern for the Alachua Audubon Society has been an unforgettable experience. I was given a unique opportunity to participate in the many AAS projects across the county. From banding birds at the Prairie Creek Banding Lab to monitoring Kestrel nest boxes, I was able to develop a plethora of valuable skills and met so many great people in the chapter throughout the semester.

I spent most of my Saturdays bird banding with Katie Sieving and Jonathan Varol; the interns were taught how to mist-net and band birds. I loved being able to work hands-on with birds. I was able to work with so many different species – my favorites were the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Northern Cardinals (even though these birds can bite pretty hard. Ouch!). Being given the opportunity to see these birds up close helped foster a greater appreciation towards birds and avian research and conservation. It was always a pleasure to work with everyone in the banding lab – I could not have asked for a better team. Katie Sieving and Jonathan Varol are great teachers and it was an honor to learn banding from them.

I also enjoyed monitoring Kestrels with Eric Amundson and Miguel Olvera. We went to different places around Alachua County checking different kestrel nest sites. It was my first time seeing the American Kestrel nest boxes, much less kestrel eggs. I got to observe several other birds including Eastern Meadowlarks, Burrowing Owls, and Loggerhead Shrikes; I also had the chance to watch Sherman's Fox Squirrels scurry around the kestrel areas. It was an amazing experience with some great wildlife sightings, I learned so much about kestrel conservation.

In summary, the AAS internship was a valuable experience and truly a highlight of my semester! I am grateful to have been part of the internship team, I learned so much from the best in Alachua County. As my last semester at the University of Florida, this internship was a great way to end my 4 years of college. I feel more prepared and amped up to start a career in ornithology! I am grateful to everyone involved in the AAS!



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## Richard Escarcena

I was first introduced to the Alachua Audubon Society last year when I applied for Audubon's Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) to try something new and get more experience. I never thought of birds as a group of animals that were particularly appealing to me, knowing a handful of species at best and being hopeless with my knowledge of songs and calls. Even after attending the Audubon Florida Assembly and getting to meet all the amazing people working in this field, it didn't quite click for me until I started working on my CLI project and alongside the interns for the Alachua Audubon Society.

During my time as a CLI student, I assisted Eric Amundson and Miguel Olvera with American Kestrel nest box surveys, tended to the Native Plant Garden with Lee Bloomcamp, and set up wildlife cameras at the Native Plant Garden and the GREBE Garden on campus to capture bird photos for my project.

*Despite all this, there is nothing in this semester and even during my time at UF that I have looked forward to more than waking up at 5am in the morning to get ready to drive down to the Prairie Creek Banding Lab to open mist nests at the crack of dawn and band birds. Every day spent there was the highlight of the week for me and pretty much anyone who would listen to me would hear about the birds we banded, what he heard and saw out there, and the birds we were hoping to catch next (the highlight for me is still the pair of sapsuckers we caught on our first week).*

While my time with AAS may be officially over, I hope to continue working alongside all their dedicated members by going out with Eric and Miguel to band kestrel fledglings and continuing my camera work in the gardens. I deeply valued all the work that I was able to take part in alongside all the other amazingly passionate and talented interns and am incredibly grateful for Jonathan Varol, Katie Sieving, and everyone else at the Alachua Audubon Society for making this possible.

## Mia Keriazes

It has been an honor to be an intern this season with the Alachua Audubon Society. I have always loved birds; this experience has reinforced that love. All of those involved with this season had molded it into the great experience that it was. I would like to give my sincerest thanks to Dr. Sieving, Jonathan, Eric, Miguel, Dr. Kratter, and all of my fellow interns.

A great portion of my experience was the American Kestrel Nest Box Monitoring Project and Loon Watch. We were able to inspect the kestrel nest boxes using telescoping cameras to count eggs, presence/absence, and we would record the data collected at each site. We even had the chance to see burrowing owls during some of our surveys. I also assisted in monitoring the migration of Common Loons across Alachua County. I was able to go out on multiple occasions to count and record migrating loons during the monitoring program. Counting the loons was a great experience and the scenery at the sites was unforgettable.

The banding lab was by far the most important and instrumental part of my experience. I believe that banding is a crucial skill, and I was able to get started with this experience thanks to the AAS Prairie Creek Banding Lab. I was taught photographer and bander grip techniques, and was educated on band sizes, the significance of banding, and data



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collection protocols. I learned different extraction methods and when to utilize them, such as wing-wing-head and wing-head-wing, as well as when it is best to be using the bander's grip in the net and how to unravel the net from a bird's tongue. Thanks to Jonathan and Dr. Sieving's guidance at the lab, I gained a lot of confidence in my abilities. We were fortunate with all the species we caught at the banding lab. Every day at the banding lab, I would ask about Towhees and request that nets be set up for them. Jonathan focused on targeting them for me, and we caught a male and a female. It was a very special moment, and we were able to release them both at the same time. We also had the pleasure of catching a Veery, and I am very thankful for being the one to band it.

Again, I am nothing but thankful for all of the opportunities that this internship has given me, and I have valued my time here as an intern. I have truly cherished and done my best to make the most of my time with AAS.

### **Delaney Cassidy**

I can think of no experience more rewarding than my time spent as an intern with the Alachua Audubon Society. As a graduating senior with an overwhelming passion for avian ecology, the opportunity to work under and learn from such knowledgeable role models has been one of the most formative experiences of my undergraduate career. From early mornings spent at the Prairie Creek Banding Lab to exhilarating afternoons spent observing nesting Southeastern American Kestrels, I have treasured every moment.

I truly believe that I will always fondly recall my first morning spent at the Prairie Creek Banding Lab. To say that my experience banding was pivotal would be a grave understatement. To handle and observe birds as closely as we were privileged to do is an experience like no other. I thoroughly enjoy birding, even by sound alone, but there is an innate intimacy that comes with banding. I vividly remember the first bird that I handled (he was an admirably feisty Ruby-crowned Kinglet) and am proud to say that my comfort in doing so has exponentially increased. I've had the opportunity to improve my understanding of the delicate balance between working efficiently and meticulously. I am endlessly appreciative of the knowledge and time shared by Jonathan Varol and Dr. Katie Sieving; their passion and enthusiasm characterized my experience.

I have also thoroughly enjoyed my time spent monitoring Southeastern American Kestrels alongside Eric Amundson and Miguel Olvera. The opportunity to visit numerous sites to track the success of local kestrel pairs has been invaluable. As my undergraduate career has come to a close, experiences like these have confirmed my future goals of pursuing raptor research. My affinity for them has only grown stronger as I have observed the kestrels defending and raising their broods. In addition to the wonder that comes with watching new kestrels being brought into the world, the bountiful joy expressed by Miguel and Eric each time we observed a bird made me all the more excited to go into the field.

Overall, I am so incredibly thankful for the time that I spent as an intern with the Alachua Audubon Society. Though this experience may have been brief, the impact that it has had on my growth is unforgettable.

### **Natalia Fuentes**

My time at Alachua Audubon has been transformative. Each day has presented new opportunities to grow and contribute to something meaningful. Working alongside inspiring individuals and engaging in various projects has not only advanced my professional skills but also deepened my commitment to conservation.

At the Prairie Creek Banding Lab, under the guidance of Dr. Katie Sieving and Jonathan Varol, I delved into the process of mist netting and bird banding. Through comprehensive training, I learned the delicate art of



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handling, banding, and releasing birds. Being able to see and work with these birds up close was a thrilling and unforgettable experience that fanned my passion for ornithology.

Participating in community outreach alongside Eric and Sherri Amundson was similarly rewarding. It was wonderful working together with them and other like-minded individuals to extend our love of ornithology to the public. As the president of the University of Florida campus chapter of the Audubon Society, this presented an amazing opportunity to collaborate with AAS and engage with a broad demographic.

Most recently, I joined Miguel Olvera, Eric Amundson, and Gary Gossman in conducting nest box checks to monitor Southeastern American Kestrel nests. Venturing into open pastures to inspect these boxes while eagerly anticipating the discovery of eggs was truly exhilarating. This hands-on experience provided me with a profound appreciation for the meticulous effort involved in conducting these checks.

Throughout my journey with AAS, the sense of community has made this internship truly special. Whether collaborating with fellow interns or seasoned professionals, there is a shared dedication to protecting avian species and their habitats. The support and camaraderie within the Alachua Audubon Society has enriched my experience beyond measure.

This internship has been instrumental in expanding my knowledge about birds, their environments, and the passionate community devoted to their conservation. I hope to continue working with the Alachua Audubon Society and all the amazing people I've come to know. I have no doubt that the skills and enthusiasm I've gained here will stay with me throughout my career. Thank you so much to everyone who has made this opportunity possible.



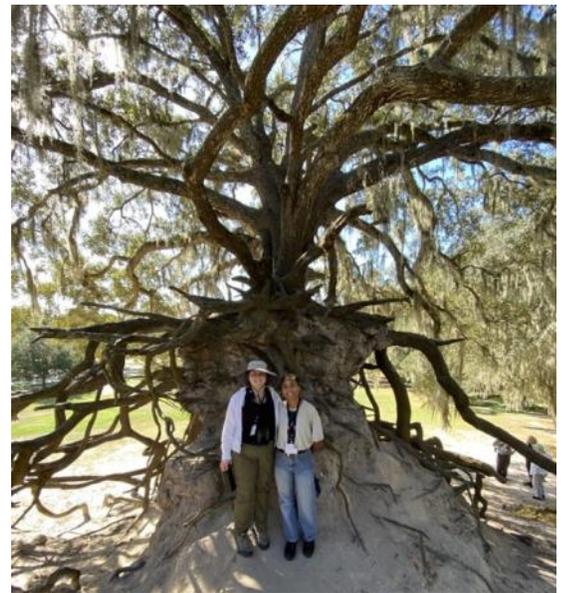
*Natalia Fuentes, right, with fellow intern Mia Keriazes.*

### **Grace Moricle**

I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a member of the 2023-2024 Conservation Leadership Initiative (CLI) cohort! The program kicked off last October at the Audubon Assembly in Tampa with fellow cohort members from schools across Florida. Over the weekend, we participated in leadership and professional development workshops, attended a learning session on creating habitat in unconventional ways, and travelled to Edward Medard Conservation Park for a birding field trip. I learned so much about conservation work and leadership in Florida. I am very grateful for the opportunity to connect with a diverse group of students, AAS members, and my amazing mentor, Kayla Ehrlich (*pictured at right*), who patiently taught me everything I know about birding!

My favorite part of the program was developing my collaborative conservation project with the AAS native plant garden at Prairie Creek Preserve. For my project, I designed an informational kiosk and plant ID signs with the goal of creating educational material that communicates how native plants help support birds. Thank you so much to the AAS board members and garden volunteers who assisted me with the project: Lee Bloomcamp, Sherri Amundson, Karen Brown, Debbie Segal, and Jonathan Varol. I am so grateful for your kindness, guidance, and collaboration.

I also want to shout out the CLI program coordinators Kristen Kosik and Olivia Priest for their direction and leadership. They truly made the program special. I am so grateful to everyone at Audubon Florida and Alachua Audubon Society who made participation in the CLI program possible!



## 2024 Summary of Spring Loon Migration in Alachua County

We have now finished five years of our citizen science project surveying loons flying over the Florida Peninsula during spring migration, from our vantage points in Alachua and Marion counties. Each of these seasons has had its own meteorological idiosyncrasies that may affect loon migration, from weird weather to long foggy spells, a lack of cold fronts or too many cold fronts, or extreme winds. But we have never experienced weather quite like we had this year in 2024. It wasn't weird or extreme – it was just the opposite from a migrating loon's or loon watcher's perspective. Most days offered perfect weather for migrating, light winds, sunny skies, and no fog, interspersed with a normal number (six) of rain-outs as cold fronts tumbled through. The thing is, with all these days of great migrating weather, almost all of the loons had flown the coop (the eastern Gulf of Mexico) by April 5<sup>th</sup>, and that truncated the tail half of our loon-watching season. As past years have shown, the loons have remarkable abilities to adapt to foul (fowl?) weather and put off migrating until they have decent weather. This year they did so by not waiting, and they jumped on the earliest opportunities to safely cross over to the Atlantic coast. Warm sea-surface-temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico this spring may have hastened their departure. As the Gulf waters warm in the spring, their fish prey descend deeper to cooler water, and out of the reach of the voracious loons. This is a good cue telling the loons it's time to hit the road; in this case they follow SR24 leaving Cedar Key and heading toward Gainesville and beyond to the Atlantic.



*Common Loon spotted in Cedar Key beginning its journey across the state. Photo by Pratibha Singh.*

Although the weather and its effects on migrating loons may be super-variable across the years, the total resulting numbers during each of the five years have been remarkably consistent (see Table). In 2024, we counted a total of 2244 loons, our second highest total ever. The highest was in 2021 (2322 loons: which is about 3.7 % higher than this year). The lowest season was the first in 2020, when 2154 loons were counted. Still, that is only 7.8% lower than the highest year. Over the five years, we now have counted over 10,800 migrating loons making their perilous journey across the Florida peninsula to reach the safety of open shorelines to rest and forage as they continue north.

Although the total numbers of loons have been remarkably consistent across years, the effort has been quite variable, with a significant drop over the five-year span (see Table). I measure effort as the number of stations monitored. This year, we had up

year	# loons	effort	max stns	% stns covered	loons/sta
2020	2089	196	240	81.7	10.7
2021	2228	121	196	61.7	18.4
2022	2286	92	175	52.7	24.8
2023	2187	126	200	63	17.4
2024	2093	87	168	51.8	24.1

to seven stations/day to monitor, for a total of 168 possible stations across the 24 days when we were not rained or fogged out. However, we only covered a bit more than half of those (87 stations or 51%), the lowest percentage in five years. So, even though we are recording similar numbers of loons per year, the number of loons per station has risen.

I attribute this rise in loons/station to increased observer skill, and a general decrease in the number of beginners participating. As the years have passed, us crusty old veterans have proven to be impervious to the tedium of too many days of watching empty loon-less skies. For me, however, the thrill of those excellent days,

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when more than 100 loons may be counted in a little over an hour, far outweighs the more boring days. And even during those loon-less times, I can spy all sorts of other birds to keep things exciting from my perch at Fred Cone Park in urban east Gainesville. Early in the season a pair of industrious Ospreys were constantly working on and fussing about their nest from previous years on one of the light standards above the field. They grew quieter as they moved to incubation in the last few weeks. I also saw a beautiful pale morph Short-tailed Hawk, a few high-flying Merlins and Northern Harriers, daily Swallow-tailed Kites, and an improbable American Bittern slowly circling over the running track.

I want to thank all the participants who have, over the years, helped turn this project into a data-production machine. I especially thank those younger birders and Alachua Audubon Society interns who came out to learn the ropes of surveying migrant birds. Hopefully they have caught the spark that will lead to many more hours spent watching the sky for evidence of the spectacular phenomenon of migration.

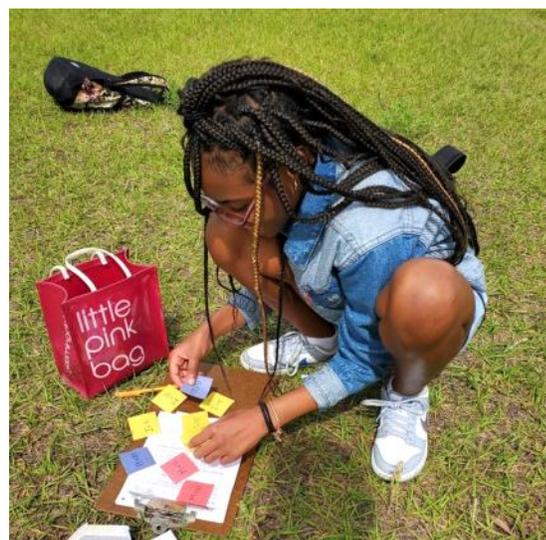
Andy Kratter, Collections Manager, Ornithology,  
Florida Museum of Natural History

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### Experiential Learning in Your Own Back (School) Yard!

During the months of March and early April, I had the privilege to work with Dr. Chloe Winant, 6th grade science teacher at Howard Bishop Middle School. We developed a 5-day unit focused on birds and their habitats around the school. Daily, six science classes experienced the curriculum. We mapped soundscapes, discussed carrying capacity and factors that limit populations. We used binoculars and dichotomous keys to help us look more carefully at birds to determine similarities and differences. Most of our time was spent in the school yard which made for a wonderful week of experiential learning. The students are a joy and are so fortunate to have Dr. Winant as their passionate, invested science teacher!

In addition, fellow AAS board member Felicia Lee and I led a bird walk at Sweetwater Wetlands Park for 15 students from Rawlings Elementary School, and we continue to engage those elementary students every Friday morning with bird walks before school begins.



By Kate Hellgren



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

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](#).

## Conservation Update

Alachua Audubon regularly receives requests to advocate and support various types of conservation-related issues. These issues are reviewed and discussed by the Conservation Committee that consists of Anne Casella, Adam Zions, and Jose-Miguel Ponciano. Here is an update of the most recent conservation items.

On March 21st, Anne attended a stakeholder meeting held by the Florida Springs Institute (FSI) that discussed an initiative to have Congress designate the Florida Springs Region a National Heritage Area. FSI requested letters of support from stakeholders. The Board voted to support this initiative and a letter was sent to the FSI.

An email was sent to Representative Kat Cammack urging her to support HR 4389, the Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act that would reauthorize and enhance a program that provides funding throughout the Americas for partnerships to benefit migratory birds and their habitats. It was recently signed into law by President Biden.

AAS signed on to a letter initiated by the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis to the CEO of Wild Birds Unlimited requesting that the company promote methods to prevent window collisions by birds. A surprisingly early response was received when a WBU store owner forwarded the proposal and list of the co-signers to WBU Corporate. A presentation was hastily prepared, and it was successful! WBU reached out expressing their appreciation of the proposal as well as an interest in discussing the "intriguing" ideas further. A meeting will be held within the next few weeks to discuss the proposal in depth.

*Conservation issues such as these involve letters and proposals wherein our membership numbers are provided to show the magnitude of our interest and the power of our voice. Every membership counts toward our success! Thank you!*

In 2022, Anne Casella applied for and received a \$1000 collaborative grant from the National Audubon Society to help establish a native plant garden at Gainesville High School. That project was successfully completed by science teacher Maggie Paxson and her students and the final report was submitted to NAS.

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## Summer 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](http://www.audubon.org/plantsforbirds)

National Wildlife Federation Native Plant Finder [www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder](http://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](http://www.fnps.org)

Plant Real Florida [www.plantrealflorida.org/](http://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

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



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



Advertisement for 'BORROW A BIRDING KIT!' from Alachua County LIBRARY District. Includes a list of items in the kit (binoculars, local resource guide, birding field guide book) and a QR code to reserve online. Website: www.aclib.us/birdingkits

Advertisement for 'Monthly Birds and Brews' event. Text describes the event as a popular gathering for birders at First Magnitude Brewery. Includes the text 'All birding skill levels are welcome!' and 'Next event: Sunday, May 5th at 5:45 p.m.' with a graphic for 'BIRDS AND BREWS'.



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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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## Join Alachua Audubon!

Benefits of membership include expert-led field trips, programs for adults and youth, *The Crane* newsletter, conservation advocacy with local & state legislators, & much more.

### Gift Memberships Available!

#### Annual Membership Levels

Choosing a higher level provides additional support for our conservation & education efforts.

Student	\$10	Individual	\$25
Family	\$35	Limpkin	\$50
Purple Gallinule			\$100
Swallow-tailed Kite			\$250
Sandhill Crane			\$500
Whooping Crane ( <i>lifetime membership</i> )			\$1,000

Sliding scale memberships welcome. Send what you can afford.

Join online with PayPal at [AlachuaAudubon.org/join/](http://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/](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](#), [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](mailto:AlachuaAudubonMembership@gmail.com)

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.

*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](http://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.*

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.

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