

Apalachee Audubon

The Newsletter Of The Apalachee Audubon Society, Inc.

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President's Column

Birdathon 2003

How many birds can you find and identify in 24 hours?

April is Apalachee Birdathon Month. Join chapter leaders, members, and community leaders on one of our Birdathon teams for the most exciting bird watching experience of your life! Or the most fun you will ever have raising money for a great cause. And if you aren't a highly skilled birdwatcher, don't let that get in the way of having an exciting day on a team led by an expert

You will soon receive a special Birdathon packet in the mail with details on how you can join one of our teams on Saturday, April 19th. It will be a full day beginning early in the morning. If you can't wait to get started send an e-mail to me, (lvthompson@earthlink.net), or call 222-2473 and I will help you sign up. And if you can't join a Birdathon Team you can still participate by choosing a day to record the birds at the feeders in your yard .

The money raised by Birdathon Teams and feeder watchers will help Apalachee Audubon fund Audubon Adventures classrooms and other chapter programs. This year we will provide educational material for local schools that will reach over 1,700 children in more than fifty 4th through 6th grade classrooms.

Join the fun! Join a Birdathon Team. Everyone is welcome.

Larry Thompson, President

A Pleasant Spring Outing: The Wakulla Birding and Wildlife Festival

By Jim Shelton

I know it's spring when I hear the call of the Northern Parula ringing out from the tree canopy above. Their high-pitched call is a reminder that for the next two months a virtual river of other neo-tropical migrants will follow and the very best birding of the year is upon us. This is also the time for the annual Wakulla Birding and Wildlife Festival. (Formerly Welcome Back Song-birds.) Apalachee Audubon has been an active co-sponsor and participant since it's inception eight years ago. The original mission of the festival was to educate the public to the plight of neo-tropical migrants. This has been expanded over time to include all wildlife with a special emphasis on birds.

This year's Festival will be on April 25-26 at the Wakulla Springs State Park. You don't want to miss it. These festivals are a lot of fun and a wonderful learning experience for all ages. This year it offers a great variety of guided walks, field trips, demonstrations and presentations on an incredible array of topics. On Friday night there will be presentations on bats, owls and frogs. Saturday will begin with the very popular sunrise birding cruise and end with a night prowling at St. Marks while during the day there will be a variety of presentations from bird identification to building a water garden.

A number of the field trips and presentations have limited attendance

so it is very advisable to pre-register. For a complete festival schedule and online registration go to: www.floridaconservation.org/festivals/wakulla or call Lora Silvanima with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 850-487-0516 for information and registration.

Program Highlight Thursday, April 24

The current series in the Tallahassee Democrat describes the enormous impact the St. Joe Company is having on our lives in the Panhandle where it owns much of its 900,000 acres of Florida land. Our speaker, George Willson, was with the Nature Conservancy when he was hired about three years ago by St. Joe to become Vice President for Conservation Lands. Since then he has managed the sale of over 120,000 acres to the state including major additions to Wakulla Springs and Bald Point State Parks. St. Joe is considering the sale of an additional 160,000 acres to the state over the next four years. Tonight's program is an opportunity to learn and ask questions about these plans. See the maps and hear the story!

Note the new location for this and future programs. The Fringe Benefits Management Company building is at 31101 Sessions Road. If traveling out of Tallahassee on North Monroe, turn left at the second stoplight beyond I-10, directly across from Sam's Club, onto Sessions Road. Follow Sessions Road to its end in the parking lot. Programs begin with an informal social at 7:00 p.m., followed by the program at 7:30.

BACK PAGE

Beggar's Role For Water Management District Gives Special Meaning To The Term "Panhandle"

By Eric Draper – Conservation Chair

Imagine a government agency with special responsibility for managing water supplies for a rapidly growing part of the country. Picture further that this agency presides over one-fifth of the state and shares borders, rivers and aquifers with two other states. Consider that the agency's mission includes clean water for world-class beaches, productive estuaries and internationally designated sites of biodiversity.

Now imagine a unit of government constitutionally restricted from raising the money it needs to do its job and relying on handouts from an increasingly stingy state legislature. The image is the Northwest Florida Water Management District. Operating from a tiny building in Quincy, Florida, the District has the same basic responsibilities as its billion dollar cousins in South, Southwest and Northeast Florida.

The difference? The other four water management districts have the science, know-how and resources to protect or restore their water resources. Our district, beyond the insignificant tax it collects from property owners, is reduced to begging for handouts. When it comes to paying for protecting our water, the district gives new meaning to the term "Panhandle."

What does this mean for those of us living in this beautiful and water rich part of the state? How could our water resources be protected if not for a ridiculous restriction conceived by the region's politicians a generation back? First look at water supply. Now that the Panhandle is growing so fast there is a question about where to get the wet stuff for all those water hogging golf course developments. With federal subsidies, cotton, peanut and soybean farmers draw huge quantities for their pivot sprinklers, most of which disappears in the summer sun. Useful information about the rate of depletion of our groundwater is scarce.

People living in Tallahassee can get a good look at our groundwater

See *Water*, page Three



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2911 Thomasville Rd., Tallahassee, FL 32312
(850) 385-2162

Officers

President: *Larry Thompson* 942-0058
lythompson@earthlink.net
Vice President: *Eric Draper* 222-2473
edraپر@audubon.org
Treasurer: *Harvey Goldman* 385-5222
Goldman@hep.fsu.edu
Secretary: *Jim Crews* 577-0051

Board Members

Marvin Collins 224-9549
mcollins@nettally.com
Karen Wensing 656-4039
kwensing@mailier.fsu.edu
Bill Lowrie 962-4138
blowrie@mindspring.com

Committee Chairs

Conservation: *Eric Draper*
Chapter Rep to State Board: *Larry Thompson*
Development: *Larry Thompson*
Education: *Ellen Shelton*
Hospitality: *Elizabeth Platt*
Membership: *Karen Wensing*
Newsletter: *Val Weeks* 925-7981
vweeks@comcast.net
Publicity: *Judy Rice* 385-5222
judy_rice@hep.fsu.edu
Population: *Harvey Goldman*
Field Trips: *Marvin Collins*
Programs: *Marvin Collins*
Past President: *Jim Crews*
Webmaster: *Hans van Tol* 656-4039
vantol@magnet.fsu.edu
Ex-Officio, Sierra Liaison: *Grayal Farr*
385-5732
St. Marks NWR Liaison: *Robin Will*
877-9058

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Mission
Protection



Statement
of the environment through education, appreciation and conservation.

Water, from Page Two



situation by visiting the vast prairie that used to be known as Lake Jackson. Several years ago the Lake drained into the sinkhole and still has not come

back. Rainfall gets the blame but the historic records give a picture of a constant decline in groundwater levels over the past decades. From a high of 45 feet and average of 35 (above sea level) to a current average of 30ish, our groundwater is simply not high enough, and may never again be high enough, to allow Lake Jackson to refill. (Don't tell the Leon County Commission, they may try to develop it.)

Then there is the problem of surface water resources. The rest of Florida protects surface water through the Environmental Resource Permit (ERP). In the Panhandle the District is too poor to regulate activities that impact surface water, so the State Department of Environment Protection does the job. Or doesn't. Reviews are mixed. As a result of a recent decision by the Army Corps of Engineers to stop regulating the destruction of isolated wetlands, the Panhandle became the one place in Florida where a developer does not have to get a permit to drain, dredge or fill those swamps that are not obviously linked to a moving stream or river.

Imagine that. Florida's so-called great Northwest, home to Destin, Seaside and Panama City, is too poor to protect its wetlands.

So the question must be asked, how did the Panhandle become the one place in Florida where water districts cannot levy a one mill tax

on property to finance proper management of water resources? The simple and historic answer is that a few decades ago when Florida's once forward looking legislature put a constitutional amendment before voters to allow property taxes for water management, they shortchanged Northwest Florida. They put a restriction in the Constitution forcing our water managers to collect only a nickel for every dollar the other districts get.

Seems easy to fix, but several proposals to amend Florida's Constitution to get rid of the relic limit have been shot down by political leaders. Local power brokers James Harrell Thompson and Dexter Douglas joined forces to keep the Constitution Review Commission from placing an amendment on the 1998 ballot. Since then every legislative attempt to pass a resolution putting the question to the voters has been stopped. House Speaker designate Allen Bense has said that it will not happen while he is in the Legislature. What won't happen? Voters will not be given the opportunity to decide if they want to pay a modest tax to plan for and protect water for the future of our beautiful part of Florida.

Where are the business leaders who are now pushing for new roads and airports? Silent, we guess, until the crisis hits. Then we will all be asked to take fewer showers so that the new golf courses on the coast stay green. Who will be the beggars then?

The Northwest Florida Water Management District does not implement Florida's Environmental Resource Permit (ERP) program. Section 373.4145, Flor-

ida Statutes, exempts the District from the implementation of this program due to its limited financial resources. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is responsible for all non-agricultural wetland related permits. (From the NFWFMD web site.)

Great Birding Spots in Wakulla, Leon & Franklin Counties Florida

Apalachee Audubon, under the leadership of Larry Thompson and with the contributions of local birding experts, editors, illustrators, and photographers, has published a wonderful new book, "Great Birding Spots in Wakulla, Leon & Franklin Counties Florida." The book has several excellent maps and describes 27 locations in the 3 county region with instructions on how to drive there, how to enter the site, a general description of the location, the interesting birds to be found, clothing suggestions, and walking conditions. In addition there are useful details on restrooms, parking, terrain type, entrance fees, hours, and whether you need permission to enter.

Look for the books at the Pine Woods Bird Festival (see page 4), the Sopchoppy Worm Gruntin' Festival (April 12th in Sopchoppy), and the Wakulla Birding and Wildlife Festival (see page 1). Also, we will have the books at all future membership events and watch for them in local bookstores soon. The price is a mere \$10 plus tax.

Monthly meetings, field trips, conservation activities and bird walks

Audubon Calendar

Monthly meetings are free and open to the public. They are held at the Fringe Benefits Management Company at 3101 Sessions Road. Most evenings begin with an informal social at 7:00 p.m., followed by the program at 7:30.

Unless otherwise stated, field trips will depart from the Wachovia Bank at 3400 S. Monroe Street (opposite the Fairgrounds). Note the time of departure in the description for each trip. For more info check out our web site at <http://www.apalachee.org/calendar.html>.

Saturday, April 5, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. – The Pine Woods Bird Festival. Tall Timbers, Pebble Hill Plantation, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources are staging Georgia's first bird festival at the historic Pebble Hill Plantation on U.S. 319 just 4 miles south of Thomasville. Admission is \$3.00 for adults & \$1.50 for children under 12. For more information visit www.nettally.com/necox/festival/index.htm.

Saturday, April 19 – Apalachee Audubon's Birdathon. See article on page one.

Thursday, April 24 - Membership Meeting. George Willson, Vice President for Conservation Lands for the St. Joe Company. See article on page one.

Friday & Saturday, April 25 & 26 – Wakulla Birding and Wildlife Festival at the Wakulla Springs State Park. See article on page one.

Thursday, May 22 – Apalachee Audubon Annual Banquet at Wakulla Springs with guest speaker Stuart Strahl, President of Audubon of Florida. Final plans will be announced next month.

Apalachee Audubon Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 1237
Tallahassee, FL 32302-1237

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