

# **Apalachee Audubon Society Conservation Plan**

Adopted November, 2015



Credit: Robert Savannah, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## **Conservation Plan for Apalachee Audubon Society**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although all Apalachee Audubon activities have the ultimate purpose of contributing to the conservation of wildlife and the habitats upon which they depend, this document is intended to cover chapter activities more directly involved in conservation that don't otherwise come under the chapter functions of education, membership, field trips, public programs, or administration. This document will outline plans to conduct conservation activities such as direct habitat enhancement for wildlife, projects to monitor wildlife population trends, comment on agency resource management plans, and public position statements on important conservation issues in our area.

This plan is broadly framed to guide our long-term approach. It does not express every nuance of an issue and is not made to preclude taking action with respect to unexpected threats or opportunities. The hope is that this plan offers every member of the Apalachee Audubon Society a way to participate in meaningful conservation activities. There are three components to our plan: 1) promoting bird-friendly communities; 2) encouraging citizen science and environmental stewardship; and 3) engaging in policy advocacy and effective communication with governmental officials.

### **PROMOTING BIRD FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES**

Over the past century, urbanization has taken contiguous, ecologically productive land and fragmented and transformed it with sterile lawns and exotic ornamental plants. We've introduced walls of glass, toxic pesticides, and domestic predators. The human-dominated landscape no longer supports functioning ecosystems or provides healthy places for birds.

Conservation begins at home. Apalachee Audubon is committed to transforming our communities into places where birds flourish. This should be a focus of our educational efforts. There are simple actions we can all take to provide essential, safe habitat for birds. These include the following:

#### **Native Plants for Birds**

By simply choosing native plants when we landscape our yards, neighborhood parks, and public spaces, we can help restore vital habitat for birds in our communities

#### **Lights Out: Creating Safe Passage**

Cities across the flyways are turning off their lights at night, reducing the disorienting effect of light pollution, thereby saving tens of thousands of birds each year. Collisions with home windows kill hundreds of millions of birds each year which can be addressed by window decals or bird tape.

### Providing Good Homes for Cavity Nesting Birds

Many species of birds can be given a better chance to survive and thrive through a little assistance from structures we build—birdhouses, roosting towers, nest platforms, and artificial burrows. For some species, these structures tip the scales back in their favor, reducing declines in populations and restoring species to places they once inhabited. We can also leave snags (dead or dying trees) standing unless they pose a hazard.

### Cats Indoors

Predation by domestic cats is the number-one direct human-caused threat to birds in the United States and Canada. In the United States alone, outdoor cats kill approximately 2.4 billion birds every year. The best way to help protect birds and other wildlife is to keep cats indoors.

### Buy Bird-Friendly Coffee

Buying bird-friendly coffee supports coffee growers who maintain traditional growing practices and provide critical winter habitat for neotropical migrants.

### Avoid Use of Pesticides and Lawn Fertilizer and Practice Water Conservation

Water defines many of our natural ecosystems. We live in a “karst environment” of springs, spring-fed rivers, and “sinking lakes.” What we put on the ground ends up in the aquifer that provides us with drinking water and is the source of our springs and rivers. Our water bodies are threatened not only by pollution but by over-pumping of groundwater making water conservation essential. We support programs such as the "Think About Personal Pollution" (TAPP) Program and the IFAS "Florida Friendly Landscaping and Yards" Program and the use of porous paving materials.

We already are engaged in promoting some of these actions through activities such as the annual Wildlife-friendly Yard Tour and our educational activities at the wildlife festivals. We can do more to build public awareness by placing more information on our website and newsletter. We can also communicate our message through the press and other media, leaflet distribution and other educational materials.

## ENCOURAGING CITIZEN SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Apalachee Audubon should also offer its members the opportunity to contribute to scientific observations and conservation policy development through Citizen Science. Long-term avian population trend monitoring is important for detecting species population declines, range changes, and effects of landscape-level habitat alterations. Members have volunteered for a number of such efforts in the past including the Shorebird Stewardship Program and EagleWatch. We would like to expand participation in these projects in the coming year and pilot a new project to monitor Bachman Sparrows.

### Christmas Bird Counts

The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a long-standing program of the National Audubon Society, with

over 100 years of citizen science involvement. Each year, dozens of volunteers take part in the three counts in our area – Tallahassee, St. Marks, and Apalachicola Bay–St. Vincent Island. They join thousands of volunteers across the US, Canada, and many countries in the Western Hemisphere in going out over a 24-hour period on one calendar day to count birds. The data collected by CBC participants over the past century and more have become one of only two large pools of information informing ornithologists and conservation biologists how the birds of the Americas are faring over time.

### Shorebird Stewardship Program

The Shorebird Stewardship Program engages volunteer stewards to help with all sorts of work related to shorebird conservation and research. Beach stewards hit the beaches every breeding season to educate the public about our beach nesting birds and to steer them away from the nests. Other jobs that stewards do include helping to post nesting colonies, conducting shorebird surveys, helping with beach cleanups, and more. The protection they provide nesting birds helps the birds to be more successful in fledging young. The data collected by stewards helps scientists to gain a better understanding of shorebird populations and the challenges they face, and this same data proves to be invaluable to land managers to help them make informed decisions about shorebird management.

### EagleWatch

Audubon EagleWatch seeks information about Bald Eagles, active nest locations and possible disturbances or threats to nesting activities. The program is designed to educate volunteer participants in general eagle nesting biology, applicable laws, the identification of nest threats, monitoring techniques and the verification of previously unrecorded active eagle nests. This data is compiled and used to assist the state's Mid-winter Annual Bald Eagle Nesting Survey by documenting both urban and rural eagle nesting activity, successes and failures. The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service also utilizes EagleWatch data to enhance their conservation and law enforcement efforts.

### Monitoring Bachman's Sparrows ( a new project to be developed)

Bachman's Sparrow is high profile species on many conservation lands throughout the Panhandle. Once common in southeastern pine forests, the sparrow is now declining throughout its range. Bachman's Sparrows nest and forage on the ground and are intimately linked to areas with diverse, healthy ground cover conditions maintained by frequent prescribed fire. The sparrow also needs large habitat patches (ca. 200 acres) in close proximity (< 0.25 miles) to one another.

Using a simple monitoring program developed the Stoddard Bird Lab at Tall Timbers, we are exploring whether it might be possible to create a volunteer program similar to Project Jaywatch which monitors Scrub Jay populations in central Florida. The goal of this project is to take a snapshot of the distribution of Bachman's Sparrows on public lands in and around Tallahassee. We plan to establish scores of sampling points that reflect a range of different site conditions (such as areas with small and isolated habitat patches vs. areas with large and contiguous habitat patches). Participants will be provided with maps that they use in combination with their smartphones to navigate to a sampling location. We will also develop a phone app that participants can use to record and transmit their data.

We plan to pilot the project in April to June, 2016.

## POLICY ADVOCACY AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

### Priorities

We live in one of the most beautiful, least developed, and most biodiverse regions of the state. However, the threats to this natural beauty are seemingly endless – from new development, to oil exploration, to the bureaucratic indifference of officials charged with protecting our natural resources. Last year, the Florida Legislature cut funds for conservation lands in spite of 75% voter approval of the Water and Land Conservation Amendment. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is reviewing proposals to increase development, logging, and grazing on conservation lands, and even is considering allowing hunting in our state parks.

To meet these threats, we will work with Florida Audubon and other conservation allies, business and community leaders, public officials and agencies to:

- Actively support state and local laws and programs that protect conservation lands and provide for the management of those lands to restore and maintain water, wildlife and habitat.
- Support the use of funds from Amendment 1 to fulfill voter intent for land acquisition, management, and restoration.
- Support programs such as Florida Forever, springs, and other water sustainability programs and oppose efforts to weaken Florida's water laws.
- Focus, as detailed below, on sites and projects that yield the greatest benefits for native and at-risk birds.

### Protection of Important Bird Areas

Audubon and its partner organizations have designated a network of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) throughout the hemisphere. Important Bird Areas are sites that provide essential habitat for one or more species of bird. There are currently 100 such IBAs within Florida and Florida Audubon has made their protection one of its top priorities. There are 7 recognized IBAs, encompassing nearly one million acres of conservation land between the Apalachicola and Aucilla Rivers. Three of these are recognized to be of “global significance” i.e. they support populations of species of conservation concern at a global level, including Bachman's Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Northern Bobwhite, and Piping Plover.

#### *Apalachicola River and Forests (Global)*

From the Apalachicola eastward nearly to Tallahassee, this is the largest IBA in North Florida, consisting of the Apalachicola National Forest, the Apalachicola River Water Management Area, the Apalachicola River Wildlife and Environmental Area, and Tate's Hell State Forest.

This vast IBA is critically important for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, with 638 active clusters. Apalachicola National Forest alone supports the world's largest population, with 611 clusters representing nearly half of Florida's population.

#### *Dog Island-Lanark Reef (Global)*

Two islands in the Gulf of Mexico off central Franklin County – Dog Island is about 4 miles south of Carrabelle, while Lanark Reef is about 1 mile south of Lanark Village. Lanark Reef is owned by Florida Audubon. The Nature Conservancy's Jeff Lewis Wilderness Preserve occupies most of Dog Island. This IBA is one of the most important wintering shorebird areas in Florida, especially for Piping Plovers, Snowy Plovers, and American Oystercatchers.

#### *Greater Apalachicola Bay*

This IBA includes Apalachicola Bird Island, Cape St. George State Reserve, Dr. Julian G. Bruce St. George Island State Park, the St. George Island Causeway, St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, and Yent Bayou. Located off the coast of southwestern Franklin County, where the Apalachicola River and several barrier islands form Apalachicola Bay. The islands are regionally important for breeding and wintering waterfowl and shorebirds, and for breeding larids. Portions of St. George Island, St. Vincent Island, and Yent Bayou have been designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as Critical Habitat for wintering Piping Plovers.

#### *Lake Lafayette*

Lake Lafayette has been designated an IBA because it contains a wading bird rookery with the largest colony of Wood Storks in North Florida and contains neotropical migratory bird habitat.

#### *Red Hills Ecosystem (Global)*

The Red Hills Ecosystem IBA contains nearly 250,000 acres between Tallahassee and Thomasville, Georgia, with a majority of this area in Georgia. The Red Hills are the last stronghold in Florida for the White-breasted Nuthatch, which largely has disappeared from the remainder of their statewide range. The Red Hills support the sixth largest population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers remaining in the world

#### *St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge*

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1931 to provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl. It is one of the finest birding locations in Florida.

#### *Wakulla Springs*

Edward Ball-Wakulla Springs State Park protects Wakulla Springs and the upper 3 miles of the Wakulla River. It supports a diversity of species including breeding Mississippi Kites and other woodland species, wintering waterfowl, and Neotropical Migrants.

Protecting these lands is at the center of our advocacy efforts.

## Land Acquisition: Amendment 1 and Florida Forever

While we are fortunate to have so much conservation land in our area, there still are important areas which are not yet fully protected. Currently the Acquisition and Restoration Council (“ARC”) has identified four projects in our immediate area as being high priority on the 2015 Florida Forever Priority List. These projects are particularly important because they serve as wildlife corridors that connect our existing conservation lands. They reduce the negative effects of habitat fragmentation by allowing dispersal of individuals between large patches of remaining habitat. This becomes even more important in the age of wide-scale climate change.

### *Ochlockonee River Conservation Area*

This project is a 4,375 acre conservation easement (1,106 acres acquired) that would protect six miles of river frontage along the Ochlockonee River and would provide support to the owner's ongoing effort to restore the property to a natural longleaf pine community. Part of the Red Hills Ecosystem, it is connected to a number of existing conservation easements including Tall Timbers, Foshalee Plantation and Hiamonee Plantation.

### *Wakulla Springs Protection Zone (including the Falls Chase property on Lake Lafayette)*

This project protects Wakulla Spring by protecting the land above the conduits that feed it and connects the state park to the Apalachicola National Forest. The Upper Lake Lafayette Aquifer Protection Zone will protect the sinkholes that also connect to Wakulla Springs as well as the rookery in Lake Lafayette. Total acreage is 7,811 acres of which 3,269 acres remain to be acquired.

### *Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks*

This project comprises parcels needed to protect the headwaters of the Wacissa River to the north and provide a link to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge on the south. The 32,665 acre project encompasses much of the Aucilla, a black-water stream and the Wacissa, a spring-fed stream. 17,208 acres remain to be acquired.

### *Upper St. Marks Corridor*

This project covers 15,670 acres of which 11,025 acres remain to be acquired. and would create a corridor one to three miles wide along approximately 15 miles of the upper St. Marks River. It would connect the J.R. Alford Greenway, the L. Kirk Edwards Wildlife and Environmental Area, Lafayette Heritage Trail Park, Tom Brown Park and the Natural Bridge Battlefield Historic State Park.

Securing funding for any of these projects under the Florida Forever Program is going to require a sustained long-term effort to build public support and lobby both the ARC and our legislative delegation to support funding. We probably cannot manage more than one such campaign at a time. Initially, the Conservation Committee is recommending that we focus on the Wakulla Springs Protection Zone and the Falls Chase property.

Land acquisition at this scale is a “long game.” Amendment 1 will generate \$10 billion over the 20 year life of the measure which can be used to fund Florida Forever. The current legislature is hostile; but, sooner or later if we are persistent, the money will be there to fund the above projects.

#### Land Acquisition: Expansion of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge

The St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge has recently received approval to add about 35,000 acres in addition to the 70,000 acres it currently manages. The first phase of this expansion includes about 16,000 acres between the current boundary of the St. Marks Unit and US 98 between Lighthouse Road and the Aucilla River. This would provide suitable black bear habitat and links to major population centers of the National Forest, Tate's Hell, and the Aucilla/Wacissa River Area.

Approval is not the same as funding. Possible sources of federal dollars to pay the acquisition costs include the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Restore Act funding from the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council. This too requires a long-term effort.

#### Management of State Parks, the National Forest and Other Conservation Lands

Equally important as acquisition of conservation lands is ensuring that our conservation lands are wisely managed. Many of these lands require significant restoration; all need sound management. Regular, prescribed burning is particularly important to the maintenance of longleaf pine ecosystems and the survival of many bird species such as Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and Bachman's Sparrows.

In almost every case, there is a resource management plan which is reviewed at regular intervals with the opportunity for public comment. With respect to the state managed lands, those plans are ultimately reviewed and approved by the ARC, providing additional opportunity for public input.

It is very important that we are fully engaged in this process. Many of the issues are technical and often require a detailed knowledge of the site. Often, there is a local support group such as Friends of Wakulla Springs, who shares our concerns; however, we can bring to the table a different perspective by focusing on what is necessary to protect bird populations, and particularly, birds most in need of conservation action. Site-based habitat and species management does produce tangible results. This must be an ongoing effort. Every year, there will be at least one important management plan up for review. For example, the management plan for Tate's Hell is likely to come before the ARC this year. Next year, the Bald Point State Park plan is up for review. Currently, comments are due by January 15, 2016 on the Army Corp of Engineers' Environmental Impact Statement for its management plan for the Apalachicola River-- an Environmental Impact Statement that is likely to face a court challenge, making good comments even more important.

We are fortunate that we have a wealth of scientific and resource management expertise available from the university community and retired agency personnel. We need to actively enlist their help in reviewing these management plans. The more detailed and factual our comments are, the more effective they are likely to be. Citizen science, which can include everything from the monitoring projects described above to Christmas bird-count data, can also be an important part of the process.



## **Appendix 1**

### **Watchlist Birds Which Breed Between the Apalachicola and Aucilla Rivers**

As part of the 2014 State of the Birds Report, a team of scientists from the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) identified the 233 U.S. bird species most in need of conservation action—these species make up the 2014 Watch List. The list is divided into a Red Watch List—species with extremely high vulnerability due to small population, small range, high threats, and rangewide declines—and Yellow Watch List—species that are either range restricted (small range and population), or are more widespread but with troubling declines and high threats. There are sixteen species on the Watchlist which occur as confirmed breeders in our area:

#### **RED WATCH LIST SPECIES**

American Oystercatcher

Snowy Plover

Wilson's Plover

Red-cockaded Woodpecker

Bachman's Sparrow

#### **YELLOW WATCH LIST SPECIES**

Swallow-tailed Kite

King Rail

Willet

Gull-billed Tern

Black Skimmer

Chuck-wills-widow

Red-headed Woodpecker

Wood Thrush

Prothonotary Warbler

Kentucky Warbler

Prairie Warbler

## Appendix 2

### Important Bird Areas in the Eastern Panhandle

