



# Audubon OF FLORIDA 2012 Conservation Priorities

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## SOUTHWEST FLORIDA ECOSYSTEMS

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Southwest Florida is one of the fastest growing areas of the nation. Audubon of Florida and its five southwest Florida chapters are engaged in a plan for protection and restoration of its ecosystems. Audubon has a long history in the region beginning with hiring wardens to protect wading bird colonies from plume hunters, later creating the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, and helping to secure federal and state public lands.

The area has six signature species that help the public identify with the need to protect and restore land and waters: Florida panthers, which require large connected territories, nesting Wood Storks, which depend on seasonal wetlands for forage, Snail Kites, which depend on good water management for lakes and wetlands, endemic Scrub Jays and Gopher Tortoises, which require protection and management of scrub and uplands, and juvenile Snook, which require healthy estuarine environments. These six species serve vital roles as indicator species, helping gauge the effectiveness of ecosystem-wide protection and restoration efforts.

Working from the science and policy base of the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and advocacy resources statewide, Audubon's strategy is to minimize the impact of this growth on specific components of the region, while proactively leveraging it for broad conservation achievements:

- Protect the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW), including the greater Corkscrew Swamp, in order to assure the abundance of birds and other wildlife and to provide a model ecosystem for people to visit and learn about nature.
- Restore the health of the Caloosahatchee River, its estuaries, and the near shore of the Gulf of Mexico, which all require increasing water storage and treatment all around Lake Okeechobee and upstream watersheds. Seek funding and support for necessary land acquisition, payment for services, dispersed water management on ranches and farms, and projects to achieve this restoration, including the US Sugar purchase, C-43 West (Berry Grove) Reservoir, and other water quality treatment and storage projects.
- Defend the Charlotte Harbor and Peace River watershed from phosphate mining and other land use impacts.
- Oppose rock and sand mines near vital resources, directing to compatible areas via planning.
- Assure funding and implementation of appropriate management plans for Babcock Ranch Preserve (exploring an Audubon leadership role), Big Cypress National Pres., conservation easements and other conservation lands to maintain and improve wildlife habitat while allowing compatible human use for public lands.
- Promote Everglades restoration by working with local communities to direct development away from needed conservation lands and important resources to achieve both economic and ecological sustainability.

- Protect and manage the Southwest Florida coast and inland habitats for the benefit of birds and other wildlife, as they are used as migratory flyways and provide critical nesting areas.
- Work collaboratively to retain ranching and other low impact agricultural uses in Southwest Florida by using innovative tools, incentives, and regulations, while working with landowners to reduce drainage and nutrient impacts to watersheds and retain or increase habitat values.

*Therefore be it resolved:*

*Southwest Florida Audubon Chapters and their volunteer and professional leadership, will align their efforts with Audubon of Florida and its professional staff and expertise, all working with conservation allies, business and community leaders and public officials, in order to:*

**Conserve Special Places and Landscapes, Including Coastal Environments:**

Develop public and political support to acquire, protect, restore and manage critical components of the Big Cypress, Corkscrew, Caloosahatchee, Fisheating Creek, Gulf Coast, and Charlotte Harbor ecosystems.

Initiate and support innovative approaches to land use planning, complementing land acquisition, that take advantage of transfer of development rights, conservation easements, and other collaborative approaches to setting aside conservation areas and direct incompatible land uses away from conservation areas. Be involved directly in the land use planning, infrastructure development, and regulatory decisions that will shape the future of the region.

Support stronger policies and more effective actions to protect water resources including strict interpretation and enforcement of wetland and water quality laws, and proactively amending the exotics/seasonal wetland biases in permitting. Advance water conservation as public policy.

**Conserve Birds and Other Wildlife (Indicators of Conservation Success):**

Advocate regionally-based and proactive wildlife protection policies, to complement land acquisition and planning efforts, at every level of government, but focused particularly on local policies and comprehensive plans. Proactively partner with landowners on collaborative tools.

**Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and Adapt to Coming Changes:**

Advocate and facilitate aggressive greenhouse gas pollution reduction commitments and actions at all levels of government and community, focusing on renewable energy, conservation and efficiency. Due to sea level rise and other unavoidable climate change impacts such as droughts and hurricanes, advocate community and conservation adaptation strategies. Prime among these are better public water policies, emphasizing conservation, reserving water for natural systems, and wise allocations.

**Engage People, Build Field Capacity (including Science) and Build Financial Capacity:**

Encourage, foster and support appropriate research and science, including accurate resource and land use mapping, to advance good policy and planning outcomes for Southwest Florida.

Increase the human and financial resources of Audubon in southwest Florida in a realistic effort to accomplish these vital and challenging conservation priorities.