



Left, Least Tern with Chicks; Right, Prescribed burn, Honeymoon Island; Sandhill Cranes, Socorro, New Mexico. Photos: Beth Reynolds.

Beth Reynolds at Honeymoon Island.

Photo Tips Online Program, December 18, 2025 On YouTube LIVE

Photographers of all ages and skill levels — the 2026 Chertok Florida Native Photo Contest approaches! Deadline is April 16, 2026 for Orange Audubon's 38th annual contest.

As is our tradition, we engage an excellent photographer to provide a photo tips program in the months before, hoping to inspire you to get out and do some nature photography.

This year we are pleased to host nature photographer Beth Reynolds. A native of St. Petersburg, Beth earned a Masters of Fine Arts in Photography from the University of Hartford and has been a photographer-educator for nearly 30 years. She teaches all levels of photography and has extensive experience leading travel-photo adventure tour groups. Her work is included in multiple collections on the U.S. East coast. [See her photography at this link.](#)

In 2022 Beth made what seemed like a big career leap. She became a park ranger at Honeymoon Island. Her post draws on all of her skills as teacher, photographer and nature enthusiast, and she was named Interpreter of the Year for Florida State Parks in 2024.

Because of holiday activities at Leu Gardens, our December program will be online. Just open YouTube and search for Orange Audubon Society. The program will be visible December 18th at 7 p.m. It will remain archived on YouTube. Try to log in live to ask Beth questions and show your appreciation. See you on the 18th!

Christmas Bird Counts December 14, 2025 through January 5, 2026

The Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is now in its 126th year. Dr. Frank Chapman founded the CBC in 1900 as an alternative to the holiday "side hunt," in which teams competed to see who could shoot the most birds.

Over 70,000 volunteer bird counters across the Western Hemisphere now track the health of bird populations at a scale that professional scientists alone could never accomplish. The *Science* magazine report documenting the decline of bird populations by 2.9 billion and National Audubon's "Climate By Degrees" report both relied heavily on this long-term bird population study.

Each individual count is performed within a circle with a diameter of 15 miles. The volunteers break up into small parties and follow assigned routes, varying little from year to year, and record every bird they see. A competitive spirit drives birders to do a thorough job.

The Orlando CBC, started in the 1970s, underwent a long hiatus and has been revived. The longest consistently running local CBC is the Econlockhatchee CBC which began in 1982.

In 1987, the Mt. Dora CBC began, with involvement of Oklawaha Valley Audubon. The organizers moved that circle to Emerald Marsh in 1995, and the Zellwood/Mt. Dora area was split off as a separate count. The Wekiva CBC began in the early 1990s.

John Thomson, Orange Audubon member and Disney employee, founded the Bay Lake CBC in 2011 and Clermont CBC in 2012 and welcomes new participants. Contact him at john.thomson@gmail.com.

Through our participation in the IDEAL program to diversify participation in our programs, Orange Audubon worked with the Zellwood CBC compiler to create a section for the Apopka Birding Park. We are soliciting participation in our Thursday, December 18th count. Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com. For dates and contacts for the other local CBCs, see page 8.

ORANGE AUDUBON SOCIETY programs are free. No reservations necessary.



Programs are the 3rd Thursday of each month (September–June) at 7:00 p.m. and all but December are at **Harry P. Leu Gardens in the Camellia Room** at 1920 North Forest Ave., Orlando, FL 32803

For map and directions, visit:
www.leugardens.org/plan/directions/

Progress at the Apopka Birding Park

Orange Audubon Society is working to raise enough money to start construction on the Orange Audubon Nature Center at Apopka Birding Park.

The 69.5 acre old nursery site, adjacent to the popular Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive, was deeded to the City of Apopka by the St. Johns River Water Management District in conjunction with our chapter.

Our long-term lease was signed in March 2024. Details on our plans to renovate the old Truck Shop into a LEED certified nature center are in [my Bird Chat presentation](#).

Our first Annual Report also profiles the project, [link here](#). We are nearly half way through a \$4.5 million Capital Campaign. We have just completed our second financial audit, to be added to our website.

What have we been able to accomplish?

With small grants and donations from our community, plenty of ingenuity and advice from people familiar with habitat restoration, Orange Audubon has begun the long road to convert a greenhouse nursery back to native habitat, a "rewilding" process.

An obstacle is lack of water, but our landlord, the City of Apopka, will be installing water and sewer hopefully before the new year.

A second obstacle is widespread presence of cogongrass, a highly invasive weed pest, but we are working with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the City on twice yearly herbicide treatments.

Our final obstacle to rewilding is the presence of the concrete pads that were the bases of the old greenhouses that burned down circa 1999. The St. Johns River Water Management District will be removing the concrete pads to use the concrete for rip-rap along the lake and other construction projects.

That will occur this winter and will cause considerable disturbance but finally allow us to do major restoration activities.

Deborah Green, Apopka Birding Park Working Group Chair



Nucor reps and our architect and committee members view the Truck Shop that will be renovated into our nature center, September 2025. Photo: Deborah Green

Nucor To Donate Product

NUCOR®

The Apopka Birding Park Working Group is excited to have secured the first national company with local representation to support our nature center. Nucor Corporation, North America's largest steel manufacturer and recycler, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, is pledging to donate some important building components.

Nucor Rebar Fabrication is located on Jones Road near the exit to the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive. The Zellwood plant is a rebar fabrication plant, but Nucor has a wide range of steel products used in just about every aspect of construction. Diane Melesio, Project Manager Lead, is a wildlife photographer and cyclist on the North Shore, as well as a member of Orange Audubon, so she understands the value of our project and its projected high visitation.

Nucor Vulcraft, a steel products group of Nucor Corporation, is a leading producer of steel bar joists, joist girders, steel deck and steel core products. The product donation will be for the metal roof deck and roof joists.

According to our architect, Philip Donovan of Little Diversified Architectural Services, this donation really moves our plans forward. Aside from the glazing (the installation of glass in windows, doors, and other parts of a building), the steel deck and roof joists are the most expensive construction materials for our building. Thank you, Nucor. If you are associated with a company that would like to support our nature center and rewilding project, please email info@orangeaudubonfl.org. [There are naming rights for parts of the building](#). We would love to show you our site and designs.



Orange Audubon Society (OAS) mission: To conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds and their habitats, for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity.

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The OASis (Orange Audubon Society information source) newsletter is published monthly, September–June, and posted on the OAS website. A link announcing new issues is e-mailed to subscribers.

Never miss out on OAS happenings. Add or update your email address by contacting newsletter@orangeaudubonfl.org.

For other membership information, contact: membership@orangeaudubonfl.org

JOIN OAS' [MEETUP](#) GROUP

LIKE OAS' [FACEBOOK PAGE](#)

OAS welcomes those who wish to volunteer and become more involved in our efforts. Email volunteer@orangeaudubonfl.org.

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A Great Gift Idea

Need a gift for someone who has everything? Or someone who loves nature and the outdoors? Maybe you're feeling you want to do something special just for yourself this holiday season. If so, consider making a donation for Orange Audubon Society's new Apopka Birding Park. We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and donations are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Donating gives you the satisfaction of giving back to Nature. The Orange Audubon Nature Center at the Apopka Birding Park will be a community gathering space, allowing opportunities for volunteer involvement and hands-on

educational programs and field trips for students, instead of only classroom programming. Our habitat restoration project will restore upland habitat, which has increasingly disappeared in our area and will provide hiking and birdwatching opportunities. More and more people that are volunteering at our workdays or donating and watching our progress from afar are excited about our project.

We are about half way towards our goal of raising \$4.5 million dollars to start construction of the new Nature Center at the Apopka Birding Park and to be able to operate it.

Our latest in-kind donation from Nucor Corporation is for a substantial (as yet unnamed) value of metal structure for creating the roof of our building. Help us keep that fundraising momentum up this holiday season!

If you haven't been to the Apopka Birding Park lately, stop by and check out the new native plantings installed by our volunteers at the direction of Board Member Alan Shapiro (p. 4).

The Birding Park is located just behind the yellow gate at the back of the Bicycle Parking Area, located to the right of the entrance to the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive, Address: 2923 Lust Road, Apopka, FL 32703.

Susan Thome-Barrett, Board Member



Conservation Committee Report

The Central Florida Regional Conservation Committee (RCC) met by Zoom on November 23rd to discuss the Audubon Florida (AF) Regional Conservation Priorities for 2026. See the presentation at 2025 Audubon Assembly this past October at [the following link](#)

Our RCC includes Halifax River Audubon, Highlands Audubon, Kissimmee Valley Audubon, Lake Region Audubon, Orange Audubon, Ridge Audubon, Seminole Audubon, Southeast Volusia Audubon, West Volusia Audubon and UCF Knighthawk Student Audubon Chapter. Each of these have their own conservation issues.

Charles Lee (Audubon Florida Director for Advocacy) reviewed the upcoming Florida Legislative session, which begins in January 2026, and bills that Audubon will be following. There will be more to come during session [which you can follow by signing up for the Audubon Advocate](#).

Senate Bill 208: Would weaken local government authority to control development. Allow "infill development" of residential uses regardless of comprehensive plan. It would enable sprawl into the countryside. Allows this to be "administratively approved" without any public [hearing before a county or city commission](#).

House Bill (HB) 299: Creates a "Blue Ribbon Projects" speedy approval process by "Administrative Approval", meaning no public hearings. If a developer has 10,000 acres or more and is willing to put 60% of its property in a "Reserve," then it can move past the zoning process. No conservation is mentioned in the bill - the "Reserve" can contain, in addition to preserved natural areas, utilities, reservoirs, retention ponds, recreational facilities like ball fields, golf courses, and tennis courts. [AF will be working to change this bill](#).

HB 479: Prohibits counties and municipalities from adopting laws, regulations, rules, or policies relating to water quality or quantity, pollution control, discharge or prevention or removal of wetlands and preempts such regulation to the state. No Senate companion.

HB 441: This is a good bill similar to last year's state parks bill. Intended to correct the problems that occurred this year concerning the proposed land exchange involving the Guana conservation land tract in St. Johns County. House and Senate support. Bill would provide several levels of public notice to allow the public more time to react to such proposals.

Other bills attempt to change SB 180, the

damaging bill passed last session that preempts local control. One such bill with sponsors are from the Panhandle would only exempt Panhandle counties and Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

HB105 to deal with local government enforcement ability for people who are aggrieved by local enforcement and obtain damages and attorney fees.

Orange Audubon shared that we are working with the County on two Areas of Special Designation (Shingle Creek and St Johns River) that were caught in SB 180.

Our neighboring Oklawaha Valley Audubon Society is no more and Orange Audubon has welcomed its members to join us. With that comes the need to engage in Lake County conservaiton issues. If you live in that area, [follow this link](#).

Federal Losses to Species Protections

A proposed federal rule, published in April 2025 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service, would eliminate the inclusion of significant habitat modification that can impair a species' behavior, like breeding or feeding. The administration has not yet released their final rule on that issue; comments were due this past April.

Now they are proposing to repeal "the blanket rule," instead requiring that the details of protection must be published at the time of listing - while at the same time firing staff at the USFWS and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) that work on protected species.

And, now the agencies are proposing that Section 7 consultations be limited to actions that the agency itself controls. For example, NMFS could not evaluate the consequences of a petitioner's action for anything except marine fisheries, leaving out all other possible impacts on the impacted species (plural) from other sources in order to evaluate the cumulative effect, and again, staff have been RIFed (permanently laid off) so doing this protection work becomes less and less possible. A [recent Orlando Sentinel](#) article. [See this link for more info and how to comment](#):

Rick Baird, Conservation Committee Chair, with Sheryan Epperley Chester, Kristen Kosik and the Orange Audubon Conservation Committee



Dancing Colt: Sandhill Crane, Orlando Wetlands. 2025 Chertok Florida Native Photo Contest, 3rd Place Winner, Novice Category. Photo: Caitrine Hellenga

Thanking Our Donors

Donating is all about having confidence that your donation will actually help to fulfill your personal mission. And hearing from the recipients that they appreciate you! Our all-volunteer board that operates our large, active chapter is right now a bit overwhelmed with the upcoming NORTH SHORE BIRDING FESTIVAL and the Capital Campaign.

We are proud of the wide support from members of our birding and conservation community and brag on this. Contributions were \$124,665 in our fiscal year 2023-24 and \$167,423 in 2024-25, as listed in our new (second) financial audit, a 34.3% increase. And with this year's fall letter appeal and our continued progress reports, fiscal year 2025-26 has started well, in numbers and amounts of our member's donations. We greatly appreciate the support of our community.

Being only half-way through a \$4.5 million Capital Campaign, it is the big corporate donors that we need also. Let us know if you have any ideas for us, and we will be thanking our donors in the next OASis. Gratefully, *Deborah Green, Orange Audubon President*

Looking For Volunteers

Do you have time and a passion for volunteering with Orange Audubon? Here are opportunities:

- Helping our Education Coordinator with school events
- Hospitality at our monthly in-person programs at Leu Gardens, 3rd Thursdays, 6pm
- Joining the elite group of Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive Ambassadors to welcome visitors to the Drive
- Assisting with clean-up, planting, etc. for our future Orange Audubon Nature Center at the Apopka Birding Park
- Helping to clean and fill bird feeders at Mead Botanical Garden

Email volunteer@orangeaudubonfl.org. Thank you!

Mary Van Egmond, Volunteer Coordinator

Gainesville Overnight Birding Trip

Join Orange Audubon as we travel to Gainesville for some great birding. With local birders as our guides we will explore several of Gainesville's top hot spots during the peak of winter. Past rarities have included Fox Sparrow, LeConte's Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Vaux's Swift, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Rufous Hummingbird, Calliope Hummingbird, Stilt Sandpiper, Ruff, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Rusty Blackbird, Winter Wren, Nashville Warbler and Wilson's Warbler. Cost is \$95 for OAS members and \$125 for nonmembers and includes two full days of guided birding and one lunch. Participants will make their own arrangements for accommodations but we do have a block of rooms reserved at a special rate at a Fairfield Inn in Gainesville. Registration is now open on our website: <https://orangeaudubonfl.org/field-trip-signup/>. Limit 14 participants.

Watch Out for Avian Pox

Avian Pox creates wart-like growths on the face and feet, and conjunctivitis (house finch eye disease) causes swollen, shut eyes. This fall we heard from two of our members that they had seen this condition in Brown Thrashers.



Brown Thrasher with apparent Avian Pox, Orlando. Photo: Jan Addison

Avian pox is a viral disease found in birds worldwide, especially in warmer areas. It affects more than 200 species, mainly songbirds like finches and upland game birds such as doves and quail. Raptors get it only occasionally, and it's rare in waterfowl.

The disease appears in two forms:

Dry form: wart-like growths on unfeathered areas (feet, legs, beak, around the eyes).

Wet form: lesions inside the mouth, throat, or upper airway.

Mosquitoes are the main carriers, spreading the virus after feeding on infected birds. It can also spread by contact between birds or through contaminated feeders, water, or dust.

Avian pox is usually diagnosed by its distinctive lesions. There is no specific cure—treatment focuses on supportive care and preventing secondary infections.

To control outbreaks at feeders, remove feeders and birdbaths to stop birds from crowding, then clean and disinfect them before putting them back out

Orange Audubon Conservation Committee.

Audubon Florida Center for Birds of Prey Volunteering

We are cross-posting for our friends at Audubon Florida. Guest Relations team members are needed to greet, answer phones and provide information at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland. Email cbopvolunteer@audubon.org.



Community Effort on the Entry Landscape

To promote use of native plants and specifically plants for birds and pollinators, Orange Audubon is providing examples of the native plants through demonstration gardens.

Board member Alan Shapiro has taken the lead in securing funding from the Florida Wildflower Foundation (FWF). FWF originally granted funding for the garden that will be viewed from the bird observatory annex in our nature center. However, until construction is complete, that landscape is delayed.

So FWF granted us funding for a new landscape along the entry road. Planting was done over several workdays, starting with site preparation in late October and then planting on November 22nd and 29th.

Four volunteers from the Bloom and Grow Garden Club of Winter Garden, along with some of our regular Apopka Birding Park volunteers planted half of the plants. On November 29th, middle school students recruited by the Biophilia Institute joined our regular volunteers to complete the planting, watering and mulching.

Along with shrubs and a few trees, many species of flowering herbaceous plants and native grasses were planted. For the proposed plant list, [see our website at this link](#).

For water, the St. Johns River Water Management District lent us a water tank, but with such a large garden it needs to be refilled frequently. The City of Apopka will be supplying our water service, along with a sewer line for the new building, soon.

About 30 bald cypress trees have also been planted. With the removal of the concrete pads and spraying of the dense invasive plants, we move closer to being able to restore more native habitat. Contact us at info@orangeaudubonfl.org if you can help.

Deborah Green, Committee Chair



Top, November 22nd workday planting of Florida Wildflower Foundation funded landscape, volunteers included Dr. Louis Stern; Dr. Becky Lynch and other Bloom and Grow Garden Club volunteers know how to plant!; Deborah Green and Andy Ray, construction engineering professor at Valencia College, had been co-chairs of the Valencia Sustainability Committee. Andy's students poured the concrete, and he and volunteers installed this sturdy bench. November 29th workday, our regular Orange Audubon volunteers were joined by Eco-volunteers from the Biophilia Institute. Alan Shapiro instructed on planting. Bottom left, Alan and Lance Hart refill the District's water tank with water from home.

Photos: Bob Elmquist, Deborah Green and Sarah Powell

Biggest Year Yet Field Trip

January 3, 2026

Start your year of birding off right with a field trip to one of Central Florida's best birding locations! We're going to see how many species we can find from 7:00 AM-12:30 PM on the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive. Last year we found 85 species — we are going to try to beat that record!

Our leaders are experienced local birders Haden Klinger, Jimena Aguirre and Kathy Rigling of Orange Audubon Society. Reservations are required. Fee is \$15 Audubon members, \$20 non members. Limit is 12 people. Register on our website: <https://orangeaudubonfl.org/activities/field-trips/>. Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com if you have any questions



Barn Owl, Photo: Alex DeBear

Apopka Birding Park Surveys

We are wrapping up an excellent year of bird surveys. Shortly after Orange Audubon secured our long-term lease on this old nursery site owned by the City of Apopka, we wanted to reinstate the bird surveys done in years past. The survey area covers more and more of this 70 acre parcel as more land area becomes accessible to birders.

Thanks to our volunteers, we've observed over 130 species in a little over a year of monthly surveys! Highlights include a Bell's Vireo, a Brewer's Sparrow (the third instance of this species in Florida's recorded history), the ever elusive Barn Owl, Eastern Screech-owl, Grasshopper Sparrow, and 20 species of warblers.

We also catalog the biodiversity of plants, insects, and mammals that frequent the property. The goal is to document an overall increase in biodiversity as Orange Audubon's restoration effort moves forward.

Surveys are the last Saturday morning of every month, shortly after sunrise. The next bird survey will be on December 27, 2025, followed by January 31st, 2026 at 7:00am. [To register use this link.](#)

Alexander DeBear

Education Program Update

In November, I visited Zellwood Elementary, Sunset Park Elementary, Sand Lake Elementary, Southwood Elementary, Camelot Elementary, Ocoee Elementary and Glenridge Middle.

You have heard us report about doing a 2024 Christmas Bird Count at Zellwood Elementary and schoolyard bird surveys there and at other schools. Our Best Large Chapter Education Program award from Audubon Florida at Audubon Assembly was for these surveys, which are active learning activities for students and introduce them to community (citizen) science.

These surveys were made possible in part through National Audubon grants for purchase of binoculars. An extension of the bird surveys is recognition of good bird habitat and efforts to improve schoolyard bird habitat. Using funding from our IDEAL grant, Orange Audubon has set up a program where teachers can apply for mini-grants of up to \$150 to purchase native plants to enhance schoolyard bird and pollinator habitat.

Volunteers assisted me to facilitate a native plant installation at Glenridge Middle School. Alan Shapiro, our board member who had owned a large native plant nursery in Gainesville, selected a wide array of native plants from Green Isle Gardens plant nursery and taught the 6th-8th grade agriculture students the correct way to install the plants.

I facilitated multiple bird counts from 2nd grade to 5th grade. The students were having so much fun that they didn't want to stop counting when their allotted time was over. They were excited to see Palm Warblers, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Bluebirds, Bald Eagles and huge flocks of Fish Crows among other species. A few very sharp eyed students spotted Black and White Warblers, Yellow-throated Warblers and even a Ruby-crowned Kinglet with its crown flared!

I did a virtual visit to Timber Lakes Elementary for their Teach-In Career Day program. I also did two homeschool programs, one for the Sandhill Homeschool Collective and one for the Three-fold Homeschool group. One of the 3 year olds, who really wanted to see a Cardinal, walked down the trail calling "here Cardinal," over and over and then one showed up!

My monthly teacher webinar was about



Zellwood Elementary after school Birding Club. Photo Kathy Rigling.

using Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch in the classroom.

We did a program at REI on introduction to Birding. Lastly, I did a bird walk for the Rollins College Environmental Club at Mead Botanical Garden. The students were interested to learn about migration and the importance of urban parks for stopovers by migrant birds.

Altogether we reached 605 students from preschool to college age and 70 adults. A big thank you to the volunteers who assisted. Alan Shapiro, Susan Thome-Barrett, who helped with the presentation at REI, Randy McCall, who assisted with bird counts at Sandlake Elementary, Sunset Park Elementary and Ocoee Elementary, and Ann Mixson, who assisted with the Zellwood Elementary Birding Club.

New volunteers are always welcome. Please reach out to me for more information.

Orange Audubon still has availability to conduct on campus bird counts and other standards-based educational programs.

We also offer a limited number of free class subscriptions of the engaging *Audubon Adventures* print publication for OCPS 3rd-5th grade classrooms. *Audubon Adventures* is a high interest magazine that not only supports standards-correlated science content but also aids literacy education with both print and digital resources.

Our monthly free educational webinars continue on December 10th from 7:00-7:30 pm with a program about Counting Birds for Science. The link to sign up is <http://eepurl.com/imGskM>.

Please email education@orangeaudubonfl.org to sign up for classroom or after school visits, or to request a class subscription to *Audubon Adventures* magazine.

Kathy Rigling, Education Coordinator

Awards Presented During 37th Annual Photo Contest Program

Orange Audubon Society's 37th Annual Chertok Nature Photography Contest (CNPC) program on June 19th had all the winning ingredients: an online auction that ran concurrently with proceeds benefiting Orange Audubon's future nature center at Apopka Birding Park, an impromptu in-person greeting from Mike Rausch, Colonial Photo & Hobby, Orlando co-owner and contest co-sponsor (since 2004!); and valued friends and members who attended. We featured contest entries in three skill-level categories of this 'Florida Native Nature' competition!

Contest winners are presented below by entry category, title, and photographer's name.

Youth Category: 1st place, *Bald Eagle and Duck*, and 2nd place, *Fish for a King—Belted Kingfisher* by Matthew Chin; 3rd place, *Duck Rotisserie—Bald Eagle* by Lauren Chin; 4th place, *Nesting Materials—Female Boat-tailed Grackle* and 5th place, *Roseate in Flight—Roseate Spoonbill* by Matthew Chin. Honorable mentions were awarded to: *Parenting is Hard Work—Great Egret with Chick* by Easton Addison; *Stomping Around—Royal Tern* by Will Misner; *Green Heron in Flight* by Matthew Chin; *Flared Feather Frame—Roseate Spoonbill* by Lauren Chin; and *Lurky LeConte's—LeConte's Sparrow* by Ethan Landreville.

Novice Category: 1st place, *Successful Snail Kite—Female Snail Kite*, and 2nd place, *Barely Skimming—Swallow-tailed Kite* by Tracy Dreyfus; and 3rd place, *Dancing Colt—Sandhill Crane*, by Caitrine Hellenga. Honorable mentions were awarded to: *Great Blue Reflection—Great Blue Heron* by Scott Ball; *Wheel!! This is Fun!!! Great Egret* by Jeanne Polarolo; *Grubhub—Sandhill Cranes and Coming Through—Black Bear* by Tracy Dreyfus; and *Golden Moment—White Ibis* by Caitrine Hellenga.

Advanced Amateur/Professional Category: 1st place, *Stealth Fighter—Least Bittern* by Wei-Shen Chin; 2nd place, *Owlways Watching—Barred Owls* by Robert Gloeckner; and 3rd place, *Caught—Great Blue Heron and American Alligator* by Lee Ann Posavad. Honorable mentions were awarded to: *Wilson's Plover*, and *American Flamingo and Roseate Spoonbill* by Bobby Van Mierop; *Burrowing Sandstorm—Burrowing Owl* by Jan Addison; *Screech Owlets*, and *Male Snail Kite* by Dan Jones; and *Spoon Landing—Roseate Spoonbill* by Wei-Shen Chin.

We congratulate the 2025 winners and extend sincere thanks to all participants.



Nesting Materials: Female Boat-tailed Grackle, Newton Park. 2025 Chertok Photo Contest. Fourth Place Winner, Youth Category. Photo: Matthew Chin

Our Judges

Winners of the 2025 Chertok nature photography contest were chosen by three expert judges representing art, nature, and photography: Steve Koury, Beth Reynolds, and Marina Scarr, respectively.

Steve Koury transitioned from a successful tenure as a baseball coach at Florida Southern College—where he contributed to a national championship—to a distinguished career as a fine artist. He has received multiple accolades, including Best in Painting, Best in Show, and three-time Florida Ducks Unlimited Artist of the Year awards. His book, "Painting Nature's Little Creatures," launched his workshop teaching career, most recently at the New York Botanical Gardens. Steve's artwork is featured in private collections, including those of Clint Eastwood and Retired General Norman Schwarzkopf. To view his award-winning pieces, visit Steve's website, skoury.com.

Beth Reynolds, naturalist, brings extensive expertise in both conservation and art. She now coordinates hundreds of volunteers and manages interpretive programs for Caladesi Island, Honeymoon Island, Anclote Key Preserve, and Egmont Key State Parks. She is a certified Florida Master Naturalist and an Audubon Bird Steward for Black Skimmer colonies. We look forward to seeing Beth as our Photo Tips presenter online on December 18th (see p. 1).

Marina Scarr, photographer, cultivated her lifelong interest in birdwatching and avian

photography after receiving her first camera, a Canon 35mm, from her father at age 18. Her work now predominantly features avian subjects, with a particular emphasis on owls. Marina has earned numerous photography awards, including recognition in the Chertok competition, and her images have appeared on the covers of *National Wildlife*, *Living Bird*, and *Audubon Florida Naturalist*. Her contributions have also been highly honored in *Nature's Best Photography* magazine. Marina has moderated avian photography communities on birdphotographers.net and currently moderates on Instagram @best_birds_of_ig. Discover her work at marinascurrphotography.com.

Orange Audubon is grateful for the services provided by this year's panel of judges. Steve is an acclaimed artist, Beth combines conservation work with photography, and Marina is a decorated nature photographer. Their diverse backgrounds and perspectives ensured well-rounded and informed judging, enhancing the contest's fairness and credibility. Thank you!

By supporting the annual Chertok Native Photo Competition, you also support Orange Audubon's efforts to protect and preserve Florida's remaining native wildlife and natural places.

Please visit orangeaudubonfl.org to view winning images and find timely news about the 2026 Chertok competition to be announced soon!

Teresa Williams, CNPC Contest Chair

QR CODE

NORTH SHORE BIRDING FESTIVAL

Discover Central Florida's 20,000-Acre Lake Apopka North Shore • 377+ Bird Species Affordable Birding and Photo Field Trips

ORANGE AUDUBON
A Chapter of National and Florida Audubon Societies

December 11-15, 2025

Photos: Mark Hainen, Sam Mitcham, Joyce Stefancic

2025 NORTH SHORE BIRDING FESTIVAL

Orange Audubon Society's 10th annual NORTH SHORE BIRDING FESTIVAL is coming up. The trips extend over 5 days, Thursday through Monday, December 11-15, 2025.

Many trips are full but with 70 trips available, [some still have space](https://northshorebirdingfestival.com/). Most trips are for birding but a number are tailored for photographers. We also have Nature Journaling, along with Drawing from Nature. Visit the festival website at <https://northshorebirdingfestival.com/>.

Note the two short promotional videos posted by Filmmaker Jim Cunningham. We have two points which we think makes our festival rise above the rest, as mentioned by an older Big Year birder in one of the videos.

First would be our great birding locations, including access behind locked gates to the bird-rich Lake Apopka North Shore, but also nearly 30 other locations within a 1 1/2 hour drive from Apopka.

Second is the quality of our trip leaders. This year [we have 60 leaders](#), with all but the professional guides donating their time. Something special is how many of our leaders are under 30, bringing a fun energy to the festival. Our youngest trip leader, now age 14, co-led with his father.

Several trip leaders who received their start with us have gone on to guide at larger festivals and for prestigious companies.

Since its 2016 launch, the festival's attendance has grown steadily, with 350 participants in 2024 from 18 states and over 70 Florida cities.

The festival aims to expand its national reach, spark return visits, raise awareness of Central Florida's natural treasures and contribute ecotourism dollars to the area. It showcases the region's conservation value and habitat protection efforts.

As of late November, 70% of 2025 registrants are returning and 30% new. When people know what to expect and love something, it makes it all the more fun.

Community Impact

Our festival brings together a critical mass of leaders and participants to catch up on their common interest—birding. Once Orange Audubon's nature center is built, the festival will include a free Expo Hall with displays by optics and tour companies, allowing added community engagement.

The start location for most field trips is the McDonald Canal Pavilion, 24600 CR 448A, Mount Dora, FL 32757. We have again been able to rent the Wekiwa Springs State Park Youth Camp, as a place to house out-of-town leaders. On Friday, we are hosting a simple Dinner with the Leaders, Pizza and Salad. The Saturday Keynote is by Alex and Mary



Marine of Osceola County. Their topic will be conservation of the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow, one of Florida's most endangered birds.

The keynote dinners will be at Wekiwa Springs State Park, and you have to enter the gate before the park closes at 5:30 p.m AND secure a daypass online. Sign up for a workshop before dinner or a trip after dinner at the park.

Proceeds of the NORTH SHORE BIRDING FESTIVAL support OAS' nature and environmental center fund. If you have any questions, visit our website northshorebirdingfestival.com, email festival@orangeaudubonfl.org or call (407) 637-2525.

*Deborah Green, Festival Committee Chair
with Mary Van Egmond, Co-Chair*

The Great Horned Owls of Safety Harbor:

For seven years, Great Horned Owls have nested in a public park in Safety Harbor, Florida. The male was affectionately known as Oliver and his mate, Emily. In January of 2022, they had three owlets named Huey, Dewey and Louie although Dewey was renamed Daisy when we realized she was a female. Spectators and wildlife photographers came regularly to the park where the owls were in the early morning and around sunset to see and photograph them. The photographers came from all over Florida and all over the country as well. They also came from Canada, the UK and the Netherlands. These owls were indeed “famous”.



Great Horned Owls eating a rodent later known to be poisoned by an anticoagulant rodenticide, Photo: Mark Schocken

Sadly, in March/April of that same year, Oliver and Emily and two of the three owlets died from eating rats poisoned with anticoagulant rodenticides. Cause of death was confirmed by necropsies. The remaining owlet, Daisy, was obviously sick with the poison but disappeared even after professional rescuers tried to capture her but were unsuccessful.

When we realized that our owls were dying from anticoagulant rodenticide poisoning, a group of us wanted to do something to minimize the chances that other owls would suffer the same fate. The “Safety Harbor Owl Team”, initially comprised of six concerned citizens, formed a Facebook group (Safety Harbor Strong Owls and Nature) intended

to inform and educate our members to the dangers of anticoagulant rodenticides and to provide alternatives to controlling rats and mice. After hearing about what happened, the mayor of Safety Harbor and the city commissioners pulled all poison bait stations containing anticoagulants from city properties.

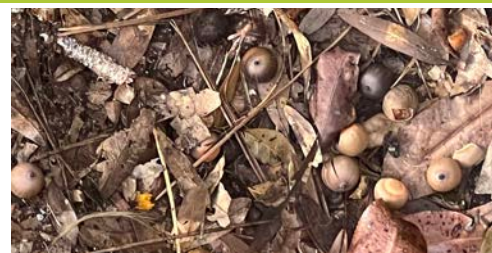
A team of our volunteers contacted pest control companies and asked them to stop using anticoagulant rodenticides. If they agreed and were willing to use “safer alternatives”, we recognized them as “Community Heroes”, presented them with a certificate of recognition, and put them on our “good list”, recommending them to our Facebook members which has soared to over 3,700.

In late 2022, two new Great Horned Owls came into the park, named Odie and Dory. They nested in the same tree as Oliver and Emily and had owlets in 2023 and 2024. Unfortunately, due to their inexperience and some bad luck, the owlets did not survive. We hope 2025 will be better. However, we are still working to do everything we can to encourage Safety Harbor homeowners, apartment managers, restaurants and pest control companies to not use anticoagulant rodenticides.

Anticoagulant rodenticide poisoning of our wildlife (and our pets and young children for that matter) is a national issue. We all need to stop using these compounds and use strategies such as prevention and exclusion, traps, rodent repellants and “safer” rodenticides as a last possible resort. More information can be found on our Facebook page.

Mark Schocken

Editor's note: The author was Orange Audubon's presenter on November 20th and his important presentation is [archived on our YouTube Channel](#).



Why So Many Acorns?

Have you noticed a lot of acorns dropping this fall? A “mast year” is when nut-bearing trees produce an exceptionally large quantity of nuts or seeds in a single season. These boom times occur every 2-5 years. 2025 is considered a mast year for acorns across many regions.

This is a natural cycle, where trees produce a surplus of seeds to overwhelm predators like squirrels and birds, ensuring some acorns survive to germinate. By dropping so many seeds at once, the trees make it impossible for wildlife to eat them all, increasing the chances that some will be left to grow into new trees.

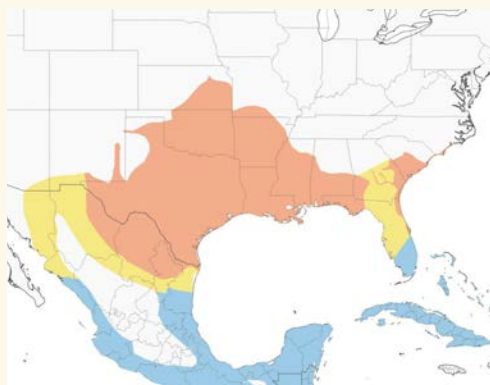


Ovenbird Photo: Robert Sena

While we are talking about oaks, the litter from fallen leaves is critical. Although the Ovenbird winter range (from All About Birds) includes Central Florida, this ground-walking warbler is rarely seen in home landscapes. In addition to planting a good native landscape, leaving your oak leaves is the way to attract them. The Ovenbird picks various insects and other invertebrates. See *The Nature of Oaks: The Rich Ecology of Our Most Essential Native Trees* by Dr. Doug Tallamy for more.

Painted Buntings Around

Many of us who put up bird feeders were delighted to start seeing Painted Buntings a few years ago. The range of this gorgeous species, from Cornell Lab of Ornithology's All About Birds, includes a breeding population (orange on map) in Northeast Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas with wintering (blue) in South Florida. And yet more and more of us have them regularly each winter. The key to attracting them is native plants with small seeds, including basket grass, Spanish needles, blue curls and Tropical sage. Use white millet in any feeders and have bird baths available.



Left, Painted Bunting distribution map from Cornell Lab of Ornithology's All About Birds, orange is breeding range, yellow is migration, blue is overwintering range, Right, Painted Buntings on white millet, Photo: Delsy Rodriguez



DECEMBER/JANUARY CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Bird Chats with OAS via Zoom

Contact Deborah at info@orangeaudubonfl.org

Southeast Asia : Birds, Culture and Food by Daphne Gemmill

December 4, 2025

No Bird Chat, NORTH SHORE BIRDING FESTIVAL

December 11, 2025

No Bird Chat, Christmas Day

December 25, 2025 •

No Bird Chat, New Year's Day

January 1, 2026

Birds of Trinidad and Tobago by Clint Quintal

January 8, 2026

eBird Tips and Tricks: Maximizing Your Use of the World's Largest Citizen Science Database by Will Johnson

January 22, 2026

For the Love of Shorebirds by Brian Cammarano

January 29, 2026

Wekiwa Springs State Park Bird Survey, Apopka

December 6, 2025

Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com

NORTH SHORE BIRDING FESTIVAL, Lake Apopka

Dec 11–15, 2025

Contact Deborah at (407) 637-2525

Christmas Bird Counts: Dec 14-January 3, 2026

December 14, 2025–January 3, 2026

See listing to right and contact compilers

January Program: Photo Tips Online Program by Beth Reynolds

December 18, 2025

Contact Alan at alanguardiflora@gmail.com

North Shore Bird Survey

December 23, 2025

Contact Deborah at info@orangeaudubonfl.org

Limited Edition Field Trip: Your Biggest Year, Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive

January 3, 2026

Register: <https://orangeaudubonfl.org/activities/field-trips/>

Wekiwa Springs State Park Bird Survey, Apopka

January 10, 2026

Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com

January Program: Tracing Florida Journeys by Leslie Kemp Poole

January 15, 2026

Contact Alan at alanguardiflora@gmail.com

January Field Trip: Lake Lucie, Green Eyes, Fields of Fame, Apopka

January 17, 2026

Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com

Oakland Nature Preserve Bird Survey, Oakland

January 25, 2026

Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com

Rock Springs Run State Reserve Bird Survey

January 28, 2026

Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com

Apopka Birding Park Workday

January 2026 (date TBA)

Contact Deborah at info@orangeaudubonfl.org

North Shore Bird Survey

January 27, 2026

Contact Deborah at info@orangeaudubonfl.org

Gainesville Overnight Limited Edition Birding Trip

January 31–February 1, 2026

Contact Kathy at riglingkathy@gmail.com

Apopka Birding Park Bird Survey

January 31, 2026

Contact Alexander at alexdebear@icloud.com

Christmas Bird Counts

- Bay Lake: Saturday, December 20, 2025. Contact John Thomson at john.thomson@gmail.com

- Wekiva River: Saturday, December 20, 2025. Contact Jay Exum at jay.h.exum@gmail.com

- Zellwood/Mt. Dora: Thursday, December 18, 2025. Contact Gallus Quigley at gallusq@gmail.com

- Emeralda: Monday, December 22, 2025. Contact Gigi DelPizzo at

- Econlockhatchee: Saturday, December 27, 2025. Contact Lorne Malo at lornekmal@gmail.com

- Kissimmee Valley: Sunday, December 28, 2025. Contact Chris Newton at dexterdevon68@gmail.com

- Clermont: Monday, January 4, 2025. Contact John Thomson at john.thomson@gmail.com



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, in Sugarberry tree, late November, Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive. Photo: Delsy Rodriguez

Help Orange Audubon with Year End Match

For the month of November and extending into December, generous donors have put up a \$10,000 match. Can you contribute to make sure we secure this amount? The match is to help us build the Orange Audubon Nature Center at Apopka Birding Park!

Please donate online or mail a check, written to Orange Audubon Society to:

Orange Audubon Society

P.O. Box 941142

Maitland, FL 32794-1142

Thank you!!!