

ALACHUA AUDUBON SOCIETY 2021-2022 INITIATIVES

Alachua Audubon Society is embarking on several new and exciting initiatives in 2021/2022 as well as expanding our successful existing programs.

The Prairie Creek Preserve Bird Banding Lab was in full operation this past spring, winter, and fall seasons. Three beautiful new and informative signs depicting avian anatomy were designed by Chris Burney. Fabrication is complete and the signs will be installed at the nearby kiosk. A native plant garden has been planted next to the bird banding lab and the plants are flourishing thanks to Jonathan Varol. And after several seasons of fall, winter, and spring banding, AAS board members Jonathan Varol and Dr. Katie Sieving are reporting some very interesting results. A total of 472 birds have been banded since the lab's inception in 2018. The data reveal some very interesting details regarding site fidelity of migratory species. A House Wren, Eastern Phoebe, two migratory Eastern Towhees, a Gray Catbird, two Ovenbirds, and two Hermit Thrushes – all Florida wintering birds that migrate north to breed – have been banded and then recaptured in subsequent years. These preliminary results confirm that some migratory species return to their same Prairie Creek Preserve wintering location each year. The purpose of the bird banding lab is to help educate and train students and other participants on the scientific methods of capturing, banding, and tracking birds, and to collect important data.

The Alachua Audubon college internship program has been extremely successful. Five college interns were selected in the 2020/2021 school year and they gained valuable career experience by participating in a multitude of projects. In addition to learning to net and band birds at AAS's Prairie Creek Bird Banding Lab, the interns monitored the spring migration of Common Loons, monitored kestrel nest boxes, and assisted Avian Research and Conservation Inc (ARCI) with some of their research projects. We will again host a fall and spring internship program and compile a list of exciting projects for the new interns.

Four high school seniors were awarded the John Hintermister Memorial High School Scholarship in memory of John Hintermister, who was a charter member and long-time volunteer of AAS and a huge supporter of high school programs. We will continue to advertise this high school scholarship program in hopes of attracting even more applicants and to promote an interest in conservation.

As a way of making bird watching more accessible to county residents, AAS has partnered with the Alachua County Public Library to implement a binoculars lending program. AAS donated five backpacks containing binoculars, a birding field guide, and avian-related literature to the public library. Similar to a very successful program in Palm Beach County, the backpacks will soon be available for checkout through the Alachua County Library.

Alachua Audubon Society donated 15 pairs of binoculars to the City of Gainesville's Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs Department. The binoculars are used all summer by students attending the Morningside Nature Center summer camp programs. Once the summer is over, the binoculars are transitioned over to Sweetwater Wetlands Park where they are used during the ranger-led nature outings.

Alachua Audubon also contributed to the Gainesville High School Birding Club by donating two pairs of binoculars and a spotting scope and tripod. GHS teachers and avid birders, Leigh Larson and Maggie Paxson, have established a network of bird feeders outside their two classrooms so students can learn about feeder birds throughout the school day. Additionally, these teachers

established a birding club and take students on monthly bird outings.

As a local stakeholder and partner with Sweetwater Wetlands Park, AAS has made multiple contributions to the park that facilitate the education and enjoyment of birds. In addition to the donation of 15 pairs of binoculars, our newest projects at Sweetwater will be purchasing a large white-board map so rangers and visitors can label specific locations where target species have been observed; and designing and constructing educational signs for the overlook structures in Cells 2 and 3. AAS resumed leading weekly bird walks at Sweetwater on September 1st. The bird walks occur each Wednesday morning at 8:30 am from September through May.

Given the extraordinary success of Sweetwater Wetlands Park as a nature destination and water cleansing facility, Gainesville Regional Utilities is proposing to construct a second treatment wetland on the west side of Gainesville. If the initial design proves feasible and the project moves forward, this new wetland will be located next to the Diamond Sports Facility on Parker Road on the west side of Gainesville. The wetland will be designed to receive reclaimed water from GRU's Kanapaha Water Reclamation Facility, cleanse the water, and then infiltrate the cleaner water into the ground where it will recharge the Floridan Aquifer. Like SWP, a new treatment wetland will require several years of design and construction before it becomes operational. AAS has already become a stakeholder for this exciting new birding site and our first contribution will be to conduct semi-monthly baseline bird surveys at the site during the two-year design period while the site remains in its existing upland state. The baseline data will serve to demonstrate the changes in avian populations as the site transitions from an upland to a constructed wetland.

Purple Martins (PUMA) have successfully nested at the Lake City Treatment Wetlands thanks to a joint project between AAS and Four Rivers Audubon. In January 2019, AAS and Four Rivers purchased and installed PUMA nesting gourds. Soon after the gourds were installed, a colony of PUMAs nested in them. The colony increased substantially in 2020 and eggs and/or young were present in almost all 20 gourds. Based on the success of this project, AAS and Four Rivers teamed together again and purchased another PUMA nesting gourd system and installed it next to the existing gourds in early 2021. Although the Lake City Treatment Wetland is not open to the public, City staff open the wetland for an AAS field trip each winter and for the Christmas Bird Count in December.

The Alachua Conservation Trust invited AAS to be partners on a Grassland Bird Habitat Restoration Project. AAS assisted with baseline and post-restoration bird surveys on ACT's Fox Pen site in eastern Alachua County. AAS again teamed with ACT and with Tall Timbers Conservation and conducted bird surveys on private properties that are preserved by a conservation easement. These surveys included property owners as a way to introduce them to birding.

And finally, AAS will support the UF GREBE (Gators Ready for Exceptional Birding Experiences) Audubon Campus Chapter's educational activities through an annual \$500 donation.

The Alachua Audubon Society is an all-volunteer organization. You do not need to be a member to participate in any of our activities, but your membership enables us to offer more to the community and makes us stronger in our efforts to promote conservation initiatives in Alachua County. If you are not a member, please consider joining the Alachua Audubon Society.

Debbie Segal
President