

Alachua Audubon Society 2022-2023 Initiatives



The Alachua Audubon Society (AAS) has embraced many exciting initiatives for the coming year, some new and others continuing, that I will briefly share.

Youth Education

In a partnership with Rawlings Elementary School--a low-income and Title 1 school--AAS Board Members Felicia Lee and Jacob Ewert expanded on the educational birding program that Sharon Kuchinski initiated for her students. During this past school year, Felicia and Jacob led bird walks around the surprisingly "birdy" Rawlings school campus. The grand finale activity was a bird outing to Sweetwater Wetlands Park that was led by Felicia and Jacob. AAS financed the bus transportation and the students used the collection of binoculars that were donated to Sweetwater by AAS. More AAS-led bird activities are planned at Rawlings Elementary for the upcoming 2022/2023 school year.

Similar to the Rawlings bird program but on a much larger scale, AAS will finance bus transportation during the 2022/2023 school year for 4th grade classes from three to four elementary schools to travel to Sweetwater Wetlands Park and Morningside Nature Center, where park staff will implement their exceptional nature-based educational programs. As we explored ways in which to offer bird and nature programs to young students, particularly those at under-served schools, we discovered that transportation funding was frequently the limiting factor. AAS is excited to partner with the Friends of Nature Parks and the City of Gainesville Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs to bring birds and nature to young students throughout Gainesville!

Gainesville High School teachers, Maggie Paxton and Leigh Larson, started a high school-level birding program by installing an array of bird feeding stations outside of their classrooms and leading their students on periodic after-school bird outings. AAS donated a spotting scope for the students to more closely admire the birds that visit the feeders outside their classrooms. Starting in September, AAS will support Maggie and Leigh's high school bird program by donating \$50 each month for bird seed. We will also join in on their bird outings should they need additional field trip leaders and provide loaner binoculars for the students' use.

Alachua Audubon has become involved in one more youth program, this time leading weekly bird walks for the Cuscowilla Summer Camp (formerly Camp McConnell) near Micanopy. AAS Board Member Tim Hardin, and AAS volunteer Stephanie Hornbuckle, will guide the young summer campers as they explore the exciting world of birds and nature.

Prairie Creek Bird Banding Lab and Native Plant Garden

Alachua Audubon's Bird Banding Lab at Prairie Creek Preserve, led by AAS Board Members Jonathan Varol and Dr. Katie Sieving, successfully completed its fourth year of banding birds, collecting a wealth of scientific data, and training college students through semester-long internship programs. Many upgrades were made at the banding lab this past year – a golf cart to expedite the examination of mist nests and to more quickly transport captured birds to the lab station for banding and release; a series of three scientific posters that were professionally designed by AAS's Chris Burney; some logistical items such as storage cabinets and supplies; and a full-scale native plant garden. Look for an article from Jonathan in an upcoming AAS newsletter where he will summarize some of the exciting results of AAS's bird banding lab.

Jonathan's vision did not stop with the bird banding lab. Through grant writing, Jonathan secured funds first from Florida Power and Light and then from Audubon Florida for a native plant garden, which he spearheaded adjacent to the banding lab at Prairie Creek Preserve. Many volunteers helped Jonathan prepare the beds and plant the new plants, and these volunteers continue to assist with weeding and watering during this critical time of plant establishment. ***We would dearly love to recruit a few more volunteers who could assist us in nurturing those lovely natives, so please contact us at***

AlachuaAudubon.org if you might be interested. And look for Audubon-led field trips to the Prairie Creek Preserve Bird Banding Lab and Native Plant Gardens this fall and spring.

Bird Outings

Audubon-led field trips will continue during the 2022/2023 season. The popular Birds and Brews sets out from First Magnitude Brewery during the late afternoon on the first Sunday of each month. Meet Michael Brock and other AAS volunteers for a stroll to Depot Park in search of birds and then back to the brewery for an optional cold brew and conversation.

Wednesday morning bird walks at Sweetwater Wetland Parks will resume in September, when we will meet at 8:30 am at the entrance pavilion. During these weekly bird walks, participants typically tally over 50 species--some year-round species, some seasonal, and often a rarity or two.

A diverse offering of weekend birding field trips is on tap for the 2022/2023 season. Look for the schedule in the September/October AAS newsletter and on our website and Facebook page. Hats off to the AAS field trip committee – Barbara Shea, Adam Zions, Tim Hardin, and Michael Brock – for such detailed and time-consuming planning of so many bird outings.

Alachua Audubon continues to coordinate and lead birding classes through the Santa Fe College Continuing Education Program. These classes have introduced many people to the fascinating world of birds, and we are continually inspired as we see folks from the classes participate in other Audubon-led bird outings. Thank you to AAS Board Member Gary Gossman for coordinating the SFC Birding Classes, and to the many other Audubon volunteers who have so enthusiastically led a weekly bird class.

Evening Programs

Monday, July 25, at 7:00 p.m. "Bird Photography Basics" by Mitch Walters – Mitch is an award-winning nature photo-grapher and PhD candidate studying avian acoustics at the University of Florida. Birds may be colorful and adorable, but they are also skulky and flighty, making them challenging subjects to photograph. Join Mitch as he shares his best tips for successfully and consistently capturing birds behind the camera, while also showcasing the incredible beauty and diversity of bird photography in Florida (and beyond)!

Visit the [Events](#) tab on our website at AlachuaAudubon.org, and click on [Programs](#).

Thursday, August 18, at 7:00 p.m. "Why Make Nest Boxes for Kestrels?" by Bob Simons

For the past 30 years, Bob Simons has built and installed over 150 nest boxes for Southeastern American Kestrels with the help of boy scouts, student interns, and volunteers. The boxes are monitored to gauge their activity. Why did he do this? What have we learned? Join us to find out.

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Conservation

Perhaps our longest-running AAS conservation project is the Southeastern American Kestrel nest box program, led by the longest-tenured AAS Board Member, Bob Simons. Bob has built hundreds of kestrel (and bluebird) nest boxes and installed them throughout Alachua and surrounding counties. When AAS purchased a telescoping pole camera a few years ago, Bob and various college interns began assessing the success of nesting kestrels. Bob discovered that the 2022 kestrel nesting season turned out to be a largely successful one. At one particular location, the Watermelon Pond site, nesting kestrels were documented in all seven of the Bob-installed nest boxes. Join Bob as he reports on this very successful kestrel monitoring program on August 18th. On a related note, AAS is exploring the possibility of expanding our bird monitoring program to include Burrowing Owls.

I would like to share a huge conservation victory with you in which AAS had a small role. Dollar General proposed building a store on the corner of US 441 and Tuscawilla Road in Micanopy on a parcel with

huge archaeological and ecological significance. Several organizations, including Alachua Audubon, mobilized and advocated against this sensitive parcel location. In spite of the many convincing arguments to deny the site plan, the County Planning Department voted unanimously in favor of Dollar General. We felt defeated as we left the meeting. But the advocacy continued. Tusawilla Road was soon nominated and eventually approved as a County Scenic Road, and with the new protective designation, the road would no longer accommodate large trucks, including Dollar General delivery trucks. DG withdrew its permit to build a store at this sensitive location and Alachua County just purchased the property for preservation, a rare and significant victory for conservation.

Another threat to local conservation lands was temporarily averted. The St. Johns River Water Management District recently announced that they would surplus some of their upland conservation lands, including properties on the east side of Newnan's Lake in Alachua County. When Chris Ferrell with Audubon Florida discovered, and then advocated against, this ill-conceived plan, the SJRWMD temporarily withdrew their plan. AAS is partnering with Chris and other staff at Audubon Florida to prevent the sale and ultimate loss of these publicly-owned properties.

Assorted Other AAS Initiatives

Next time you visit Sweetwater Wetlands Park, check out the large, new, AAS-funded, white-board map at the entrance pavilion. And feel free to mark the map with any locations of noteworthy wildlife sightings.

And if you wish to borrow a nice pair of binoculars, a Sibley field guide, and other birding resources, look no further than the Alachua County Public Library. AAS has assembled 10 birding kits into backpacks and donated the backpack birding kits to the public library for general circulation and check-out. We have learned that these birding kits are hugely popular.

Hopefully, the dark veil of COVID will dissipate this winter and Alachua Audubon will once again host the popular Backyard Birding Tour. Designed to be an educational event to learn about bird-friendly yards, this will be a tour of 4-6 yards that host an array of bird feeders and other attractants. ***If you have a yard that you would like to consider featuring on the Backyard Birding Tour in February, please contact AAS at AlachuaAudubon.org.***

AAS has helped finance two local bird projects – a bird cam on an osprey nest built on a stadium light fixture at a UF ball field so viewers could watch the hatching and rearing of osprey chicks; and renovation funds for mews (flight cages) at the Sunrise Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in High Springs.

I am hugely inspired by the motivation and enthusiasm of the Alachua Audubon Society Board Members – Tim Hardin, Felicia Lee, Bob Simons, Emily Schwartz, Anne Casella, Karen Brown, Barbara Shea, Jonathan Varol, Katie Sieving, Eric Amundson, Adam Zions, Christina Opett, Pratibha Singh, Gary Gossman, Elizabeth Mance, Zachary Holmes, and Kayla Ehrlich. We are all volunteers who value birds, nature, and conservation. ***If you are not a member of the Alachua Audubon Society, please consider joining today.*** More members allow us to do more for the benefit of avian conservation. There is also strength in numbers when we advocate for conservation of our natural resources.

Please feel free to reach out to us at **AlachuaAudubon.org or contact us at contact@AlachuaAudubon.org** if you would like to assist with any of our educational or conservation initiatives. I hope to see you soon enjoying nature in all its beauty.

For birds and conservation,

Debbie

Debbie Segal
President, Alachua Audubon Society