

## **Notes on Florida Audubon Assembly, October 26-28, 2023, “Conservation in a Changing Landscape.”**

John Warbach, VP Eagle Audubon Society

Florida Audubon held its annual Assembly in October at the Tampa Sheraton Brandon, the first since 2019.

The following are brief notes from some of the various sessions.

A Chapter Presidents Roundtable was held Thursday afternoon with Jacqui Sulek, Florida Audubon Chapter Conservation Coordinator moderating. Presidents and other representatives from about 32+ of 45 Florida Audubon chapters attended the Roundtable.

- Chapter size seems to range from about 50 members to over 4,000.
- Representatives were asked to give the age of their chapter, challenges and recent accomplishments.
- For Eagle Audubon I mentioned the Plants for Birds project and moving our meetings outside of a gated community so more people and more from a wider geographic area could attend.
- There are chapters that do not have membership meetings and one large one meets in a large auditorium.

Among other accomplishments chapter representatives mentioned were:

- Citrus County providing birder backpacks to a local library which included binoculars.
- Manatee County providing bird image clings to put on windows to help prevent bird deaths.
- Adult advocacy training so members can be effective in promoting conservation at the local, state and federal level. At least one large chapter, Tropical Audubon Society also has an Ambassadors Program (ages 18-80) and has professional staff involved in this. Their program is online through a password protected portal.
- Several chapters are active in introducing children to nature. At least two chapters have retired outdoor education educators either on staff or as volunteers. One chapter has published a bird coloring book in both English and Spanish as part of their nature exposure program for kids. An award winning chapter (Pelican Island Audubon Society) coordinates with a nonprofit that helps the homeless and the program focuses on homeless children and building their confidence to succeed in the world. The chapter leaders say this is a life changing experience for the children and for themselves.

The Presidents Roundtable also reviewed different leadership styles and qualities of a leader.

General notes and observations:

- Florida Audubon is 123 years old (older than national Audubon)
- Average participant ages appears to be much younger than EAS.
- Many chapters are very hands on with planting natives (one obtained a license to be able to sell up to 900 plants at an event). Another chapter has a goal of planting 100,000 native plants.
- Many chapters are involved with young people. There may have been a dozen Conservation Leadership Initiative (students funded for mentoring programs with local chapters) young people at the Assembly. Venice Audubon exists in a community where the average age is 69+, but they have an active Little Naturalist Program that reaches out to children ages 3-5 plus and requires a parent or guardian participant. The program has four sessions: What is... a bird, an insect, a reptile, and a plant?

There were a number of topics covered in breakout sessions and the plenary on the last day. These include:

- Creating habitat in unconventional ways.
  - At Babcock Ranch (the solar community not the preserve), extensive wetlands were created after discovering old hydrologic flow patterns. Over time, the wetlands developed native plant communities from the soil seed bank, and plantings. Drone video showed hundreds of nesting waterfowl and wading birds. Night wildlife cameras showed a panther family developing over a three year period at the community. Florida Power and Light (FPL) also has an extensive solar array on a part of the property away from the homes and commercial settlement areas.
  - An FPL spokesperson described how they develop wetlands in conjunction with their solar farms. They have created over 4,500 acres of wetlands on their solar farms. They have practical reasons for doing this as well as trying to be better stewards. They mostly build the farms on old orchards, farms and ranches where the existing ground surface does not drain well or experiences extensive erosion. They need solid footing for the solar panel supports. They also plant and harvest thousands of tons of native wildflower seeds as their ground cover. They use special fences (fences are required by Federal agencies to keep people away from power generation equipment) that have openings large enough for small mammals and short enough that deer can jump. Panthers are beginning to also utilize the habitat. In the past two hurricanes, FPL solar farms have lost one panel.
  - Least Terns have been nesting on gravel rooftops in recent decades as beach habitat has disappeared. Unfortunately so have gravel rooftops as more modern materials are being used. To offset this trend, Tern “sandboxes” are being built and placed on building roofs.
- Reports on species of particular interest (Scrub Jays not included in presentations at this Assembly):
  - Eagle Watch reported that there are now over 4,300 nesting pairs of Bald Eagle in the US. Florida and Alaska have the most of any state. Still there are Eagle deaths from development, pesticides, climate change, plastics, car strikes (they do scavenge road kill) and fish hooks. Eagles are now nesting on man-made structures—perhaps 20% of nests. Cell towers are popular with Eagles and Ospreys but can be a problem as newer towers have small weight tolerances and maintenance equipment can be the same weight as an Eagle nest. Nesting sites are getting closer together, often one half mile apart when their natural territory requires a mile. This crowding is due to development and more successful reproduction of the species. Eagle recovery centers are seeing more injuries due to territorial fighting.
  - Burrowing Owl populations have declined although breeding pairs in many instances are fledging a surprising number of young. Marco Island seems to have many more burrows than would be expected since the landscape is nearly entirely man-made. At many burrow sites the owls seem to get used to people, including at HS athletic fields, condo yards and empty lots. We saw a photo of one on a million dollar empty lot. A multi-million dollar yacht was parked just behind the burrow. Starter burrows (a shallow hole and small pile of sand placed by humans) sometimes attracts owls that then complete the burrow, up to 5’ to 8’ long. People are also installing owl perches near burrows and the owls often use them to look around.
  - Roseate Spoonbills are moving their nesting farther inland and farther north, including into the Carolinas. This is due to climate warming. Warming allows their territory to reach farther north. Sea level rise associated with warming has been raising water levels as much as 15” in many south Florida coastal areas. Spoonbills can only eat when the water is 13” or less deep, due to the location of the nostrils on their bills.