



Welcome to the first Statewide eNewsletter of 2026! Today we're bringing you stories of Piping Plovers beating the odds, a unique Christmas Bird Count, a day in the life of a Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary burn boss, the Jay Watch annual report, and more.

Great Egrets. Photo: Robert Gloeckner/Audubon Photography Awards



## Audubon Florida Celebrates Two Big Openings in February

After being closed for nearly six years, the original Discovery Center space inside the Blair Visitor Center at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples was reimaged and reopened on February 4 as the Spurlino Foundation Discovery Center. With exhibits that highlight the resident species of the swamp, the impressive migratory journeys of birds, Audubon history, and more, the 1,600-square-foot space highlights the Sanctuary's work and wildlife. With mounted artifacts to touch, bird calls and other sounds to hear, and an opportunity to dress up like a prescribed fire professional, this multi-sensory learning experience is the perfect complement to a walk along the renowned 2.25-mile boardwalk.

The Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland hosted a ribbon-cutting to debut the Sitek Smith Owl Aviary on February 12 after it was closed for six months for construction. The new aviary provides resident owls with a much-improved habitat and also enables guests to enjoy an impressive view of the owls housed there. Staff and volunteers installed perches in each of the mews, where two Barred Owls named Fil and Hitch, and three Great Horned Owls named Henry, Charley, and Jeanne, now reside.

Photos: Julie and Ben Cechman/Cechman's Photography and Videography and Audubon Florida staff.



## Two Piping Plovers Beat the Odds

On a quiet stretch of tidal flat at Outback Key, two tiny shorebirds illustrate a story of conservation success. "Jevie" (also known as "Obby" in Michigan) and "Lopey" are banded birds, part of an ongoing, science-driven effort to support the recovery of one of North America's most imperiled shorebirds.

Their behavior mirrors that of any other Piping Plover as they forage in the muck for nutritious worms or hunker down in the sand for a nap. Would you believe that they were rescued as eggs, hatched and raised by amazing humans at the University of Michigan Biological Station? Once they fledged, they were released back onto the beaches of Michigan, and made their way south during fall migration. They eventually found their way to Florida, where they were spotted by the Audubon Florida coastal team.

[Read the full story.](#)

Lopey the Piping Plover. Photo: Abby McKay/Audubon Florida



## Orange Audubon Society Brings the Christmas Bird Count to Elementary and Middle School Students

It's December in Orange County, Florida, and the Christmas Bird Count is on. For students at Zellwood Elementary and Wolf Lake Middle School, that means they set their eyes on the skies for this century-old community science initiative – with a little help from Orange Audubon Society.

Orange Audubon Education Coordinator Kathy Rigling has led the effort to involve students in the Christmas Bird Count for three years.

Students have to fit the count within their class schedules, so each participating class allotted around 45 minutes to range across campus counting birds and species. Rigling and volunteers write down the birds and turn sightings into an eBird list to report back to the students and the Christmas Bird Count coordinators. Using grant funding, Orange Audubon continues to work with participating schools to enhance campus bird habitat so students in future years can find even more species.

[Read more.](#)

Volunteer Maddie Barber (and former Conservation Leadership Initiative student) leading kids on their Christmas Bird Count. Photo: Kathy Rigling/Orange Audubon Society



## A Day in the Life: Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Prescribed Fire Burn Boss

The ignition plan was set: Conduct a team test fire at Location A; red team will ignite a backing fire across all sections; yellow team will advance ignition from Locations B through H; and spotters will monitor flame behavior and wind conditions. A designated weather person will give hourly weather updates using a Kestrel, a handheld weather monitoring tool.

Fire is a critical force driving the ecology of South Florida. Most of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's habitats have evolved to depend on fire. Maintaining the Sanctuary's 13,000 acres of wildlife habitat is a top priority because habitat loss—made worse by the escalating impact of climate change—is driving bird declines throughout the hemisphere.

[Learn more about the process and watch a short reel highlighting a burn day.](#)

Burn Boss Alyson Webb, second from right, gives her team instructions for the day's burn. Photo: Renée Wilson/Audubon Florida



## Snail Kite Population Showing Strain in Dry Years

The Snail Kite is one of the most iconic birds of the Florida peninsula. With its striking dark plumage, deeply hooked bill, and slow, buoyant flight just above the water's surface, the kite is uniquely adapted for one purpose: feeding on apple snails. The apple snail does not live north of Florida, and thus, neither does the Snail Kite. This highly specialized diet, restricted range, and human changes to historic water flow in the Everglades combined to land the kite on the federal endangered species list in 1967.

Since the River of Grass was drained and ditched in the mid-20th century, kite populations have been on a roller coaster ride.

[Read more.](#)

Snail Kite. Sydney Walsh/Audubon Florida.



## Center for Birds of Prey Installs New Motus Tracking Station

The Audubon Center for Birds of Prey is now a part of the Motus network! The Motus Wildlife Tracking System is a network of stations around the world that helps Audubon and its partners understand how migratory birds and other wildlife are connected to different places and habitats across seasons. Researchers put small radio tags on animals like birds, bats, and insects, and when a tagged animal passes within about 10 miles of a station, it is recorded as data! With data showing where birds move as they migrate, we can better advocate for key habitats and address conservation challenges they face along the way. Thanks to Bill DeLuca and Alicia Brunner from Audubon's migration tracking team for installing the tower. [Learn more about the Motus network.](#)



## Jay Watch Annual Report is Here!

This year marks a milestone for Jay Watch: 25 years of volunteers, land managers, scientists, and conservationists coming together to monitor and protect one of Florida's only endemic bird species, the Florida Scrub-Jay. What began as a small, collaborative effort at just 13 sites has grown into a statewide community science program monitoring more than 45 scrub-jay populations across 19 counties.

In this report we bring you a stunning photo gallery, a water management district jay summary, a history highlight, and more!

[Download your free copy today.](#)

Florida Scrub-Jay. Photo: Michael Dreese/Audubon Photography Awards

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