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 Uniting Amateurs and Professionals in the Conservation and Study of Wild Birds*

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*Preliminary Review of Florida's Threatened Wildlife Under Way by FWC*

The preliminary findings of biological status reviews on listed species reveal success stories for some of Florida's most vulnerable species. Although work is still under way, in early November, experts appointed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) began to review the information and data received on 61 state-listed species against Florida's listing criteria. The groups found that several species may no longer be at risk of extinction and may not need to be listed.

"We hope these preliminary findings will result in the discovery that our conservation measures in the past decade have had measurable, beneficial impacts on wildlife in Florida," said Dr. Elsa Haubold, who heads up the FWC's threatened-species listing process team.

Ten currently listed mammals have undergone the preliminary status reviews, and initial results indicate that five species do not meet listing criteria. These species include the Florida black bear, chipmunk, Florida mouse, Homosassa shrew and Sherman's fox squirrel. Four of 21 currently state-listed birds also do not meet the criteria: limpkin, brown pelican, snowy egret and white ibis.

The biological status review groups found that the following bird and mammal species met at least one of the listing criteria: American oystercatcher, least tern, little blue heron, reddish egret, roseate spoonbill, tricolored heron, osprey, southeastern American kestrel, white-crowned pigeon, Florida sandhill crane, Marian's marsh wren, Scott's seaside sparrow, Wakulla seaside sparrow, Worthington's marsh wren, black skimmer, snowy plover, burrowing owl, Everglades mink, Florida bonneted bat, Sanibel Island rice rat, Sherman's short-tailed shrew and Big Cypress fox squirrel.

Haubold cautions this is only the first step in the careful process of studying the status of these species. After all 61 species receive the scrutiny of the biological status review teams, composed of recognized experts and led by an

*(Continued on page 9)*



*Florida Burrowing Owl.  
 Photo by Lauren Deaner*

## *Tree Swallow Roosting Ecology and the Effects of Large Scale Agriculture, by Andrew J. Laughlin*

“I have seen a million flamingos on the lakes of East Africa and as many seabirds on the cliffs of the Alaska Pribilofs, but for sheer drama, the tornadoes of tree swallows eclipsed any other avian spectacle I had ever seen.”

-Roger Tory Peterson, *All Things Reconsidered*

Perhaps you've been lucky enough to have seen these “swallow tornadoes” too, here in Florida, over marshes in St. Marks or Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuges, or in Sarasota County. Those who are fortunate enough to witness them do not soon forget these dramatic descents into the roost by thousands to millions of swallows. For the next few years, I'll be studying the winter ecology of Tree Swallows as part of a doctoral program at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA. This is a species that has been very well-studied during the breeding season for decades. But virtually nothing is known about them on their wintering grounds along the Gulf Coast.

Tree Swallows are an integral component of the birdlife in Florida and the Gulf Coast during the non-breeding season (~October through April). After the breeding season has ended further north, these birds form huge roosts every evening that eventually move south for the winter. The swallows form roosts in the same reed beds year after year, proving as site-faithful to their winter quarters as they notoriously are to their breeding grounds. Some of these roosts are so large that the morning ascent of birds are captured by NEXRAD weather radar, showing a distinctive roost “ring-echo” on the screen as the birds disperse in all directions to feed (see Figure 1). This is a very useful tool in locating swallow roosts and documenting where most of the birds disperse to during the day to feed.



*Tree Swallow. Photo by Adam Kent*

Most swallows roost in phragmites cane or cattails during this roosting season, but others take a different approach. In eastern Louisiana, swallows form roosts as large as ~1 – 5 million birds in sugar cane fields every evening (see Figure 2). However, in mid-December, these sugar cane fields are harvested and the millions of birds disappear. How does this disruption of their roost-site affect the birds that choose this roost substrate year after year? Where do the birds go after the sugar cane is harvested? Are they able to find suitable roosting locations in nearby marsh-

lands, or are they forced to move greater distances for the remainder of the winter? These are some of the questions I will attempt to answer during my research.

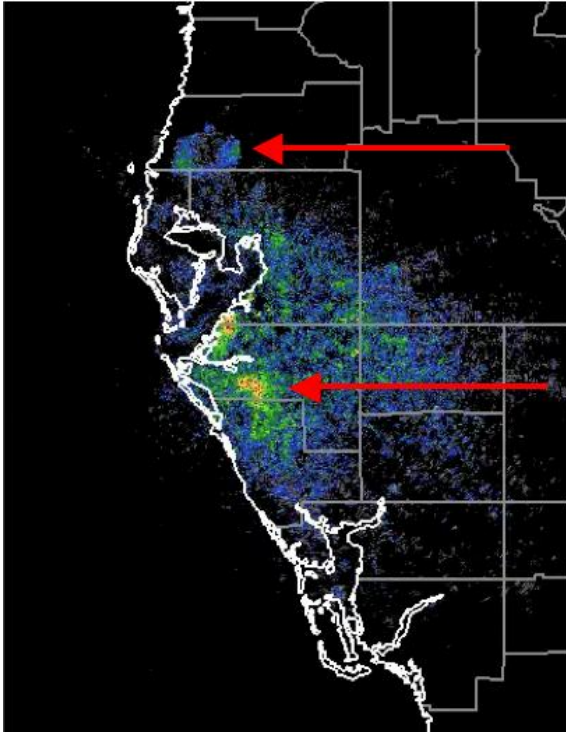
Most of the large swallow roosts during the winter are found either in Louisiana or Florida. I'm very interested in what sort of habitat Tree Swallows prefer to roost in throughout Florida. Do swallows roost in sugar cane fields in Florida, or is this a Louisiana-specific phenomenon? What sort of vegetation besides cattails or phragmites do roosting swallows use?

If you see any Tree Swallow activity during the winter in Florida, I would certainly like to hear about it (email me at the above address). I'm interested in the exact locations of the roosts, what sort of vegetation is used, and the approximate size of the roost (this is very hard to estimate once the roost exceeds ~20,000 birds!). Many thanks to those on various Florida bird listservs who have already helped me locate historical and regular roosts throughout Florida. Your help is much appreciated!

For more information, please contact Andrew J. Laughlin, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. pileatus@gmail.com

*(See figures on Page 3)*

## Tree Swallow Roosting Ecology, continued



**Figure 1.** (*Left*) NEXRAD weather radar image. This image shows the ascension of two Tree Swallow roosts on a morning in mid-January, 2010. The top roost (just north of Tampa, FL) depicts the distinctive “ring-echo” as the swallows disperse in all directions to feed for the day. The bottom roost (just north of Sarasota, FL) is larger (hence the brighter colors), and shows a northeasterly bias in flight direction.

**Figure 2.** (*Below*) Tree Swallows descending at nightfall into the sugar cane fields near Vacherie, LA, 2009, showing the typical “swallow tornado” pattern as they enter the roost. Photo Credit: © Michael A. Seymour/Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries



## *Fall Meeting in Tallahassee a Success, by Jim Cox*

The fall FOS meeting in Tallahassee was another fine example of the great gatherings this organization hosts. Approximately 90 birders from throughout Florida and even more distant lands heard great presentations on ornithological history, research, and trivia, and the banquet presentation by Dr. Felicia Coleman was one of the most succinct, informative, and energetic reviews ever provided for this summer's massive Gulf oil spill.

Highlights from field trips included sightings of scores of migrating raptors as well as Bell's Vireo, Wilson's Warbler, Piping Plover, and more than a few 300-year-old pine trees (on the Wade Tract). One participant who traveled all the way from Tennessee added 14 species to his Florida list, and many people added at least 1 life bird during the weekend.

Eight students competed for cash awards and other prizes at the scientific presentations on Saturday. Clark Jones, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia, took first place for his investigations of Bachman's Sparrow movements in different landscapes. Angela Tringali

took second for her work on the effects an urbanized diet has on Florida Scrub-jay health and plumage, and Derrick Thrasher took third for his work on habitat associations of Painted Buntings.

Selecting a winner was a difficult decision because all presentations were top-notch, and each student walked away with a subscription to the Florida Field Naturalist, two special publications, and a great deal of experience and positive feedback on their research projects.

The Board made great progress on several fronts, including developing some initial plans for a second Breeding Bird Atlas Project and continuing the North American Migration Counts on a more Florida-friendly schedule. Look for more on these in the near future. Better yet, come to the next meeting in the Tampa area on March 12-14 and experience the great fun and camaraderie first hand. FOS is the place to learn tons more about all those colorful creatures out there.



*FOS members birding on a field trip at the Fall 2010 Meeting. Photo by Adam Kent*

## *BBA Moving Ahead, by Tom Palmer*

The update on the Florida Breeding Bird Atlas is moving ahead.

A committee chaired by David Stock met in September in Gainesville to begin planning. Expect to hear more details at the Spring 2011 meeting.

Rick West has volunteered to be state coordinator.

The first-ever Florida Breeding Bird Atlas field work occurred from 1986-1991 and involved more than 1,700 persons.

The next BBA is intended to find out what changes have occurred during the past two decades.

For a fuller discussion, see my article in the Spring-Summer 2008 issue of the Snail Kite at <http://bit.ly/bjN4Oe>

If we're going to do a new Florida Breeding Bird Atlas we need a new logo, a flag under which we can head out to do our work.

If you are good at graphics or want to run the idea by a friend who has some design skills, send your ideas to me. I'll compile them and forward them to the committee.

I don't think there's any money in it, but the creator of the winning design will be given proper credit in the publication for their work.



**Pictured above is the old BBA logo. What do you think the new one should look like?**

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## *Bird News*

A federal judge has denied motions to dismiss a lawsuit filed by the Aransas Project against the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Birders United reports.. The suit charges that the state of Texas harmed endangered whooping crane populations by restricting the flow of fresh water into their winter habitat. In the winter of 2009, 23 whooping cranes died while in Texas, nearly 10 percent of the last remaining natural flock of the endangered bird. The suit charges that the action of the commission resulted in high salinity and depleted food supplies in the bays where the cranes spend the winter. The ruling allows the case to proceed to trial, which is now set for March 2011.



*Whooping Crane. Photo by Dominick Martino courtesy of Friends of Paynes Prairie*

## *Bird News, continued*

Ten common loons outfitted with satellite transmitters are being used to aid researchers' study the migratory movements and feeding patterns of these birds as they migrate through the Great Lakes toward their winter homes farther south.

By using satellite tracking devices implanted in the loons from Wisconsin and Minnesota, USGS scientists expect to learn essential information about avian botulism needed by managers to develop important conservation strategies for the loon species.

"This study will also help managers better understand how loons fare as they head to their wintering grounds along the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic coasts," said USGS scientist Kevin Kenow, of the Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center (UMESC) in La Cross, WI. "Right now, little is known about habitat use along their entire migratory routes."

In addition to satellite transmitter-marked loons, about 70 other loons will have geolocator tags, which will record daily location, temperature, light levels and water-pressure data that will log the foraging depths of these diving birds. "This information will help shed light on how avian botulism may work in the food web on the Great Lakes," said Kenow, the leader of the migration project.

Botulism, which has caused more than 80,000 bird deaths on the Great Lakes since 1999, causes paralysis and death of vertebrates who ingest neurotoxin produced by the botulism bacterium. The USGS study on avian botulism on the Great Lakes, funded by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, will examine the pathways by which fish and birds acquire botulinum toxin from Great Lakes food webs and determine how avian botulism outbreaks are related to environmental variables such as water quality and food web structure. Avian botulism outbreaks have resulted in periodic and often huge die-offs of fish-eating birds since at least the 1960s, but outbreaks have become more common and widespread since 1999, particularly in Lakes Michigan and Erie.

"Understanding feeding patterns and exposure routes of waterbird species at high risk for botulism die-offs, such as the common loon, is central to understanding how botulism exposure happens in the aquatic food chains in the Great Lakes and to eventually identifying what drives botulism outbreaks," said Kenow, "Only then, can we help provide tools to prevent or lessen such outbreaks."

Movement of loons from previous studies carrying satellite transmitters can be followed online at the USGS UMESC website. Loon movements from the current study will be available later this summer.

More information on avian botulism can be found at USGS National Wildlife Health Center website.



*Common Loon.*  
Photo by Adam Kent

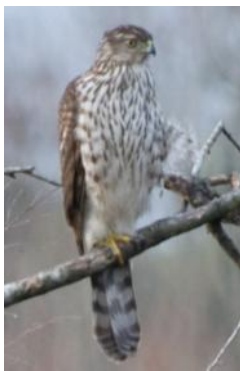
**Movement of loons from previous studies carrying satellite transmitters can be followed online at the USGS UMESC website.**

## *Bird News, continued*

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has denied a petition calling for a ban on the production and distribution of lead hunting ammunition. EPA sent a letter to the petitioners explaining the rejection – that letter can be found here: <http://www.epa.gov/oppt/chemtest/pubs/sect21.html>

Steve Owens, EPA assistant administrator for the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, issued the following statement on the agency's decision:

“EPA today denied a petition submitted by several outside groups for the agency to implement a ban on the production and distribution of lead hunting ammunition. EPA reached this decision because the agency does not have the legal authority to regulate this type of product under the Toxic Substances Control Act, nor is the agency seeking such authority.”



*Cooper's Hawk.*

*Photo by Lauren Deaner*

The Florida Keys HawkWatch Project at Curry Hammock State Park on Little Crawl Key was resurrected by the Hawk Migration Association of North America. The volunteer effort lasted September 15 through October 31. For more site information and data, go to [www.hawkcount.org](http://www.hawkcount.org) and click on "month summaries" and choose Curry Hammock State Park

Southeast Partners in Flight is pleased to announce the launch of a new field guide to web technologies for bird conservation. The guide is targeted at manager and administrator alike and provides simple, one-page summaries of a variety of general web tools (e.g., blogs, news feeds) as well as specific web-based applications (e.g., Facebook, eBird). Each summary provides a short overview of each technology, highlights of its strengths and weaknesses, examples of how each technology is being used in bird conservation, and links to sites with more detailed information. Users can download the entire guide or individual summaries as PDFs at:

<http://webtechguide.sepif.org/>

**The guide provides summaries of a variety of general web tools as well as specific web-based applications**

## *From the Editor*

Here's a fun game anyone can play.

What was the most unexpected Florida bird sighting (species or location) that you can recall personally?

I warn you, if you don't send an answer, you may have to read mine.

--Tom Palmer



*Royal Terns. Photo by Lauren Deaner*

## Requests for Assistance

The USFWS would like to enlist the help of local birders in identifying significant sea/shorebird habitat (focusing on fall and winter use) along the Mississippi, Alabama and Florida Gulf Coast down to Cedar Key. An easy way to report the coordinates is from the website <http://mapper.acme.com>. Pan around until the crosshair in the center is on top of the area, then report the coordinates displayed in the lower right.

Send your sites and a description of the species that use the area directly to [steve\\_holzman@fws.gov](mailto:steve_holzman@fws.gov).



*Short-billed Dowitcher.*  
Photo by Lauren Deaner



*Loggerhead Shrike.*  
Photo by Adam Kent

Members should be alert for wintering Loggerhead Shrikes that were marked in Ontario as part of a recovery project. Birds will have an extensive area of their breast colored in green, blue or purple. All released birds, and a large proportion of the wild population, are also color banded. If you see a shrike with a colored breast and/or wearing bands.

Please report it to Wildlife Preservation Canada at [jessica@wildlifepreservation.ca](mailto:jessica@wildlifepreservation.ca)

Include details about specific location (GPS coordinates are ideal, but not essential) and color(s) (breast and/or bands) seen.

The Florida Bluebird Society sponsored a statewide Bluebird Blitz Nov. 20-21 to provide the society with a better idea on the location and abundance of Eastern Bluebirds in Florida. For more information about how to get involved with the Society, go to: [www.floridabluebirdsociety.com](http://www.floridabluebirdsociety.com)



*Eastern Bluebird.*  
Photo by Adam Kent

## Preliminary Review of Florida's Threatened Wildlife Under way by FWC, continued

(Continued from page 1)

FWC staff member, the reports will be sent for review to national and international experts

for each wildlife species. However, before the Commission removes any species from the list, a management plan will have to be written and approved. One goal of the management plans is to ensure the species never reaches a high risk of extinction again, which would result in the need to re-list the species.

The reviews in Florida are still under way for many of the remaining 61 species, and the preliminary findings will be available sometime in early December. The Commission could consider staff recommendations as early as April.

“This is a huge effort on the part of the teams, and the process is working very well,” Haubold said. “But this does not mean our work is done – far from it. We still have lots to do to ensure no species ever goes extinct in Florida.”

“When a species is delisted – no longer in danger of extinction – it is truly a reason to celebrate,” Haubold said. “It means Florida’s past efforts to increase protected and well-managed habitat, educate the public and manage the population have resulted in the very best possible scenario: a species brought back from a high risk of extinction.”

The bird species undergoing review are:

American oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*)  
 Black skimmer (*Rynchops niger*)  
 Brown pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)  
 Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*)  
 Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis pratensis*)  
 Least tern (*Sterna antillarum*)  
 Limpkin (*Aramus guarana*)  
 Little blue heron (*Egretta caerulea*)  
 Marian’s marsh wren (*Cistothorus palustris marianae*)  
 Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)-Monroe County population only  
 Reddish egret (*Egretta rufescens*)  
 Roseate spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*)  
 Scott’s seaside sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus peninsulae*)  
 Snowy egret (*Egretta thula*)  
 Snowy plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*)  
 Southeastern American kestrel (*Falco sparverius paulus*)  
 Tricolored heron (*Egretta tricolor*)  
 Wakulla seaside sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus juncicola*)  
 White-crowned pigeon (*Patagioenas leucocephala*)  
 White ibis (*Eudocimus albus*)  
 Worthington’s marsh wren (*Cistothorus palustris griseus*)

**Before the Commission removes any species from the list, a management plan will have to be written**



White Ibis. Photo by Lauren Deaner

## *Watch for Banded Birds from Spill*

With large numbers of birds being rescued, treated, and relocated in the Gulf States as a result of the BP oil spill, people seeing banded birds are asked to report sightings. As part of this unprecedented unified response to the BP oil spill, we are asking the public to help report oiled wildlife, as well. A large percentage of captured birds are being successfully treated and released back into the wild. These birds are being fitted with leg bands that provide identifying information to assist Federal scientists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey and other organizations in studying these birds after release.

Scientific information being collected from this oil spill will expand the scope of knowledge that bird researchers and other scientists will have in the future to help ensure the health of migratory birds. Among other information, scientists will learn the extent to which released birds return to their original habitat.

Birds are released only after wildlife specialists determine they are sufficiently prepared and exhibit natural behavior including waterproofing, self-feeding, normal blood values, and are free of injuries or disease. They are released in appropriate habitats where human disturbance is minimal. While the birds are often released in the Gulf area, they are released as far as possible from areas affected by the BP oil spill. Choosing release sites is complicated; biologists want to make sure that birds are released into the same populations from which they came, but with as little risk of getting re-exposed to oil as possible.

All birds released from rehabilitation are banded for identification purposes. Ultimately, scientists use information gleaned from reports of banded birds to help answer a host of questions. Among those questions are: How long do formerly oiled birds survive? Where do the birds travel? Do immature birds select locations different than breeding-age adults? Do captured birds return to the area where they were captured? Do rehabilitated birds breed in future nesting seasons – and where?

Birds from the BP oil spill are banded with metal federal leg bands with a unique ID number. In addition, brown pelicans also receive a large color leg band. Three colors of leg bands are being used:

- Orange bands with no identification numbers or letters.
- Red bands with identifying numbers and letters.
- Pink bands with identifying numbers and letters.

People who see the birds are asked to report sightings to the National Bird Banding Lab online: <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/default.htm> Reporting the band number and the bird's location will help biologists understand the movements and survival of the birds after their release.



*Brown Pelican. Photo by Adam Kent*

**Snail Kite is published by the Florida Ornithological Society as an information exchange among those interested in the conservation, research and enjoyment of birds in Florida.**

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Learn more about birds, improve your birding skills, support research and conservation of Florida birds, interact with Florida's leading birders and researchers, participate on great field trips, and contribute to our knowledge of Florida avifauna! Fill out the form below and mail it to **Peter G. Merritt, 8558 SE Sharon St., Hobe Sound, FL 33455-7230** or visit:

<http://www.fosbirds.org/Membership/Membership.aspx>

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Student: \$15; Individual: \$25; Family: \$30; Contributing \$45; Library/Institution \$40; Individual Life \$400; Family Life \$500

FOS only accepts checks. Please make checks payable to: Florida Ornithological Society or [join online](#) via Paypal!

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