



Sun City Center Audubon Club

January 2026

President's Corner

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

Hope to see everyone in the Community Hall on January 3, 2026, at 9:30.

Keep in mind that our presenter will be Justin Matthews, of Matthews Wildlife Rescue. Justin will be telling us about Florida wildlife and displaying some non-human friends. If you have family staying for the holidays, please consider bringing them along. Children and guests of members will not have to have a CA visitor pass as this is an open meeting.

I would like to welcome Sheri Cameron, our new vice president. Thanks for volunteering. We are still in need of a program chair. WE have many talented people on our board, and everyone will help any new board members with any new positions.

If you are wondering how we spend our dues and donations, here's a quick breakdown. Dues help to pay our expenses, which include coffee, sugar, creamer and paper products; postage, copying and general office supplies; website costs; honorariums to speakers.

We also split the maintenance costs of the CA trail with the CA. We use some dues money, donations, and the 50/50 raffle money for this. Trail costs are @\$3000.00/year. Last year the company that helps maintain the trail did some work pro bono. In 2026 we are looking at what needs to be done. Melanie Higgins is our conservation chair and schedules maintenance with the CA.

REMINDER

Membership dues are needed by the February meeting; we need to give our membership numbers to the CA in March. Have a safe and happy new year.

Pam Viner, President

Field Trip Report

On December 15, 30 members of the club boarded a bus and headed to the Florida Botanical Gardens in Largo. We were greeted by two docents and led on a tour. Then we stayed for the Holiday Light show. Many trees and gardens were decorated in Holiday lights, it was lovely. They also had live musicians playing Holiday music. Everyone had a good time. Then we went to Olive Garden and had a good meal. We returned at @10pm. Thank you all who participated.

2025-26 Programs

January 3, 2026

Community Hall

Birding in Africa

Steve Burkholder

President of Eagle Audubon

February 7, 2026

Manatees

Stan Kroh, Manager

Land and Water Programs, TECO

March 7, 2026

TO BE DETERMINED

April 4, 2026

Alligators

Kent A. Vliet, Ph.D.

Coordinator of Laboratories,

Department of Biology

University of Florida



FLORIDA BOTANICAL GARDENS FIELD TRIP







We would like to introduce you to our new 2026 SCC Audubon Board.

**Pam Viner, President &
George Viner, Treasurer**

Have been involved with Audubon Club since 2017. We have participated in a lot of field trips and overnight trips. We have been on the board for 3 years.

We have been married for 39 years and have two children: Elissa is a DNP (doctor of nursing practice) in Saratoga, NY, where she is a wound care specialist. Erik teaches high school social studies and history at his former high school. He is married to Emma who works for an insurance company. He is an avid birder. He lives in Stephentown, NY in the home he grew up in. We have no grandchildren but we have lots of cats, dogs, chickens, and a horse.

Betty Giles, Secretary

Betty Giles has lived in Sun City Center since 2011 with her husband, Tim and joined the club a few years later. She has been the club's secretary since Nov. 2018. Betty grew up in Rhode Island, then moved to Virginia where she taught elementary school for 25 years. Besides watching birds at feeders and out in nature, Betty loves to sing in the Women's Chorus, make greeting cards, and play Scrabble.



Betty Giles, Secretary
Sheri Cameron, New Club Vice President



George Viner, Treasurer
Pam Viner, Club President

Change to January Program, our speaker will be Steve Burkholder, President of Eagle Audubon and co-leader of the Tuesday morning birding expeditions in Kings Point. We want to thank Steve for pinch hitting due to the last-minute cancellation of our scheduled presenter.

**Birding in Africa
Steve Burkholder, President of Eagle Audubon**

This recount of a two-month birding expedition in Tanzania and Kenya during Spring 2025 will focus on avian diversity with a secondary emphasis on iconic African wildlife. Observations, enriched with photos, will highlight unique behaviors and habitats. The talk will address conservation challenges and the interplay between avian and mammalian life, inspiring attendees to appreciate and support East Africa's biodiversity.

Island Sanctuaries in Tampa Bay are for the Birds!

by John Perian, Publicity Chairman

Desolate, sand and shell dumping grounds of dredged bottom soil in Tampa Bay and vicinity have been given a new purpose in the natural order of things. After the shipping channels are deepened and the islands of dredged spoils are made, they are then refurbished with mangrove seedlings, tree and shrub plantings, bull rushes and breakwaters.

Jeff Liechty discussed the evolution of these manufactured bird habitats at the SCC Audubon Club's meeting Saturday, December 6th, in the South Campus Community Hall at South Pebble Beach Boulevard.

Liechty is manager of the Audubon Society's Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries. He and Audubon Florida partners up with other Tampa Bay organizations, like TECO, DUKE Energy, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and Port Tampa Bay, with the help of numerous volunteers, to enhance the viability of these vital avian island retreats.

Most of these island sanctuaries are off limits to kayakers, boaters, drones and their operators, and other visitors. The isolation gives the myriad colonies of wading birds and shore birds an undisturbed chance to make their nests, raise their young and provide a resting place and source of food for White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, Reddish Egrets, Brown Pelicans, Cormorants, Anhinga's, Oyster Catchers and other birds.

Some of these sites include what's known as "The Alafia Banks" - a vital protected bird sanctuary and Critical Wildlife Area (CWA), at the mouth of the Alafia River in Tampa Bay near Gibsonton. They include Bird Island and Sunken Island, which were made with dredged sediment and spoils in the 1920's.

Other nearby "Plop" islands made from dredged sand include "2D" and "3D" Islands near the mouth of the Hillsborough River, east of the Howard Frankland Bridge. They are also restricted bird sanctuaries. Green Key and Whiskey Stump Key (later developed into Davis Island) are also in Hillsborough Bay and were part of the original Tampa Bay Sanctuary Islands.



Roseate Spoonbill

Liechty said that people and their watercraft are required by law to stay at least 100 feet away from these man-made islands, that are now covered with trees, shrubs and other plants. Thousands of wading birds and pelicans use these protected sites for roosting and nest sites, especially during the breeding season.

"They are a hotspot for biodiversity and rare species like the Reddish Egret, which was completely wiped out in Tampa Bay in the early 1900's, by Plume Hunters," he said. "Entire colonies of these beautiful birds were shot for their feathers, which were used to decorate women's hats."

"They would slaughter the entire colony of birds with small bore rifles and shotguns during the breeding season," he added. "When they finished wiping out the concentration of wading birds, the mutilated bodies of adults and chicks littered the islands. The feather trade was an extremely lucrative business."

In 1886, for example, it's estimated that more than 5 million birds were shot and killed for their feathers. The "Plumes" in 1915 sold for \$32 an ounce, which was the price of gold at the time.



Reddish Egret



Melanie Higgins, SCC Audubon Conservation Dir. & Jeff Liechty, Florida Coastal Island Sanctuaries

In 1934, Liechty said, Fred Schultz became the area's first Game Warden. He had a shotgun, a rowboat and his dog with him, while he patrolled the restricted wildlife areas and monitored the nesting wading birds.

The first casualty of the wading bird plume hunting era occurred in 1905. A former Plume Hunter turned game warden, Guy Bradley, was murdered, when he confronted hunters in the illegal feather trade.

"A water bird colony is a group of large, noisy and stinky birds," Liechty explained. "They lay their eggs and nest on islands covered by lush mature trees, shrubs and mangroves. These rookeries are also separated from most mainland predators, by the waters of Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico."

"They can't just make their nests in your backyard oak tree," he said "they need a safe place, where for months they can sit, lay their eggs, forage for food, and raise their young in peace. Protected from bobcats, coyotes, raccoons and other predators that like to eat eggs and young chicks."

The other interlopers the nesting birds have had to deal with are people. Most of them unintentionally disturb the nesting pairs, who then fly away. And, sometimes the chicks get frightened and fall out of the nests. Then they get lost in the underbrush and starve, he said. Other natural and human actions adversely impact the island habitats. Hurricanes, lesser storms, sea level rise and the wakes from ship traffic in the bay can destroy the mature growth of trees, shrubs and mangrove forests. The crashing waves and high winds knock down the foliage and destroy the habitat. This makes the islands susceptible to erosion.

In an effort to help control the effects of erosion on some of the island sanctuaries, Liechty said Audubon Florida and its partners in Tampa Bay have been placing specially made concrete "reef balls" in the water off of the mudflats and island shorelines. They are hollow inside, with holes spaced at intervals all over the units, which provide habitat for oysters, smaller fish and crustaceans.

"In recent years," he said, "we've installed over two miles of these breakwater concrete barriers over five different sites. They are manufactured on the mainland and moved to the drop sites. They are lined up, one after the other, about 20 yards offshore. So, the foraging areas for the birds is kept intact. But the concrete balls help to break up the wave action, which decreases erosion on the islands."

Some of the reef balls are six feet tall and weigh about 8,000 pounds. The smaller ones are only about 20 inches tall. "We scale things to the environmental conditions," he said. He showed another image to the enthralled audience of one of the concrete units, that were covered in oysters of various sizes.

"We call these breakwater balls the Living Shorelines, because although we're placing concrete spheres into the shallows just offshore of these bird nesting islands, they are designed to work with nature - not against it. And, in a matter of a few months they become covered in oysters and other mollusks, that provide food for shorebirds. Even blue crabs have been seen foraging over the balls."

"It takes a lot of money and work to make these reef balls and then place them in the right spots to do the most good," he said. "But they've proven to be a really effective way to preserve these sites."

Another significant problem to shorebirds, like the Brown Pelican, is their deadly encounter with fishing lines. Old, discarded lines with rusted hooks and hardware often become entangled in their feet, feathers or their beaks.

"Brown Pelicans are sort of the poster children for fishing line entanglement. Sometimes a fisherman accidentally hits the large, soaring birds with a baited hook or lure. Or when a Pelican or gull or other shore bird tries to steal the bait."



Roseate Spoonbills Resting on a manmade island in the Alafia

When the hook becomes imbedded in the bird's bill, it becomes immediately problematic for the bird, as well as the angler. Some fishermen make the mistake of just cutting the line. Then the bird has a sharp hook stuck in its mouth, while it trails a length of braided or monofilament fishing line. Sometimes the birds eventually become so entangled in the line, that they become immobilized, or can't swallow their prey and can't take care of themselves.

"It's really heartbreaking," he said. "If the impaled bird is able to fly back to its island colony with the fishing line trailing behind it, the line can become entangled in the mangrove branches, where the bird can die. Then the other birds in the colony can potentially also get entangled in the mess."

Audubon Florida and other organizations are attempting to mitigate the problem by educating the public with brochures and signs posted at busy angling sites, like the Skyway Bridge Fishing Piers, marinas and other favorite fishing sites. The information explains in simple detail and images how to safely remove the hook and line, without hurting the bird.

"Feeding fish parts to pelicans and gulls is also an activity that is discouraged," he said. "The birds then become habituated to being fed by humans. They get used to people feeding them fish scraps. This seemingly harmless behavior increases the chances that these birds will become entangled with discarded fishing gear at some point in the future."

"We partner with Tampa Bay Watch and use volunteers to go with us to over 40 islands each fall, when the birds are not nesting. We usually retrieve over two miles of discarded fishing gear each year. That's an incredible amount of fishing line, that's posing a future danger to the birds."

These island sanctuaries in Tampa Bay and its estuaries, as well as the barrier islands between the mainland and the Gulf, are extremely important to Florida's residents, tourists and wildlife. They are a hotspot for migratory and native birds and provide exceptional nesting and roosting sites. These island havens have also been attracting threatened and endangered species, like the Reddish Egret and Roseate Spoonbill. Audubon Florida has been working to protect and monitor the water bird populations in Tampa Bay since 1934.

The Great Egret is used as the emblem of the National Audubon Society for good reason. It's to honor these beautifully plumed birds, that were nearly hunted to extinction, because of the value of their feathers. Liechty's office is under the jurisdiction of Audubon Florida, which is itself the state office of the National Audubon Society.

Anyone who would like to make a donation to Florida Audubon or contact Liechty for more information can email him at jeff.liechty@audubon.org or mail your inquiry to him at Audubon Florida, 107 South Willow Ave., Tampa, FL 33606. You can also call him at 813-623-6826.



January 2026

Kathy Ambs
Nancy Amoroso
Irene Brogan
Mary Buccilli
Kimball Cleveland
Patsie Ginley
H. Frankie Greise
Barbara Harte
John Lampkin
Donna Machmer
Linda Marx
Mildred McClary
Robert Monahan
Phillip Price
Nancy Renfrow
Jo Ann Wilkinson



Reminder for Volunteers

If you are helping with setting up, please be at the hall by 8:30am.

If you are helping at a table, (sign in, donations, dues) please arrive by 8:50am.

Looking forward to seeing all of you in December.

Sun City Center Audubon Club Officers & Committee Chairs 2025-26

www.sccaudubonclub.com

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| <i>Treasurer</i> | <i>George Viner</i> |
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| <i>Field Trips</i> | <i>Sabine Prather</i> |
| <i>Master Birder</i> | <i>Ray Webb</i> |
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| <i>Historian</i> | <i>Clara Clancy</i> |
| <i>Membership</i> | <i>Joanie Swartz</i> |
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| <i>Publicity</i> | <i>John Perian</i> |
| <i>Merchandise</i> | <i>Laura Butler</i> |
| <i>Name Tags</i> | <i>JoAnn Wilkinson</i> |
| <i>Previous President</i> | <i>Alan & Nancy Renfrow</i> |

Alfia Banks Island Bird Sanctuary with its concrete reef ball breakwater & Visiting Bald Eagle



Living Islands in Hillsborough Bay