



Sun City Center Audubon Club

November 2025

President's Corner

I can't believe it's November already. We have some great speakers and field trips lined up for our coming year. I would like to remind everyone of our mission statement:

The purpose of this Club is to promote an understanding of and interest in all wildlife and the environment that supports it; and to further the cause of conservation of natural resources for the benefit of posterity.

Hi, Neighbor!

It is being held on November 6. Please stop by our table and say Hello to our volunteers.

Remember to go to our website:

SCCAUDUBONCLUB.COM to view our schedule of events and to sign up for field trips.

We are still planning a three-day trip; the committee is currently looking at a couple of sites to visit. Thank you for your patience.

Dues are \$15.00 and payable now through February.

Hope to see you all in the Florida Room on Saturday, November 1

Coffee: 9:15 am

Meeting: 10:00am

Speaker: Tom Ries

Ecosphere Restoration Institute

Regards,

Pam Viner, President

2025-26 Programs

November 1, 2025

Springs Restoration

Tom Ries

Ecosphere Restoration Institute

December 6, 2025

Community Hall

Regional Wading Bird Surveys

Jeff Liechty, Sanctuary Manager

Audubon Florida, Florida Coastal Island Sanctuaries

January 3, 2026

Community Hall

Native and Exotic Wildlife

Justin Matthews

Matthew's Wildlife Rescue

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

*Happy
Thanksgiving*



Speaker **HOWARD HOCHHALTER**, by John Perian, Publicity Chairman.
Free photo images from Google

Andromeda Galaxy



People have gazed up to the stars for hundreds of thousands of years. Before we settled down and built villages and cities, the night sky was an explosion of sparkling white lights and larger, closer celestial bodies, like Venus, Mars and the Moon. Today, the world's night sky is dimmed by the ambient light of hundreds of thousands of homes, cars, skyscrapers and industrial plants. Despite that "light pollution," most of us are as intrigued and drawn to gaze at the heavenly bodies, as our ancient forebears.

Some people may wonder, though, why a club that studies avian wildlife in our area of Florida would be interested in the planets, stars and other objects in our solar system and the rest of the universe. Most likely, we aren't just curious about Ospreys, Scrub Jays and Palm Warblers. We also have a strong desire to learn about other things in nature, the earth, and the extra-terrestrial universe.

One such expert in the cosmos was the guest speaker at the SCC Audubon Club's October 4th meeting in the Atrium. Howard Hochhalter is a self-taught astronomer and astrophysicist. Originally from the Washington, D.C., area, he and his family live in Myakka, where he has a better view of the night sky.

He gave an enthralling slide presentation of the known universe, and an in-depth explanation of what lies out there, beyond Earth's atmosphere.

He met his wife, Kristen, when he moved to Florida. After perusing some astronomy catalogues, she suggested he get a small telescope to start his inquiry into astronomy. It was a factory second, battery-operated six-inch reflector scope.

"That night," he said. "I managed to get the planet Saturn in my view. My life was changed forever. I wanted to walk around and wake up everyone in my neighborhood at 10:30 at night, so that they too could take a look at Saturn."

The next day, he excitedly coughed up the money for a stronger, more elaborate telescope. He said that it resembled a six-foot cannon. Most of the cost is to pay for the "Mount." That's the mechanics of the scope, he added. It has all the gears, that turn it and tract the stars and planets.



Earth from Space

He subsequently joined the Suncoast Stargazers, a large, very active and knowledgeable group of astronomy enthusiasts from the Bradenton, Sarasota and Venice areas of the Suncoast. It helped him better understand the celestial phenomena that he was observing at night with his new telescope.



Saturn from the Cassini Space Station

"I started to look at the stars, planets and galaxies as something more than just pretty things," he said. "I wanted to understand what they were, why they were there, and what they were doing in the greater scheme of things."

Soon, he was studying astronomy and astrophysics on his own. Another member of the Sunset Stargazers club happened to work at the Bishop Museum of Science and Nature in Bradenton. The fellow wanted to have weekends off and asked Hochhalter if he wanted to work his weekends on a part time basis.

"He thought I was very good at communicating astronomical concepts. So, I said 'Sure!'" Hochhalter wound up working there for the next fourteen years. "I started off cleaning the bathrooms. Then I became a planetarium operator, then a manager. The last seven years, I was functioning as the Planetarium Director."

As director, he was charged with creating content, producing shows, programming, as well as a media relations officer. He even had an astronomy column in the Sarasota Herald-Tribune newspaper for a couple of years. Although he currently works for the U.S. Postal Service, he continues to spend time speaking about astronomy topics, as a volunteer NASA Solar System Ambassador to the public.

"It's engaging the public at events like this," he said, "about the stars, planets and galaxies in our own solar system and beyond. Not just astronomy topics, but also about NASA Programs, where your tax dollars are going and what NASA is spending it on."

He then dived into the bulk of his presentation, which was about the stars that make up the constellations, the planets in our solar system, and galaxies near and far. He also explained why you shouldn't expect to see a star or planet in the same position in the sky all year round.

"The winter sky and the summer sky are much different," he said.

"The earth is constantly moving 360 degrees in 365 days. So, essentially, the earth moves a bit less than one degree each day. Everything you see in the sky tonight will be one degree closer to the western horizon tomorrow. The position of the stars are constantly changing, because of the earth's rotation and its orbit around the sun."

Then he started discussing the multitude of constellations, which were identified by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Many of those names were taken from ancient mythology. It takes a good imagination for someone today, to visualize a cluster of stars that the ancients believed looked like Pegasus, the winged horse, or Perseus, holding the head of Medusa. The night sky was their television and movie screens, Hochhalter explained. There was also less "light pollution" then, from cars, buildings and factories. So, they had an unobstructed view of the stars.

Astronomers use about 88 official constellations to map and divide the nighttime sky, to make it easier for people to locate stars and other celestial objects. Besides the ones that were just mentioned, there is also the constellations Arcturus or Ursus the Bear, Leo the Lion, Aquila the Eagle, Aquarius the water carrier and Lupus the Wolf.

To put it in better perspective, Hochhalter asked the group, "Did you ever look at a cloud in the sky and imagine what it looked like to you? Your mind tries to connect it to something you understand, like a camel or a dog. Those clouds are like a visual 'Rorschach Test' in the sky. You see what your mind shows you. The ancient Greeks and Romans did the same thing."

He then changed the image on the screen and showed the audience the mythological image of Andromeda, the Greek princess, who was chained as a sacrifice to a sea monster, but who was saved by the hero Perseus.

"The Andromeda Galaxy is the nearest spiral galaxy to our Milky Way, about 2.5 million light years away. It's also known as Galaxy M31." Just as a side note here. Andromeda is larger than the Milky Way, and it contains about one trillion stars. By comparison, our Milky Way "only" has an estimated 100 to 400 billion stars. One day, he said, in the distant galactic time calendar, Andromeda and the Milky Way will converge and become one, much larger Galaxy.

The Andromeda Galaxy, despite being a couple of million light years away, can still be seen with the naked eye. Provided there is a very dark night, with no moon, or any of the ambient artificial light from a city or town obstructing your view. And, you have to know exactly where to look.

In the Fall and Winter months, Andromeda is located in the northeastern sky, between the square of the constellation Pegasus and the "W" of Cassiopeia. It will look like a small, fuzzy smudge of light.

Hochhalter said that a good pair of binoculars, with a stabilizing staff or tripod, or a good telescope, will make the constellation easier to identify and visualize. A much better rural location, away from city lights, will help immensely, he added.

Some of the better areas in South Florida, to see the night sky include secluded places like Big Cypress National Preserve, the Everglades, Myakka State Park, Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, Ocala National Forest and Dry Tortugas National Park. The boat ramp before entering Fort DeSoto National Park in Pinellas County, is another option to observe the night sky over the Gulf of Mexico. It's about the best alternative that is closer to the Tampa Bay area, even though it's affected by light sources in St. Petersburg and Bradenton.



Besides the sun and our moon, the brightest star in our skies above Tampa is the Red Giant star "Arcturus." It's only 37 light years from earth. It's the brightest star north of the celestial equator, and sparkles like an orange globe. You can find Arcturus by following the handle of the Big Dipper towards its end. Keep looking past the handle. It should be fairly easy to spot, since it's even brighter than Polaris, the North Star.

What exactly are "stars?" The speaker went on to explain in detail.

"Stars are born in immense clouds of hydrogen and helium gas and dust called 'Nebulae.' They are found throughout the galaxies. If stars were a snowball, the gas cloud would be in the center trying to steal more snow."

Over time, gravity squeezes the gas and dust together into more dense clumps. As these clumps grow, so does the gravitational pull. Eventually, the gas cloud collapses in on itself. That dense mass of gas and dust then heats up and becomes a dense, hot core called a "Protostar." It's the first stage in the formation of a star.

As that Protostar gathers more and more mass from its surroundings, the core becomes hot enough for nuclear fusion to begin. Then it starts to shine and glow, and eventually becomes a real live, honest to goodness star! Any left-over dust and gas can form planets, asteroids and comets.

"Human beings have only existed on earth for a short period of time," he said. "Probably about 315,000 years. Stars, planets, asteroids and comets have been around since the beginning of the universe." The ubiquitous "Big Bang" created the known universe about 13.8 billion years ago. Many of the stars and planets that we've observed throughout the millennia have lived and died, long before we came on the scene. The time it takes for starlight to reach the earth varies depending on the star's distance from the earth. For example, light from our sun takes about 8.3 minutes to reach us. The next nearest star is Alpha Centauri, which takes 4.3 years to reach earth. The light from more distant stars can take hundreds, thousands or even millions of years to reach us. And some of the lights we see came from stars, that have long ago gone "supernova" and exploded.

"So, we can see them as they are born and observe stars at the end of their existence," Hochhalter said. "We've learned to understand what's happening to them on the inside. We don't have to actually go there to determine the life of that star."

Just the light we see from a star can tell us a lot about a star's nature, he added. One instrument that's used to analyze a star's light is called a "spectrometer." It breaks down light into a spectrum of colors, that reveals information about its composition, temperature, velocity and other properties.

"If you've ever wondered where the atoms of the Periodic Table come from," he said, "they all come from the stars. If you have any gold today, it was not made on the earth. It was deposited into a solar nebulous during a supernova explosion. That gold you have was born in the death of a star billions of years ago."

There are eight planets in our solar system, he explained. In order for a planet to be like the earth or Mars, it has to be spherical in shape and orbit the sun. It also must clear its orbit around the sun of other objects of comparable size. Pluto, for example, used to be considered a "Planet." Not anymore. Today, it is referred to as a "Dwarf Planet," because it's orbit actually goes through the "Kuiper Belt" of icy objects beyond Neptune. It doesn't orbit in a clear path around the sun.

So, our first planet is Mercury, which is 36 million miles from the sun. Then Venus - 66 million miles from Sol. Earth is next and about 93 million miles away. Then comes Mars at 150 million miles from our star. Jupiter is 500 million miles away. Saturn is about 900 million miles from the sun. Uranus is just under 2 billion miles away. And Neptune lies just under 3 billion miles from the sun. And Pluto? Because of its elliptical orbit around the sun and through the Kuiper Belt, its distance varies from about 2.8 to 4.6 billion miles away.

Hochhalter says one of his favorite planets is Saturn. "If it weren't for its rings, though, it would be one of the most boring planets, because there isn't a lot going on at its surface." A surprising note about Saturn's rings are their size. While its rings are composed of billions of ice and rock particles from shattered moons, comets or asteroids, its main rings are unbelievably shallow. Some areas are less than 10 meters thick (30 feet). Denser regions of its A and C rings are only 20 to 50 meters thick (150 feet). The other gas giants in our solar system also have smaller, less spectacular rings. They aren't very visible from earth, because they are so far away.

Mercury and Venus, however, can be seen almost every day with the naked eye, he said. "The only time you will ever see them is in the early morning or early evening. Either right before the sun sets, or right before it rises in the morning."

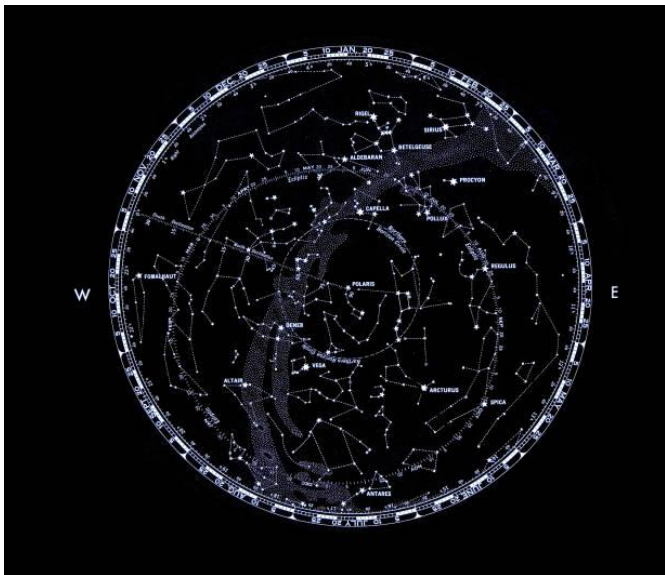
A true "Renaissance Man," Hochhalter has seen and done a great deal in his life so far. He was a former U.S. Marine Corps Assault Amphibious Section Leader (Sgt) during the first Gulf War. After his service obligation with the Corps, he moved to Australia and worked as a nightclub manager for a couple of years. He moved back to the States in 2000. He pursued an education in Computer Networking and Management. After finishing school, he worked for two years with a defense contractor in Northern Virginia. In 2003, he finally got tired of ice and snow and moved to Florida.

Cont'd Howard Hochhalter

He and Kristen have three daughters and a son. All four children were named after stars, constellations or noted historical figures in astronomy. His oldest daughter's name is Mira, for the variable star found in Cetus. His next daughter's name is Stella, the Latin for Star. His 15-year-old daughter's name is Lyra, for the Harp constellation. And his 10-year-old son is called "Tycho," after the 16th Century Danish astronomer Tyge Ottesen Brahe. Even the family's pet dog is named Luna, after our moon!

Here in Florida, Hochhalter said, the best time to view the night sky is in the Fall and Winter months. The heat and humidity these days in South Florida's summer months limits the time most people can stand being outside. But, the Stargazers are still able to host a July daytime event called "The Summer Doldrums." During that time, the club brings out its Solar Telescopes, to show the public what our sun looks like in a wavelength called "Hydrogen Alpha." That's a deep red visible wavelength, that allows astronomers to see features such as solar flares and vast, glowing loops of plasma, called "Prominences," that extend from the sun's surface into its outer atmosphere called the "Corona."

More information about astronomy and the celestial bodies, as well as the Suncoast Stargazers, can be found on the internet.



Northern Light Sky with Polaris Arcturus

Meeting Saturday, November 1, 2025 Springs Restoration By John Perian, Publicity Chairman

The Sun City Center Audubon Club will welcome Tom Reis, President and Founder of the Ecosphere Restoration Institute at Ulele Springs on the Tampa Riverwalk, adjacent to the Water Works Park. Reis will give a presentation entitled "Springs Restoration," at the Audubon Club's next meeting Saturday, November 1st, at 10:30am, in the Florida Room of the Atrium Building, off of North Pebble Beach Boulevard.

Tom Reis is a nationally known Ecologist. He has more than 37 years' experience helping to restore more than 2,400 acres of natural wetlands systems in Southwest Florida. In 2013, Reis was granted the prestigious National Wetlands Award in Conservation and Restoration from the Environmental Law Institute in Washington, D.C. He established the Ecosphere Restoration Institute in 2007, to advance reclamation activities in Florida, through innovative public and private partnerships.

Reis will begin his presentation "Springs Restoration" after a brief club meeting at 10am. A social pre-meeting for members and their guests, with coffee and pastries, will start at 9:15am.



Field Trips Past and Future

By Sabine Prather

Our field trips began again this summer without the leadership of our master birder, Ray Webb. His extensive knowledge of not only the native birds here, but of the places where they can be found, cannot be replaced. I miss him already and hope he will feel better enough to join us in the future.

In June, several of us went to the Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI) in Tampa. We enjoyed an informative planetarium show and spent a little time in the museum for their mythical creatures exhibit. We were joined by hordes of children for their summer camp field trips! A couple of us checked out the short trail behind the museum, but it was turning very hot.

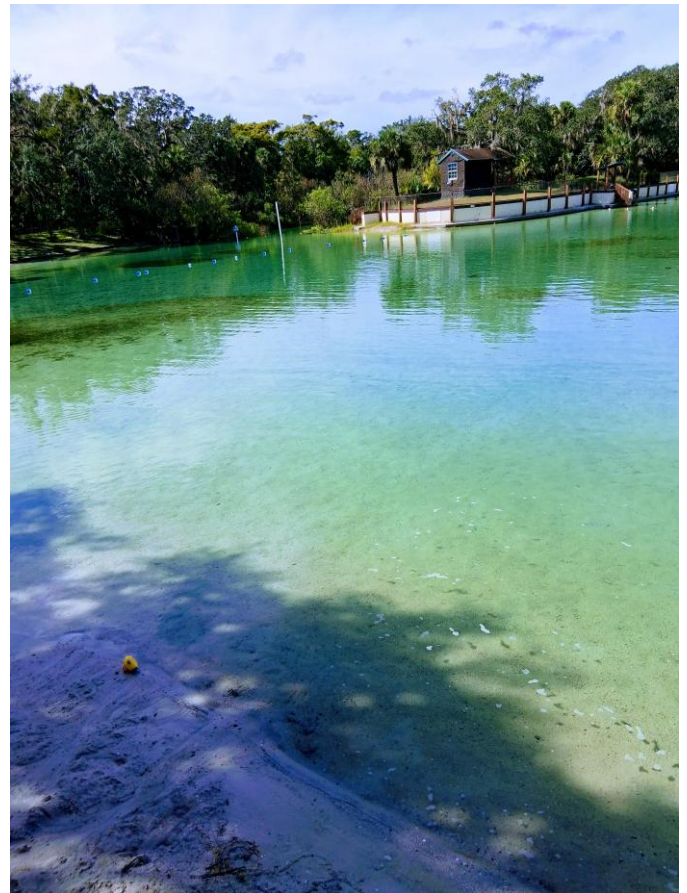
July was to be a peaceful sunset cruise run by Latitudes, a company out of Apollo Beach that has always been good to us. Unfortunately, the afternoon summer storms forced us to switch to a lunch cruise. About half the group that signed up was able to attend the changed itinerary. We got some good photos before the storms came in and we saw several birds – and dolphins.

August was a tough month for field trips – only three of us ended up going to the St. Pete Museum of Art. This is a very special museum, and we were treated to a private guided tour by a docent – very cool. Afterward, we walked to the St. Pete Pier shuttle and rode to the end, where we enjoyed a lunch with a view at the Teak.

In September a few of us finally ventured out on the trails, walking a bit in Fishhawk Creek Nature Preserve. We saw a red-bellied woodpecker and heard a red-shouldered hawk, blue jay – and many cicadas. It was still the hot season, so we were happy to soak afterward in Lithia Springs in the same preserve. We had the place almost to ourselves – it is a relatively undiscovered gem.

October brought the first meeting of the year and a trip to Circle B Bar Reserve. It was once a cattle ranch, where the rancher drained the wetlands for dry land for the herd. In 2000, Polk County and the [Southwest Florida Water Management District](#) jointly acquired the land. After the purchase, the land was restored from pastureland into its historic marsh ecosystems, and the reserve opened to the public in 2006. We were able to secure a tram that transported us around the trails with a volunteer who gave us information on the reserve.

We saw and heard many birds on the trails, including dancing sandhill cranes. Other birds sighted or heard were the Snowy Egret, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Little Blue Heron, Tri-colored Heron, Red Shouldered Hawk, Kingfisher, Cormorant, Anhinga, Common Gallinule, Blue Jay, Gray Catbird, Osprey, Northern Cardinal, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Red Bellied Woodpecker. We had a wonderful lunch afterward at a restaurant recommended by our guide, the Catfish Country. They were able to accommodate the 10 of us with no problem!



Lithia Springs

Next month, in November, the speaker will be talking about springs. So our field trip will be an urban spring in Tampa, Ulele. We will stroll around Waterworks Park, check out the spring, and perhaps walk on the Riverwalk a short way. We will have lunch at Ulele Restaurant, next to the spring. In December, we will be visiting the Florida Botanic Gardens in Largo. A docent will take us on a guided walk in the afternoon and we will enjoy the Christmas lights afterward. They suggest a \$10 donation to help maintain the gardens. We may have enough people to rent a bus.



Great Blue Heron – Circuit B Bar Reserve

In 2026, January will be either Felts or Rye Preserve, February will be the Manatee viewing area in Apollo Beach, March will be Venice Rookery and Shamrock Park, and April, again, we will check out Fort DeSoto Park.

A gentle reminder; please sign up for the trips online (click Submit when you finish) or at the meetings. I will send an email reminder a few days before the trip with directions. I will not be making phone calls, so please check your emails!

*Your humble field trip coordinator,
Sabine Prather*



Raptor Center of Tampa Bay will be at the

Fire House Cultural Center

101 1st Ave N.E. Ruskin FL

November 8, Saturday from 1:00pm to 4:00pm

Fun for everyone

See website for details

firehouseculturalcenter.org

Upcoming Field Trips

Tuesday, November 18

Ulele Springs

Sign up today Visit:

WWW.SCCAUDUBONCLUB.COM

REMINDER FOR VOLUMTEERS

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

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

Looking forward to seeing all of you in November



**HAPPY
BIRTHDAY!**

November Celebrations

Lauralei Collier

Ann Fenimore

Dave Greise

Paul Kopf

Russell Moody

Marjorie Parker

Richard Parker

Sabine Prather

Nancy Stanton

Tom Verth

Janice Wohlrab



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

www.sccaudubonclub.com

President

Pam Viner

Vice President

Secretary

Elisabeth Giles

Treasurer

George Viner

At Large

Linda Floyd

Patsie Ginley

Field Trips

Sabine Prather

Master Birder

Ray Webb

Refreshments

Pat Dean

Historian

Clara Clancy

Membership

Joanie Swartz

Conservation

Melanie Higgins

Newsletter

Denise Rosen

Publicity

John Perian

Merchandise

Laura Butler

Name Tags

JoAnn Wilkinson

Previous President

Alan & Nancy

Renfrow

