



January 2026 Newsletter

PASCO AUDUBON

Upcoming Events

Saturday, January 3rd

8am Bird walk in Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park. Meet in the Education Center parking lot - p 1

11am Feature Presentation: Attracting Birds to Your Backyard with Sanam Mehra
p 1

Saturday, January 10th
Birding-by-Bike on the Pinellas Trail - p 2

Saturday, January 17th
Field Trip to Circle B Bar - p 3

Saturday, January 24th -
Photography Club Outing to John Chesnut Sr. Park - p 2

Saturday, January 31st
-February 1st Birding weekend in the Panhandle - p 4

Our web address is:

www.pascoaudubon.com

Our Facebook Page is:

Pasco Audubon

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Pasco Audubon Bird Board



Sanam's Macaw, who will accompany him

Attracting Birds to Your Backyard with Sanam Mehra

Our first presentation of 2026 will be on attracting birds to our backyards, and will be brought to us by Sanam Mehra, Master Gardener Volunteer with the UF/IFAS Pasco County Extension. The best home landscapes should fit the needs of humans, but also provide for wildlife of various kinds. Most yards can host a plethora of species, making for very interesting wildlife-watching! Just a few easy changes to landscape can help attract birds to our backyards. In this session Sanam will cover bird behavior, benefits that birds bring to our backyards, and an overview on how to provide for a habitat for birds in your backyard. And Sanam will be bringing with him his companion Macaw (see photo above), who enjoys attending his presentations. This presentation will be held at the Starkey Environmental Education Center in Starkey Park at 11am on January 3rd.

As always, there will be a bird walk in Starkey Park from 8am the same morning - meet in the Education Center parking lot. You'll be back at the center to enjoy brunch!

Birding-by-Bike: January 10th on the Pinellas Trail

For our January Pasco Audubon Birding-by-Bike outing, we will meet at the Brooker Creek Preserve parking lot and travel across Keystone Road continuing north on the Pinellas trail. I plan to bike a little further than our usual ride so that we can check out the trail between Trinity and SR 54. eBird reports that 50 species were identified in this area over the last 30 days.

This is a great place to see our winter visitors.

We will meet at 8:00 AM at the parking area at Brooker Creek Preserve and travel north up the Pinellas trail.



Eastern Meadowlark by Bob Burkard

Camera Club: Updates and Field Trip to John Chesnut Sr, Park by Noriko Buckles

We had a wonderful time getting together and seeing everyone's photographs. We discussed a few things that I would like to share with you. I do apologize for the technical difficulties I encountered.

1. We now have a logo!! Thank you Hal and Anthony
2. Next meet-up will be at John Chesnut Sr. Park on Jan 24th @ 7:30 am. We will meet at the Dog Park parking lot.
3. I will contact New Port Richey Library to see if they can accommodate us for the bi-monthly meeting.
4. Costa Rica bird/photography tour will be March 17-24 2027. If you are interested please let me know at nbucklesphoto@gmail.com.

Have a wonderful Holiday season!



January 17th: Field Trip to Circle B Bar Reserve



American Bittern by Pat Misajet



Painted Bunting by Anthony Marella

One of our perennial favorite field trips is Circle B Bar Reserve in Polk County. We typically find a wide range of birds here, supplemented by other species such as raccoons and alligators. For those who have not been before, we usually break into two groups, depending on the length of walk you'd like to undertake. The shorter walk is about 3 miles, and the longer walk typically more like 5 miles, so do allow the full morning for this activity. While we plan to head out on the trail at 8am, we do advise arriving early, as there are often wonderful birds to see (such as Barred Owls and Painted Bunting) in the area around the trailhead and welcome center.

The walk will take us across marsh land and along the shore of Lake Hancock. The close-up opportunities with wildlife make this a great opportunity for photographers as well as birders. Just checking my eBird report from last year's field trip showed that we walked 3.3 miles over 4 hours (which probably included time at the trailhead and picnic area) and saw 55 species of birds, including appearances by American Bittern, Northern Harrier, Roseate Spoonbills, Painted Buntings, Purple Gallinules, Green Herons and Black-crowned Night Herons!

There are portable restrooms at the trailhead, as the welcome center with regular facilities doesn't open till later. Please bring water, and it's a great idea to bring snacks or a picnic to enjoy on the shaded picnic tables at the end of the walk. No food is sold on the premises, so I recommend you bring all you'll need with you. Please do not leave valuables in your car in this location.

Last year a number of us decided to continue our trip at nearby Lake Morton, and saw Mute and Black Swans, Ruddy Ducks and Redheads in addition in a group of American White Pelicans at very close quarters. We'll do this again this year for anyone interested in extending their birding trip a little.

The walk will commence at 8am on Saturday, January 11th. The address of the reserve is 4399 Winter Lake Rd, Lakeland, FL 33803. Please reach out to me at president@pascoaudubon.com if you have any additional questions. While registration is not necessary and all are welcome to this free event, we do recommend letting us know that you plan to attend so that we can keep you updated. The photos on this page were taken on last year's trip to Circle B Bar.

Our Panhandle Weekend January 31-February 1, 2026 by Christine Rowland

This year our weekend birding trip will be held over the January 31-February 1 weekend. This time around we're heading up to the Panhandle, where a Saturday visit to St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge will form the anchor of our visit, but we'll also take in a couple of other hotspots. The Panhandle does see some birds we do not get in the Tampa Bay area, and we'll certainly be trying to take in some of those while we're there.

Kimberly Snaric, who moved recently from our own area, is looking forward to sharing some of her new favorite places to bird with us. It's always good to have a local show us around! While 'the main event' will be a full day Saturday and Sunday morning through lunch time, we know that some of you will want to arrive the day before (it's about a 4 hour drive from New Port Richey) in order to take full advantage of the opportunity. I'm sure we can arrange a late afternoon/evening birding experience for those who arrive early and would enjoy that.

Kimberly has arranged for local expert Juli DeGrummond to be our guide for the weekend, so we will optimize the time we spend there.

The closest town to St. Marks is Crawfordville, which is probably the best place to stay. A simple internet search will provide you with several options nearby. Anthony and I have a reservation at The Best Western Wakulla Inn and Suites, which has reasonable rates. We hope that you decide to join us on this adventure. Please feel free to reach out with questions or to register to

Report: December 13th Birding-by-Bike in Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park by Bob Burkard

Our December Pasco Birding-by-Bike outing was at Jay B. Starkey Wilderness. I love this location and always enjoy seeing Brown-headed Nuthatches and Eastern Bluebirds. Palm Warblers were there in large numbers and we observed another one of my winter favorites, a Swamp Sparrow.

We identified 29 species of birds.



Brown-headed Nuthatch by Phil Duncan



Red-bellied Woodpecker by Bob Burkard

While the report from our West Pasco Christmas Bird Count will not come until next month, we're happy to share this account with you from Mary Keith, who's team braved cold conditions to bird via airboat in Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park - sounds like it was quite a ride!



Cecilia Dumois and Mic McCarty on the airboat

Christmas Bird Count – by Airboat! **by Mary Keith**

I was asked what's it like to bird by airboat. It is NOISY! That big V-8 engine behind you roars. You wear noise-cancelling earphones, which makes it dicey to communicate with the other birders and the pilot. Hand signals are important. When he turns the motor off, your ears will still ring for several minutes, along with the ticking of the cooling engine for a bit. Then it is the silence of marshes or the gulf waters, and the calling birds and splish-splash of little waves on the boat. After several minutes of silence, you play the tapes and hope a rail or a sparrow calls back. Repeat several times, then move to the next spot.

It is WINDY! You'll get windburn on your face for sure. Glasses are a must to protect your eyes. It can be FRIGID if the weather is cold. A wind-breaker jacket is a must. It can be bumpy if you're skimming over waves, or smooth if you're sliding over calm water. And it is EXHILARATING! An airboat can take you into back corners of the marsh where even a kayak wouldn't get you. And sitting high on the airboat gives you a vantage point to look over and through the flocks of birds before you get close enough to scare them off. When you round a corner in the boat trail and a Black Rail flies across the bow of the boat, you gasp, then it's high-fives!

The rangers at Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park have taken us out for at least 5 years, searching the salt marshes for Black Rails. We've seen and heard them several times. This past week the water was very low and we couldn't get into all the back creeks we usually visit. But we rounded a corner into a lagoon and over 80 Wood Storks plus hundreds of ibis and egrets lifted off like a huge white cloud. Sand spits into the Gulf held shorebirds galore, plus gulls and terns. It's a different way to bird, a different way to move through their habitat. If you have the chance, be prepared, but take the chance!



Rufous Hummingbird by Don Fraser



Northern Harrier by Don Fraser

East Pasco Christmas Bird Count - December 17, 2025 by Don Fraser

The 36th annual East Pasco Christmas Bird Count was held on December 17th. The count circle, roughly centered on San Antonio, was covered by four teams of birders. The team of Don Fraser, Christine Rowland and Pat Goldberg worked the area east of U.S. 301. We started before sunrise at Withlacoochee River Park, where we played tapes of Great Horned Owl and Eastern Screech-Owl. Although we were unable to elicit a response from either of these species, our first bird of the day was a curious Barred Owl, who flew into a nearby tree to check us out. A brief stop at the river produced a Hermit Thrush. We then drove south along Auton and Singletary Roads, periodically checking roadside hedgerows for wintering sparrows. This produced a nice Grasshopper Sparrow and several Vespers among dozens of Savannahs. Scoping of a recently ploughed field north of Enterprise revealed several distant American Pipits, a bird that is often missed on this count. A male and female Northern Harrier quartering in a field gave us fantastic views and great photo opportunities.

We found Red-headed Woodpeckers at two different spots, a very encouraging sign for a species that is not always observed in our portion of the count circle. Two White-crowned Sparrows, our number one target bird, made an appearance at their usual spot but there were fewer present than in past years.

We briefly left our count area to check out a Rufous Hummingbird that Bill Pranty and Dave Bowman found visiting honeysuckle flowers at The Grotto at St. Leo's. After getting great photos of this western rarity (a new bird for the count), we returned to our area and checked a couple of ponds along River Road, where we found over 130 Blue-winged Teal, with another 30 Green-wingeds mixed in. Unfortunately, the American Bittern that Christine and Don had seen there a couple of weeks earlier was a no-show.

After reviewing the overall list with the other teams over lunch, we checked several large ponds in Dade City, finding our only Roseate Spoonbill and Glossy Ibis of the day. On our way to check a known heron roost in Zephyrhills we made an impromptu stop at a large pond on Wire Road.



Vesper Sparrow by Christine Rowland



White-crowned Sparrow by Christine Rowland

To our amazement it was teeming with Hooded Mergansers (we estimated there were at least 360!) and seven species of herons/egrets engaged in an intense feeding frenzy. While scanning the Hoodies Don found a lone drake Canvasback, only the second time this diving duck has been recorded on the count. Canvasback is rare in Pasco at any time of the year but to find one so far inland on an urban pond is truly remarkable. Our delight was quickly overshadowed by another call from Bill, this time to report a Snail Kite (another count first!) that he and Dave had just found on Happy Hill Road. We headed straight there and observed the kite successfully hunting for apple snails over a large lake. A great way to end a very successful count!

Other count highlights were two Baltimore Orioles, four Painted Buntings and several Soras. Although Bill Pranty, the count compiler, is still awaiting final lists from all the teams, he estimates that the total will probably reach about 125 species this year, a little below average.



Hooded Mergansers on Wire Road

Pasco Audubon Bluebird Project Update by Bob Burkard

Eastern Bluebirds are year-round residents in this area of Florida and during the winter here in Pasco County, they form small flocks and switch from eating insects to eating more berries and fruits like sumac, holly, and grapes. They will often use nest boxes or natural tree cavities to roost together to stay warm during cold nights.

Interestingly, while they form social flocks, they also defend a winter-feeding territory, especially around berries and other food sources. They are less aggressive to other bluebirds than during their breeding season, but still protective of their feeding areas.

We are planning to update 12 of our Pasco Audubon Bluebird Nest Boxes for the upcoming 2026 Eastern Bluebird nesting season and are currently building new boxes to replace 6 of the older metal boxes with those more appropriate for our hot Florida summers.

Summary of Nesting Cycle in Pasco County

- Scouting for nest cavities: Starts in January
- Nest building: Starts in February / March. The female builds the nest, which takes about 2 - 6 days
- Egg laying: The female lays 4 to 6 eggs, usually one per day
- Incubation: The female incubates the eggs for 12 - 14 days
- Hatching: Eggs hatch over a 24 – 72 hour period
- Fledging: The young birds leave the nest 16 - 21 days after hatching
- Subsequent broods: The female may start a new nest shortly after the previous brood
- The birds will remain in this speckled plumage until they molt into their first adult plumage later in the summer or fall



Eastern Bluebird in Starkey Wilderness Park

Location	Number of Boxes at Location
Aripeka Road Weeki Wachee Preserve	3
Heartwood Preserve - Starkey Blvd	4
Hudson Sugar Creek	3
Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park Bike Trail	4
Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park Edge of Timber Greens	2
Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park South of Entrance Road	12
San Antonio Elementary School, San Antonio FL Hwy 54	1
Seven Springs Golf & Country Club	3
Timber Oaks Common Area	1
Trinity College	2
Veterans Memorial Park Hudson, FL	3
W.H. Jack Mitchell Jr. Park	4
Total	42

Link to our interactive map that show where our Pasco Audubon Bluebird Boxes are located:
[Bluebird Box Locations Map](#)



Eastern Bluebird fledge in Starkey Wilderness Park

New in 2026... by Christine Rowland

Here are some of the new initiatives we are planning to implement this year:

Purple Martin Houses

Our Board has approved the construction of a Purple Martin house, which will be built by Bob Burkard. We are investing over \$1300 in this project. Why Purple Martins? This species has been in serious decline for a while, and east of the Rockies they're dependent on humans for nesting. If Purple Martins are to nest in a box, it has to be up as they arrive in our area. The first 'scouts' can arrive as early as late January, so Bob is working fast! We have identified a preferred location for the house, and are meeting with the land manager on December 29th. Two alternate destinations have been identified should this preferred location not be available. Purple Martins are colony nesters, and one 'house' is more of a condo than anything, providing housing for 14 families.

Motus Tower

The Board has also moved to try to erect a Motus tower this year. A Motus tower monitors birds and other wildlife passing within 6 miles of it. When captured by banders, many birds are fitted with incredibly small and light tracking devices. When a bird fitted with one of these devices passes near the tower, its location is recorded. Why do this? Researchers will be able to learn a lot about migratory patterns by studying the path of these birds. Mike Kell has been leading the charge on this project and we'll keep you updated as the year progresses. We are currently looking for an optimal location for a tower.

New Birding Opportunities

Field trips and our monthly Saturday birding walks have long been a part of our Pasco Audubon tradition. Then in October 2021 we began Birding 101 - our Wednesday morning walks. In 2023 we introduced an annual out-of-town weekend birding experience (first Gainesville, then Miami - in 2026 it will be the Panhandle). In 2025 we took our first international adventure with trips to Costa Rica. This year groups of us will travel to the Central Andes in Colombia, and Southern Costa Rica. In 2027 we already have plans in the works to visit Ecuador. But this year we are offering two new birding opportunities.

The first is **Birds and Brews** - a more social take on birding where a group birds in an area, followed by gathering at a local brewery to enjoy a well-earned beverage afterwards. Birds and Brews has been long a part of the birding tradition in many Audubon chapters, and is especially popular with younger members who have to work and are not able to participate on Wednesdays, and whose schedules often make weekends challenging. We'll be starting with monthly events early this year.

The second new opportunity will be a **Big Sit** (or related **Little Sit**). In this instance we pick a single location and see how many species we can see in one day, or half-day. Needless to say, we need to pick a birdy spot. This can be great for birders to dig more deeply into an area, also good for those with mobility issues and those whose availability may be limited on the day - it's possible to drop in for a while and not stay the entire time. More about this, along with a first date, in our next newsletter.

Looking Ahead to February...

February 7th - 8am - Monthly walk in Starkey Park

11am - Fort De Soto Park with Ron Smith

February 13-16th - The Great Backyard Bird Count

February 14th - Birding-by-Bike on the Good Neighbor Trail, Brooksville

February 21st - Field Trip to Paynes Prairie, Gainesville

February 27th - Field Trip to The Celery Fields, Sarasota

Pasco Audubon Board of Directors

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