Get to Know Audubon

A Louisiana landowner since 1924.

The Audubon name is well-known in Louisiana from naturalist John James Audubon’s paintings depicting the birds and landscape he saw in the South. Across the United States, Audubon’s work has inspired millions of people to action and to appreciate birds.

The National Audubon Society has built awareness of bird-related issues for more than 100 years. The establishment of the 26,000-acre Paul J. Rainey Wildlife Sanctuary, Audubon’s oldest and largest sanctuary, was a testament to the importance of Louisiana’s natural heritage. The Sanctuary was established in 1924 and is only accessible by boat or plane.

Audubon Louisiana is part of a nationwide and internationally connected network of conservation professionals, wildlife enthusiasts, and citizen scientists. Birds are a bellwether for ecosystem health, and they play a necessary role in nature. They help regenerate forests with seed dispersal and eat insects that can damage crops.

Birds need healthy habitats and our goal is to bring together Louisianans around issues affecting birds and their environment. In this newsletter, you will find details on why birds are an important indicator of ecosystem health and how we are helping birds in Louisiana.

Join us and the 3,600 Audubon members in Louisiana who support conservation policies and practices that are balanced with the needs of our local economy and culture.
FROM THE DIRECTOR

“There’s a brand new Louisiana outpost of one of the world’s major environmental organizations, and New Orleans resident Doug Meffert is going to lead it.” - The Times-Picayune

Since my start with Audubon in 2012, we’ve built a strong Louisiana team focused on the restoration of the Mississippi River Delta and the protection of those globally significant Important Bird Areas in Louisiana. Our collaborative work with the Rainey Conservation Alliance is impacting coastal restoration and aiding coastal waterbird conservation.

Establishing the state office in Louisiana is a firm commitment by the National Audubon Society to long-term conservation and coastal restoration. Louisiana has 23 recognized and proposed Important Bird Areas. You can’t leave New Orleans without crossing an Important Bird Area. When you think about the birds that use the Mississippi Flyway, Louisiana is the last stopping point before they cross the Gulf of Mexico for hundreds of miles, and it’s the first stopping point on the way back for foraging and feeding.

We need to invest the money now, save part of the coast that we can, deal with the realities of what we can’t, and move forward. The time to act is now.

- Dr. Douglas J. Meffert, Audubon Louisiana Executive Director

OUR MISSION

To conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth’s biological diversity.

Engage communities, businesses, governments, and landowners

Conserve birds, wildlife, and habitats that support them

Restore marshes, bottomlands, swamps, islands, and shorelines

National Leadership Team Visits New Orleans for Annual Meeting

Audubon Louisiana was pleased Audubon’s National Leadership Team’s chose New Orleans as the city for its 2014 meeting, marking the first time Louisiana has hosted the annual gathering. Audubon President & CEO David Yarnold and senior leadership staff met with our team, and attendees shared thoughts on issues involving collaborations, strategic planning, climate-change initiative implementation, and diversity in our network.

When asked why Louisiana was chosen for the annual meeting, Yarnold stated he saw it as a great opportunity to highlight Louisiana’s accomplishments to our national network. Some of the leadership team were able to visit the Paul J. Rainey Wildlife Sanctuary.

A special tribute was paid to long-time employees Norm Brunswig, Executive Director of Audubon South Carolina, and Charity Krueger, Executive Director of Aullwood Audubon Center in Ohio, on their retirement. Norm and Charity both provided outstanding leadership in fulfilling Audubon’s mission. Their recognition included a Louisiana-style second-line on Royal Street in the French Quarter with a marching brass band. Charity and Norm were ordained Queen and King of the celebration!

SAVING IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

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OUR WORK

National Audubon Society Teams Up with New Orleans City Park to Create Urban Birding Corridor

New Orleans City Park is an ecological and recreational treasure within the City of New Orleans. The Urban Birding Corridor, in partnership with the Orleans Audubon Chapter, City Park, and Grow Dat Youth Farm, exemplifies the relationship between people and wildlife. Audubon Louisiana is dedicated to promoting science-based conservation, restoration, education and outreach in both rural and urban environmental settings in Louisiana.

We believe that “bird-friendly communities” can exist in urban areas by designing the natural and built environment, and we believe these areas will promote bird and wildlife conservation, as well as to support outdoor recreation and other uses.

We are removing invasive species, planting native bottomland hardwood species to support native birds, and establishing trails for educational and recreational purposes within City Park. This project enhances the existing sites at Couturie Forest and Scout Island. Bring your binoculars!

DID YOU KNOW

The Important Bird Area (IBA) program is designed to identify, prioritize, and help to conserve habitats that are important for birds throughout the world. IBAs are assigned three different levels of importance: state, continent, and global.

In response to the alarming decline of many birds and their habitats, Audubon is identifying and protecting critical places on which birds depend - part of the international network of IBAs.

Our work focuses conservation efforts in several of Louisiana’s coastal IBAs, which includes Audubon’s Rainey Sanctuary, and the Atchafalaya River Basin.

Additionally, we are working hard to reestablish Mississippi River water flows that better reflect historic water levels throughout Louisiana is vital for the long-term health of many IBAs.

GET INVOLVED

Audubon’s Coastal Bird Survey 2015 Dates Announced

January 10 to February 20
and
March 20 to May 30

Audubon Coastal Bird Survey is a citizen science program providing scientists with data to address coastal waterbirds conservation needs along the Gulf Coast. If you live near or visit the Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, or Florida coasts and would like to participate, contact ejohnson@audubon.org.

For the Kids: Swamp Stompers in Baton Rouge

Audubon Louisiana recognizes the importance of engaging the next generation in nature-related activities. To enhance kids programs each summer, we have partnered with BREC’s (Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge) Bluebonnet Swamp Nature Center and the Louisiana Bird Observatory, a program of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society.

BREC’s Swamp Stompers is a weekly summer camp for kids ages 7 to 14. Dr. Erik Johnson, ornithologist and Audubon Louisiana’s Director of Bird Conservation, gives kids an indoor presentation about birds, conservation, bird migration, and the importance of urban habitat.

Audubon volunteers take the kids through the woods to learn about native plants, insects, and habitat types. Mist nets are set up to capture birds at the swamp. The children visit the bird banding station where Dr. Johnson collects information from the captured birds, places a metal band on the bird’s leg and lets the children see these birds up close and personal.

CREATING BIRD-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Many people live in urban areas and play a critical role in supporting wildlife populations and communities. As the leading voice for birds, Audubon can inspire people to make daily choices that add up to make a real conservation impact.
Audubon Pushes for Restoration of the Mississippi River Delta

Since the 1930s, 1,900 square miles of Louisiana coastal marsh, swamp and barrier islands have disintegrated into open water.

Dams and levees along the river block fresh water and sediment from the wetlands. Channels and canals sliced deep into the wetlands let salt water in to kill plants. This globally important ecosystem is collapsing, losing its ability to sustain life, and disappearing into the Gulf of Mexico at an alarming rate.

For thousands of years, fertile wetlands at the mouth of our continent’s mightiest river have sustained nurseries for countless marine organisms, including many commercially important seafood species.

For people, wetlands offer food, energy, transportation, recreation, and protection from storms and flooding. By reconnecting the Mississippi River with its wetlands, we can build land again.

The Mississippi River Delta Coalition is committed to rebuilding a healthy, resilient and productive Mississippi River Delta so people and birds and other wildlife, that share this part of the world, will find ways to thrive well into the future.

Audubon is partnering with National Wildlife Federation, Environmental Defense Fund, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, and Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation for the Mississippi River Delta Restoration Campaign.

For more information, visit MississippiRiverDelta.org.

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Rainey Conservation Alliance a Successful Collaboration of Landowners

The Rainey Conservation Alliance (RCA) is a unique coalition of landowners and land managers working together in south Vermilion Parish to promote sound natural resource management and habitat restoration. The RCA is an example of what parties with a shared interest in healthy lands and waters can achieve together.

The Alliance represents more than 185,000 acres of contiguous marsh, forested ridges, and beach habitats in Vermilion Parish, including the Paul J. Rainey Wildlife Sanctuary.

Each member of the alliance is committed to Louisiana’s people, wetlands, waters, and wildlife. Alliance members currently include the following:

- E. A. McIlhenny Enterprises
- National Audubon Society
- Sagrera Lands
- Vermilion Corporation

RCA’s management approach places marsh integrity first, and property boundaries second. This approach allows property managers to address hydrological processes that affect their land at a regional scale instead of as separate, independent units of land.

Through the RCA, we are pioneering technologies and practices for managing coastal marsh. The RCA partners have leveraged their investments to secure funding from a variety of public and private sources to achieve more than $3.5 million dollars of on-the-ground restoration work.

Accomplished RCA projects include:

- repairing water-control structures and 55,000 linear feet of levees that protect 11,000 acres of marsh from saltwater intrusion, and
- constructing terraces in damaged sections of 7,500 acres of marsh. Terraces are used to slow water and sediments and begin rebuilding marsh.

As RCA work continues, alliance partners are pursuing large restoration projects worth tens of millions of dollars. They meet regularly with Louisiana and federal agencies to advance projects and to meet challenges affecting the entire region for a healthy, productive future for Louisiana’s people, birds, and other wildlife.

PUTTING WORKING LANDS TO WORK FOR BIRDS AND PEOPLE

Best management practices on farms, ranches, and forests hold the key to survival for certain threatened species. By partnering with landowners, Audubon can help ensure a bright future for birds and a healthy landscape for future generations.
INVESTED IN LOUISIANA
Small-dredge Demonstration Project: Creating New Marsh Terraces

The National Audubon Society is a major landowner in southwest Louisiana, and we own a small dredge to create and sustain marsh. Our dredge is not designed for commercial use, and was constructed with a simple design for anyone to use and maintain.

State and federal dollars target large projects that encompass thousands of acres while small-scale restoration can be difficult to fund or is overlooked. In 2009, Audubon commissioned construction of a dredge as a cost-effective means to put coastal restoration into the hands of local people with local concerns.

Our project is at Audubon’s Paul J. Rainey Wildlife Sanctuary in Vermilion Parish. Within the Rainey Sanctuary, Hurricane Ike gouged 16-acres of marsh, creating an open pond. We envisioned creating marsh terraces within the pond with the small dredge to reduce wave action and erosion. This will promote the growth of marsh and aquatic vegetation, creating additional habitat for birds and other wildlife.

Learning the art of mud management has been an ongoing process. Before and after each terrace is put in place, and then periodically for at least three years, the pond area will be surveyed. Vegetative growth will be measured as well as the plant species that occur. Seven terraces are planned, but the actual number of terraces to be completed is highly dependent upon weather, water levels at the time of dredging, and staff schedules.

So far, we filled 1.3 acres with the small dredge and 50 percent of this acreage has naturally vegetated in 3 years. Watch for project updates in our newsletters and Facebook posts.

HAPPENINGS
Dr. Johnson Leads Bird Banding Workshop during 2014 Yellow Rails and Rice Festival

Workshop participants at the 6th Annual festival witnessed birds using southwestern Louisiana rice fields as fall stopover habitat.

Dr. Erik Johnson and participants guided birds into mist-nets and caught Yellow Rail, Sora, Virginia Rail, King Rail, Marsh Wren, Sedge Wren, Savannah Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Swamp Sparrow.

Funds generated through this workshop helped purchase radio transmitters deployed on four Yellow Rails this year. The data will provide our first look into how Yellow Rails use the rice agriculture system in the Coastal Prairie Important Bird Area (IBA). This IBA supports some of the highest numbers of non-breeding Yellow Rails known in North America.

Learning how these secretive birds use this landscape can have important management implications and help support this species of conservation concern.

We thank Donna Dittmann and Steve Cardiff for organizing the Yellow Rails and Rice Festival; Kevin and Shirley Berken for hosting the festival on their lands. Also, thanks to Dan Mooney for tirelessly volunteering to track Yellow Rails with radio transmitters, as well as the other 17 volunteers that helped with the banding activities.

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White-Faced Ibis by Erik Johnson

Marsh section at Rainey Sanctuary, April 13, 2011

Same marsh section as above, August 6, 2014

Yellow Rail by Erik Johnson
INVESTED IN LOUISIANA

Rainey Sanctuary Full of Green Heron Nests

Despite their elusiveness, Green Herons are the new stars of a monitoring effort at Audubon’s Rainey Sanctuary.

These understudied wading birds have experienced a 51 percent decline between 1966 and 2010. As an important environmental indicator, we learn about the impacts of wetland loss and other environmental problems through their successes or failures.

Timmy Vincent, Rainey Sanctuary Manager, has become expert at finding the birds, due to living on the 26,000-acre property. The birds can be difficult to find because of their coloring, reclusive habitats, and skittishness. However, at the Rainey Sanctuary, their abundance and preferred nest placement along navigation canals makes them relatively easy to find and study.

After conversations with Vincent, Dr. Erik Johnson began monitoring the birds’ nests with the help of Karen Westphal, Audubon Louisiana’s Coastal Project Manager, and Molly Folkerts, a Louisiana State University student in Dr. Jim Ingold’s lab who did her Master’s thesis on the project. Small cameras were installed by nests to help monitor hatching successes and determine which predators were taking eggs and chicks. Due to these efforts in 2013 and 2014, over 600 nests were found and more than 250 chicks have been banded at the Rainey Sanctuary.

In addition to being surveyed and recorded on trail-cams, our Green Herons were also the subject of an Audubon Magazine article in the July/August 2014 issue. The story, featuring several Audubon Louisiana staff, received a lot of attention on Audubon Magazine’s website, as well as National Audubon Society’s national website and social media.

Watch for future updates about our ongoing effort to better understand and protect these birds.

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

Monitoring Prothonotary Warblers to Advance Life-cycle Conservation

The Prothonotary Warbler is a top conservation priority species in the eastern United States.

In 2013, Dr. Erik Johnson, Audubon’s Louisiana Director of Bird Conservation, began a project with the Louisiana Bird Observatory (LABO) and their volunteers to discover migratory routes of these warblers using geolocators.

In 2014, they deployed 21 geolocators on birds across south Louisiana.

This year, the project in south Louisiana expanded to assess the effects of habitat quality on breeding success (and annual return rates).

LABO volunteers followed 37 nests in nest boxes, and banded 72 nestlings, all of whom successfully fledged their nests.

For more information, visit LABO.org.

Prothonotary Warbler by Erik I. Johnson

A banded Green Heron chick, photo by Karen Westphal

Green Heron nest by Karen Westphal
Coastal Stewardship Program Engages Youth, Educates Local Beach-goers

Audubon's coastal stewardship program helps birds and humans share the beach in harmony. The program addresses immediate and long-term threats to nesting birds, like Least Terns and Wilson's Plovers, and is guided by on-the-ground nest and habitat monitoring, as well as tracking local, state, and national policy actions.

After monitoring bird nesting on Grand Isle in 2010 and 2011, we partnered with the American Bird Conservancy in 2012 to implement additional bird monitoring and a community education program. As the project entered its third year in 2014, we have an established presence on Grand Isle, nearby Elmer's Island, and in southwestern Louisiana.

Grand Isle and Elmer's Island Least Tern colonies increased from 220 pairs in 2012, to about 285 pairs in 2014. Elmer's Island, is a success story in conserving Least Terns and their habitat. In 2013, we collaborated with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to prevent erosion from vehicular traffic and one of the potential nesting sites became occupied with Least Terns in 2014. This was our largest and most successful area colony.

We continue to grow the coastal bird stewardship program by recruiting new volunteers, working with new partners, and expanding monitoring and future stewardship sites.

If you’d like to be involved in this program or would like to hear about opportunities to get involved, please contact Erik Johnson at ejohnson@audubon.org.

We Need You!

- Dec. 14 - Jan. 5: Christmas Bird Count
- Feb. 13 - 16: The Great Backyard Bird Count
- Jan. 10 - Feb. 20: Audubon’s Coastal Bird Survey
- March 20 - May 30: Audubon’s Coastal Bird Survey

For more information, email Louisiana@Audubon.org or visit LA.Audubon.org.

Audubon Louisiana thanks all our donors and friends for their support. A complete list of all our supporters will be printed in the 2015 Annual Report.

We invest in Louisiana

Incorporating marine sites into our IBA program, Audubon can advance policies and practices that will reduce threats such as overfishing, pollution, and other causes.