

Audubon
Western Everglades
2021
Annual Report



AWE’s Mission:

**Protecting Southwest Florida’s Natural Environment and Wildlife
Through Policy, Advocacy, Research, Education and Habitat Stewardship.**

What a Year!

Surviving in this COVID driven business context has certainly been a challenge. But AWE not only survived, we were able to accomplish some amazing things given exceptional leadership from our Board of Directors, staff dedication and financial support from our members, community businesses and foundations.

For example, as will be detailed in this Report, AWE was involved in expanding political and financial support for water projects in the Greater Everglades which will favorably impact the Western Everglades. Long delayed approval of improvements to the Rural Land Stewardship Plan, supported by AWE for over 10 years, were finally approved by the Collier County Commission. Furthermore, under terms of the RLSP 12,300 acres of environmentally significant lands in eastern Collier County were placed in permanent conservation status in return for development on 3,500 acres of cleared farm fields.

Additionally, our conservation partnership with the City of Marco Island continues to grow with our Owl Watch, Gopher Tortoise, and Winter Shorebird Stewardship programs attracting over ninety citizen-science volunteers and allowing us to continue local conservation research and stewardship initiatives that protect threatened and endangered species.

We have launched a new after-school “Conservation Leadership” program for high school students that involves field expeditionary learning and links groups of participating students through social media platforms and student authored online publications.

Also, in the second half of FY-2021 AWE received a large planned giving legacy gift from the Marjory Reed Snyder Fund. This made possible our favorable reserve position of approximately \$1.15 million as this report is issued. The intent of the Board of Directors is to utilize a portion of earnings spun off by this account to permit expansion of routine as well as new community education activities for a diverse population of Collier County students in accordance with the wishes of the donor while maintaining the principal as an emergency reserve.

On behalf of our Board of Directors and staff, I thank all who stepped up to help us this year.

Ted Rodman, Executive Director

FY-2020/2021 FINANCIAL SUMMARY (\$)	
REVENUE	
• Contributions/Grants	155,586
• Programs & Services	52,817
• Investment	34,502
• Other Revenue	25,168
Total	270,041
EXPENSE	
• Grants Paid	0
• Salaries	
– Conservation	93,565
– Staff	135,138
• General & Program Expense	83,537
Total	312,687
P&L SUMMARY	(-42,245)
FUNDRAISING EXPENSE	
• As % of annual expense	21,888 (7%)
NET ASSETS	
• Investment Portfolio	1.15 M

Audubon Western Everglades Conservation Advocacy and Policy Review

It was a surprisingly good year for Southwest Florida’s environment since AWE’s last Annual Report! In spite of COVID and necessary changes in ways of reaching and attempting to influence key decision makers in the public and private sectors, AWE and its conservation allies won a number of long championed and hard won victories. And during that difficult year AWE once again proved itself a critical member in the alliances of conservation groups contributing to the achievements below. AWE staff continued to earn their reputations as well respected sources of science driven information by decision makers, the media, other environmental organizations, and the general public. Additionally, AWE members played significant roles in demonstrating to decision makers the depth of public opinion regarding environmental protection.

Greater Everglades

In 2014 AWE officially extended its mandate to include protection of the Caloosahatchee River, its watershed, tributaries and estuary along with other waterways and wetlands north of Lake Okeechobee and in Hendry, Lee and Glades counties, and retained staff to deal with issues there as well as in the Western Everglades/Big Cypress areas whose health ultimately impacts eco-systems in Collier County including its beaches and bays, water supply/quality, the Ten Thousand Islands, Corkscrew Swamp, and other threatened environmental assets.

After another year of advocacy and provision of information to key actors in Collier, Lee, Hendry, Glades and to some extent Charlotte counties, AWE is gratified that political support for projects important to the Western Everglades has grown and that federal and state funding has been enhanced to permit significant progress. Recently over \$4 billion have been set aside for projects directly benefiting the Western Everglades. Some important examples include:

- Aquifer storage wells north of Lake O to store excess wet season runoff for when needed in dry seasons while reducing destructive blasts to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.
- Kissimmee River restoration.
- Herbert Hoover Dike rehabilitation.
- Expedited construction of the \$800 million C – 43 reservoir designed to capture and store excess runoff in the Caloosahatchee and to release it when needed to maintain adequate fresh water levels in the estuary.

\$28 Million

Annual funds authorized for Conservation Collier to buy and manage conservation lands after the 2020 referendum approval by 77% of Collier voters!

10 Years

Time AWE has been advocating for improvements to the Rural Land Stewardship Plan finally approved by the Collier County Commission.



12,300 Acres

Critical wetlands and Florida panther habitats permanently preserved in 2021 by Collier County and Collier Enterprises with support from AWE and allies.

100,000 Acres

Restored wetlands and estuaries at the 2025 completion of Picayune Strand Restoration Project advocated by AWE and allies for decades.

134,000 Acres

Rural Land Stewardship Plan Western Everglades preserves when fully implemented."

AWE Conservation and Policy Review July 2020 - June 2021

- Sea grass replanting in the Caloosahatchee.
- Projects aimed at piloting techniques for reducing nitrogen from agricultural and urban runoff.
- Enhanced funding to the suite of projects (Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan) needed to restore as much as possible of eastern central Everglades natural water flow.
- Initial improvements by the Army Corps of Engineers for lowering Lake O when it threatens to overflow in ways that more equitably share both the pain and the benefits between population centers, agriculture, and the environment.
- Moving the Picayune Strand restoration through its final stages to completion in 2025, especially advancing water quality solutions in the southwest portion. This project has had positive effects on wildlife and sheet flow and will ultimately benefit at least 100,000 acres.

Natural Resources Protection

Since its inception AWE has been dedicated to preservation and restoration of critical environmental resources and wildlife habitats. The past year has been a productive one on that front as well.

The big story in recent months was the passage of the Conservation Collier referendum in 2020 by 77% of Collier voters. This will generate \$287 million over the next ten years for conservation land acquisition. We also applaud the long delayed approval by the Collier County Commission of improvements to the Rural Land Stewardship Plan, for which AWE has been advocating for more than 10 years. In essence the RLSP provides land owners with incentives to limit building to already environmentally degraded lands while preserving/restoring the most important lands, including wetlands and wildlife habitats, in perpetuity. The improvements, known as the Five Year Review Amendments, which AWE helped to write, provide for panther and bird habitat conservation and restoration for up to 40,000 acres of farms next to habitats, and affordable housing. At build out the RLSP will protect 134,000 acres and assure that development will not exceed 45,000 acres.

During the past year the County Commission also approved 12,300 acres of permanent preserves under RLSP in the Camp Keais Strand in return for development of 3,500 acres on cleared farm fields next to Golden Gates Estates. Also approved were three new wildlife underpasses and removal of



1.43 miles of the Old Road to Immokalee and another farm road which have blocked Camp Keais Strand for decades. While not perfect, these projects and the RLSP program maintain broad connected swathes of wilderness, protect wetlands and water from the effects of rural sprawl, provide wildlife corridors, and in the view of AWE and its conservation allies are the best practical outcome for the environment.

AWE continued work with Audubon Florida to improve wetland regulatory protections at both state and federal levels. Unfortunately half of wetlands have been dropped from federal protection and passed to Florida without provision for more staff or funding to do the job. AWE and Audubon Florida are now regrouping to support revisions that would reverse these setbacks. And in the past year AWE has intensified its efforts to preserve existing, and create new, habitats for shorebirds, burrowing owls, and gopher tortoises on Marco Island and its immediate surroundings. AWE has hired a full-time biologist to assure these efforts are successful.

Sea Level Rise and Climate Change

In the past several years awareness of these two related issues has grown dramatically. Whereas previously AWE was almost alone in southwest Florida trying to inform the public and elected officials about the threats they pose and the need not only to be reactive but also proactive, more recently virtually all environmental organizations have engaged. Public awareness has become much more widespread thanks not only to the damages of storms right before their eyes but also the deliberate educational efforts led by local newspapers, Florida Gulf Coast University, and the University of Florida. As a result area politicians have become less reluctant to support efforts to take future climate impacts, sea level rise, droughts, fires and storms into account in infrastructure decisions and, less frequently, to begin to consider actions designed to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. During the past year AWE staff have consistently advocated for taking sea level rise into account in future development planning, and Board members and staff have critiqued an Army Corps proposal for armoring a few parts of Collier County against coastline flooding from storm surges while not adequately taking sea level rise into account nor the effects of inland flooding worsened by the coastal protection measures. Most promisingly, AWE and its allies celebrated the creation of the Southwest Florida Regional Resiliency Compact that includes all 14 local governments in Lee, Charlotte and Collier counties.

AWE Owl Watch Program

The AWE Owl Watch program involves research and stewardship benefitting burrowing owls on Marco Island, Isles of Capri, Fiddlers Creek, and to a lesser extent in Naples and Cape Coral. During the nesting season ending July 2021, 65 AWE volunteers monitored 380 nesting sites and it looks like we are on track to have the same number of active burrows as in 2020 with a slightly smaller number of chicks fledged. We are closely monitoring our “starter burrow” initiative that involves residential properties on Marco Island and Fiddlers Creek. If the AWE program is successful it should help sustain these owl communities as habitat is lost to development. There currently are 25 starter burrows in Marco which qualify for \$250 “Safe Harbor” payments by the City of Marco. Isles of Capri and Fiddlers Creek also have starter burrows not qualifying for the Marco incentives.

AWE’s science staff continues to analyze six years worth of data to document trends in nesting that may be influenced by urban sprawl and climate change. Among other things it has been discovered that water levels are important to the owls since they hunt for amphibians at water’s edge in golf course community lakes.



Additionally our Staff Biologist, continually checks for owl activity occurring at burrow sites and passes such information on to citizen-science volunteers for followup. She also works closely with our volunteers to manage public viewing activity. This season more green iguanas have been taking over burrowing owl and gopher tortoise burrows. We are monitoring this situation with the City of Marco as this invasive species has been increasing on the Island.

Class of 2021

- 65 Volunteers monitored 389 Burrow Sites.
- 178 pairs nested on Marco.
- 5 pairs nested in Naples Area.
- 485 chicks fledged, down from last year due to development growth on the island.
- 35 banded owls were resighted from the 100 banded 4 years ago.
- Average brood produced 2.6 juveniles.

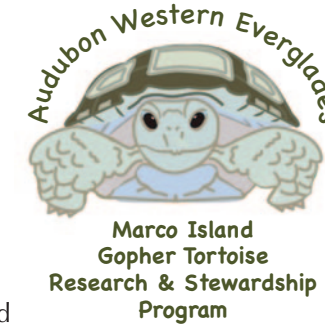


AWE Gopher Tortoise Research & Stewardship Program

The gopher tortoise is seen as a keystone species because it digs burrows that provide shelter for many other animal species. With their strong back legs and front feet specialized for digging, they are well adapted to burrowing. They are not, however, “well adapted” to crossing roads or being moved 80 miles to the only legal habitat related development relocation site for Marco Island — Glades County! Gopher tortoises are threatened with extinction in Florida and have been on Marco Island for centuries and appear to be unique in the state. Without good science guiding a proactive conservation plan for the species, we may lose this iconic animal from the island.

Consequently, AWE’s field biologist, with support from the City of Marco Island and its Beach and Coastal Resources Advisory Committee, and oversight by veteran tortoise biologist Nancy Richie, has continued surveying properties on Marco Island that have gopher tortoise burrows, which are mainly found in the uplands of the Estates neighborhoods, Key Marco and Hideaway beach areas.

Working closely with the City, we have been able



to survey over 160 sites — 53 developed properties and 108 undeveloped properties — that certainly made surveying challenging, as most were overgrown. On the burrow sites surveyed there were about 1,910 occupied and 275 that were seemingly abandoned. When we started this project, we never realized how many burrows we would encounter on a single third acre property. Some sites had over 50 burrows on the property. We intend to complete the surveying phase of the project by year end and then submit a comprehensive land study and burrow habitat stewardship plan to the City of Marco Island.

AWE is also collaborating with City Council and allies on finding sources of funding for preservation of tortoise and threatened burrowing owl habitats. As we have learned, an important added benefit of preserving lands with gopher tortoises is many of these sites are ancient Native American shell mounds with thousands of years of archaeological importance to the City, Tribes, and the State. Some also host pioneer history, as well, such as the Otter Mound Preserve, bought and managed by Conservation Collier.



This incredible group of Marco Island volunteers help monitor sites and protect the species.



Winter Shorebird Stewardship Program

AWE continues monitoring shorebirds, seabirds and wading birds at Clam Pass in Naples and Tigertail Beach, Sand Dollar Island and Caxambas Pass on Marco Island. From October through March the AWE program helps protect flocks from which are busily feeding and fattening up for the nesting season. In early summer they begin laying eggs and the birds and nests again require protection from humans who otherwise encroach too closely and from predation by crows, owls, rats, raccoons and other animals which destroy eggs or chicks. Research data from this winter stewardship season confirmed that 448 banded birds were re-sighted, the majority being Black Skimmers. Red tide affected our resting bird populations with the greatest concentrations in February.

Unfortunately, many different species of birds had to be rescued this season due to neurological issues stemming from red tide including Red Knots, Great Blue Herons, Sandwich Terns, and a variety of gulls. Black Skimmer fledglings were hardest hit with many of those having been banded earlier by Audubon Florida biologists. Hundreds of vultures helped to naturally clean up the beach by disposing of the dead fish.

On a more positive note, Sand Dollar Island seems to be serving new species as a rest and fueling stop during migration. This year, for example, was the first when a massive flock of Blue-Winged Teal was observed resting there. The wading bird population was affected this winter season by a Collier County dredging project. Before dredging began off Tigertail Beach over 200 wading birds were seen each day. Once the dredging got underway seabirds and shorebirds remained, but wading birds left to feed in other areas. However, resting flocks of shorebirds were still viewed in great numbers at Clam Pass, which continues to host some of the largest resting shorebird flocks east of the Mississippi each season.



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A special thanks to all our supporters and friends who made the commitment to care.

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Black Skimmers fishing Sand Dollar off Marco Island



12250 Tamiami Trail E. (Suite 331)
Naples, FL 34113

(p) 239.643.7822

www.audubonwe.org

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P-10 – Black Skimmers take flight, Adobe: Julia. Nesting Black Skimmers: Jean Hall. Resting Flocks: Leslie Branda.

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