



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

## NEWS RELEASE

January 6, 2010

**CONTACT:**

**Gabe Margasak**

South Florida Water Management District

Office: (561) 682-2800 or Cellular: (561) 670-1245

[www.sfwmd.gov/news](http://www.sfwmd.gov/news)

follow us on **twitter**

### **SFWMD Reports Lofty 2009 Wading Bird Breeding Season** *Wading birds an important "indicator species" of overall environmental health*



*(Click on picture for a larger version.)*

**West Palm Beach, FL** – The 2009 breeding season was exceptionally good for wading birds in South Florida, with a most noteworthy improvement for the federally endangered wood stork, according to a South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) report.

“Wading birds are among the most useful indicators of overall environmental health,” said SFWMD Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle. “Collection and study of wading bird data and trends is one of our best tools to track improvements in South Florida’s environment, wildlife and

#### **2009 Wading Bird Statistics**

- Estimated Total Nests = 77,505
- Increase from 2008 = 320%
- Wood Stork Nests = 6,452
- Everglades White Ibis Nests = 43,415

resources.”

The estimated total number of wading bird nests in South Florida was 77,505 in 2009, which eclipses the number of nests during the previous banner year (2002) by some 8,000 nests and represents the largest nesting effort since the 1940s.

Increases in nesting efforts occurred for most wading bird species and especially for the endangered wood stork, a species whose nesting numbers have raised concern in recent years. Approximately 6,452 wood stork nests were recorded in 2009, representing a 203-percent increase over the average of the past decade and a 1,776-percent increase over last year.

In 2009, the majority of wading birds in South Florida continued to use the Water Conservation Areas for breeding. Scientists noted that a large proportion of birds nested in areas used by the historic colonies in Everglades National Park – 15,432 nests – representing the largest nesting effort in the park since 1941.

Scientists also found that wading birds appear to be increasing nesting activity on the recently restored section of the Kissimmee River floodplain. This year, 1,574 nests were recorded, which is considerably greater than the 6 nests recorded last year and greatly surpasses the previous high count in 2006 of 637 nests.\*

The exceptional wading bird nesting events as observed in 2009 may be a result of extensive drought conditions in recent years. The theory, known as the “Predator Release Hypothesis,” suggests that drought reduces predatory fish densities, allowing crayfish and small fish populations – which serve as food for wading birds – to increase in size and abundance.

A key goal of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) is to restore hydrologic conditions, which will contribute to re-establishing aquatic prey densities and concentrations across the Everglades landscape. This, in turn, will more permanently support the return of large, successful wading bird nesting colonies to the Southern Everglades.

The latest wading bird report contained several additional highlights, including:

- This was the largest nesting effort recorded in South Florida since the 1940s.
- The season represents an 83-percent increase over the average of the last nine seasons.
- Wading birds produced the fourth-highest nest count at 8,169 around Lake Okeechobee since aerial surveys began in 1957.
- White ibis nests were 101-percent greater than the average of the past nine years.

The District will continue wading bird research, including additional testing of the “Predator Release Hypothesis.” This testing will occur at an Everglades living laboratory known as the [Loxahatchee Impoundment Landscape Assessment](#), or LILA. LILA is a working 80-acre model of the Everglades ecosystem on the grounds of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

For more information, please see the [South Florida Wading Bird Report](#).

\* Because the recently restored Kissimmee River floodplain was only added to the surveys in 2005, for comparative purposes with prior years, nest counts for the region are not included in the system-wide total.

# # #

**About the South Florida Water Management District – [Celebrating 60 Years \(1949-2009\)](#)**

*The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state – 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys. It is the oldest and largest of the state’s five water management districts. The agency mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.*