



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

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Christmas Bird Count Documents 99 Species at Everglades Treatment Wetland

Popular Audubon/SFWMD birding tours offered throughout 2010



(Click on picture for a larger version.)

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West Palm Beach, FL — An Everglades restoration project maintained its status as a national bird watching destination as volunteers with the Hendry-Glades Audubon Society partnered with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to document 99 species and nearly 106,000 individual birds during the 110th Christmas Bird Count this January. Known as “citizen science,” bird counts are vital to studies of the long-term health and status of bird populations.

On January 2, Audubon and its 35 volunteers made the trip to Stormwater Treatment Area (STA) 5 just south of Lake Okeechobee in Hendry County for a day of intensive bird watching. Of the diverse array of bird species sighted at the constructed wetland, American coots were by far the most abundant — as they were in 2009 — with more than 60,000 counted. Birders also took note of 45 endangered snail kites, which are native to South Florida and the Everglades, and spotted some rarer species such as a

short-tailed hawk and a Cassin’s kingbird, a species more common in states west of Texas.

“We are honored to be part of a more than century-old tradition that helps us follow trends in bird diversity and numbers, which ultimately aids in their protection,” said SFWMD Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle. “We manage treatment wetlands to improve Everglades water quality, yet their extensive use as havens for wildlife demonstrates the significance of our restoration work.”

The District recently renovated STA-5 by enhancing plant growth and water movement through the treatment marsh to improve its ability to remove phosphorus from Everglades-bound waters. In conjunction, the District is expanding the treatment wetland by 4,656 acres, connecting STA-5 to STA-6 to the south and more than doubling water treatment capability at the site. Both of these significant efforts to improve Everglades water quality will benefit bird watching in the area.

Count Comparison Snapshot		
	2009	2010
Black-Bellied Whistling Duck	484	700
Northern Rough-Winged Swallow	685	15,000
Glossy Ibis	715	2,800
Wood Stork	138	200
American Coots	37,500	60,000

The bird count at STA-5 once again served as a prelude to another partnership year of Audubon/SFWMD birding tours that showcase wildlife and public access on lands managed in perpetuity by the District for Everglades restoration. The 6,000-acre constructed wetland, just south of Clewiston, is today one of 489 sites on The Great Florida Birding Trail. Sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the sites are selected for their prolific bird watching or bird education opportunities.

Renowned as havens for birds and wildlife, Stormwater Treatment Areas are the water-cleaning workhorses of Everglades restoration, naturally using plants to remove phosphorus from water flowing into the fabled *River of Grass*. The District operates a network of six STAs south of Lake Okeechobee with a combined area of more than 52,000 acres. Since 1994, the treatment areas have retained more than 1,200 metric tons of total phosphorus that would have otherwise entered the Everglades.

Birding, a national pastime, is also big business, with 48 million people observing birds both around the home and through vacation travel. A 2001 report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that nationwide birding generated \$32 billion in retail sales and created 863,406 jobs.

Non-consumptive bird use (non-hunting activities) supported more than 19,000 jobs in Florida in 2006, and wildlife viewing activities generated more than \$3 billion statewide that year, according to a state report. Second in the nation only to California, birding generates an estimated \$477 million in retail sales in Florida every year.

The South Florida Water Management District is steadily increasing recreational access to public lands while continuing to manage them to support environmental restoration, water supply, water quality and flood control missions. At present, the District actively manages 621,000 acres of public land. Many of these properties are in their natural state or have enhancements such as picnic tables, informational kiosks, campsites and hiking trails. For more information on recreational opportunities throughout the District's 16-county region, visit www.sfwmd.gov/recreation.

For more information on Florida bird watching, visit [The Great Florida Birding Trail](#).

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About the South Florida Water Management District

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.