



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Christmas Bird Counters Record 105 Species at Everglades Treatment Wetland**

*Hendry-Glades Audubon/SFWMD bird-watching tours continue in 2011*



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

**West Palm Beach, FL** — A wetland that cleans water flowing to the Everglades retained its reputation as a renowned bird-watching destination as volunteers with the Hendry-Glades Audubon Society partnered with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to document 105 species and nearly 99,000 individual birds during the 111th Christmas Bird Count. Known as “citizen science,” bird counts are vital to studies of the long-term health and status of bird populations.

“A healthy population of wildlife is an important indicator of the overall progress of restoration efforts,” said SFWMD Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle. “Participating in this more than century-old tradition of citizen science helps us document trends and gather data that ultimately further our goals of restoring the Everglades.”

On December 18, dozens of Audubon 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 in the STA-5-Clewiston 15-mile diameter circle, American coots were by far the most abundant – as they were during the last several counts – with more than 70,000 documented. Birders also noted 38 endangered snail kites, which are native to South Florida and the Everglades, as well as painted buntings and a burrowing owl.

The District has 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 also benefit bird watching in the area.

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 (FWC), the sites are selected for their prolific bird watching or bird education opportunities.

Audubon volunteers, with support from the District, have led 108 individual tours with more than 4,250 birders and photographers from across the world at the site.

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 1,400 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 owns 621,000 acres of land that are open to the public. 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](http://www.sfwmd.gov/recreation).

More Information:

- [Preliminary STA-5 Christmas Bird Count Report](#)
- [Full Christmas Bird Count Results Database](#) (Numbers are still being reported.)
- [STA-5 Bird-Watching Tour Schedule](#)

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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.*