

A Great Frigatebird is the central focus of the image, perched on a rocky shore. Its long, dark neck is extended upwards, and its sharp, yellowish-brown beak points towards the top left. The bird's wings are spread wide, revealing a complex pattern of dark feathers with prominent reddish-brown and white streaks. The background consists of a body of water with gentle ripples, reflecting the light. The overall composition is a full-page photograph that serves as the backdrop for the publication's title and other text.

# THE AUDUBON OBSERVER

Winter 2014-15 Edition

A publication of  
**Duval Audubon Society**

Serving Clay, Duval and Nassau counties since 1939



# Winter Programs

## General Program Information

Unless otherwise indicated, all programs are held at:  
Swaim Memorial United Methodist Church  
1620 Naldo Avenue  
Jacksonville, FL 32207

### **BEST OF ALL OF US – 75th Anniversary Photos and Potluck Dinner**

December 15 @ 7:00PM

Speaker: DAS Members

Help us celebrate our chapter's 75th anniversary. Bring a dish to the potluck dinner to share. This is also an opportunity to share your favorite birding images from your travels. Please store the photos on a jump drive. We'll start at 7:00 p.m., a half-hour earlier than usual.

### **BIRDING IN A CHANGING WORLD**

January 19 @ 7:30PM

Speaker: Carolyn Antman, President of Duval Audubon Society

How will the birds respond to shifting climate patterns? Will there be new migration routes? Will they be seeking food and rest in new areas? Will you have a different set of backyard birds? National Audubon Society released a major scientific paper on September 9, 2014 regarding birds and climate change. Learn what their scientists anticipate in the years to come and see what they think we can do to facilitate our feathered friends as the environment changes.



Royal Terns and chicks (D. Kainauskas)



Red Knots (C. Wainwright)

### **UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE MANGROVE CUCKOO**

February 16 @ 7:30PM

Speaker: Rachel Mullin, Research Biologist, Ecostudies Institute

Ecostudies has accepted the challenge of studying one of North America's most poorly known species, the Mangrove Cuckoo, a species that is extremely rare and disappearing from parts of Florida. This is a first of its kind ground breaking study - so little is known about Mangrove Cuckoos! They have been studying the ecology and life history at J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge since 2012.

# Field Trips

## General Field Trip Information

**Start Time:** All field trips start at 8AM unless otherwise stated.

**Carpooling and Directions:** Those interested in carpooling to our more distant field trips should check out our Meetup.com page for like-minded adventurers. Detailed directions and full descriptions can also be found on Meetup.com as well as on our website: <http://www.meetup.com/Duval-Audubon-Society/>

**What to Bring:** Always dress for the weather, and wear closed-toe shoes. Bring water, binoculars, camera, insect repellent, a snack, and a friend.

**Cost:** Cost for parking and/or entrance fees is indicated by a \$ symbol.

### **Saturday, December 6: Camp Tomahawk**

**Leader:** Inez Whipple (484-769-3816)

**Meeting Place:** Meet in the parking lot at 8 a.m. Camp Tomahawk is at 8419 San Ardo Road, off San Clerc Road which is between San Jose and Old Kings Road.

Camp Tomahawk Park is a hidden gem in Jacksonville. Come prepared for an easy hike along shady trails with dense undergrowth. We expect to find species of warblers, grosbeaks and orioles during migration.

### **Sunday December, 14: Sheffield Regional Park**

**Leaders:** Anne Turner (904-314-4468) and Lesley Royce

**Meeting Place:** Meet at the last parking lot by the soccer field at 8:00 a.m.

Sheffield Regional Park is approximately 385 acres with nature trails and several lakes. In winter the lakes and ponds can hold a variety of ducks, mergansers and waders. The nature trails will take us through habitat ripe for other winter visitors such as warblers, kinglets and woodpeckers. We will try to cover all the lakes and ponds and several trails through open fields and wooded areas. After covering Sheffield Park we will drive to the old M&M Dairy site and look for any species we have not seen.

### **Saturday January 3: Christmas Bird Count 4 Kids (CBC4Kids) 8AM - Noon**

**Leaders:** Debra Hill (904-612-3780) and Inez Whipple (484-769-3816) FREE, but registration is required.

**Meeting Place:** Somewhere in Clay county. Find out when you register!

Looking for something fun for the kids to do on those days during holiday break? Join us for a fun filled morning of counting birds at our first annual CBC4KIDS - Christmas Bird Count for KIDS! Register by emailing Debi at [fldeb@gmail.com](mailto:fldeb@gmail.com). Teams of 5 - 6 kids plus a local birder will set out on a trail to count as many birds as they can. At the end of the morning, all teams will tabulate their sightings and announce them as we enter the totals into eBird.org for scientific research purposes! Bring a bag lunch and join the fun! Limited to 50 kids, so register early! Registration closes on December 15th. Target ages are 8 - 16.

### **January 9/10: St. Mark's Wilderness**

**Leaders:** Joan & Richard Becker (516-359-6838)

**Meeting Place:** TBA

Join us again for this fun-filled weekend for the whole family. We'll camp just outside of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. RSVP to Carole Adams (904-403-7134) no later than January 4th.

**January 24: Crosby Saturday 8 AM - Noon**

**Leader:** TBA

**Meeting Place:** 427 Aquarius Concourse, Orange Park, Florida.

Check our website, facebook page or meetup group to find out what is happening on this Crosby Saturday. DAS is working to provide more opportunities for our members and the public to visit and help with projects at the Crosby Sanctuary. Regular work days/field trips are scheduled on the fourth Saturday of the month throughout the 2014/2015 season.

**Sunday, February 1: Cradle Creek & Castaway Island**

**Leaders:** Joan & Richard Becker (516-359-6838)

**Meeting Place:** 2921 San Pablo Road South, Jacksonville, Florida

Cradle Creek Preserve offers a canopy of old-growth upland forests, saltwater marshes, and panoramic views of the creeks that feed the Intracoastal Waterway. The Preserve provides habitat protection for endangered and threatened plant and animal species including the Least Tern, Bald Eagle, and Wood Stork. Bring a scope if you have one.

**Saturday, February 7: Fort Clinch State Park Pier**

**Leader:** Caroline Wyatt (904-261-9272)

**Meeting Place:** The entrance to the Pier. \$

This “must-see” park allows visitors to sample a wide spectrum of Florida’s bird species and habitats. The jetty is famous as a Purple Sandpiper hangout in winter. Target birds include Red-breasted Merganser, 2 species of Loons, Northern Gannet and Bonaparte. Dress warmly.

Admission Fee: \$6.00 per vehicle - limit 2-8 people per vehicle; Single Occupant Vehicle - \$4.00; Pedestrians, bicyclists, extra passengers, passengers in vehicle with holder of Annual Individual Entrance Pass \$2.00.



Purple Sandpiper (left) with Ruddy Turnstones at Fort Clinch pier (D. Hill)

**Sunday, February 8: Harris Neck**

**Leader:** Laura Johannsen (h: 904-757-8894 c: 904-982-5710)

**Meeting Place:** 5000 Wildlife Drive NE; Townsend, Georgia 31331

There are more than 2,700 acres of saltwater marsh, freshwater impoundments, mixed deciduous forests and open fields. These habitats support an amazing array of birds.

**Sunday, February 15: Guana Inner Trails**

**Leader:** Diane Reed (dreedster@aol.com or 904-829-9854) **7:30 a.m.** \$ Limited to 20, **please RSVP to Diane.**

**Meeting Place:** 505 Guana River Road. Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida 32082 -The main entrance is slightly north of the Exxon Gas Station. Proceed through the \$3 pay station and meet at the first parking lot.

We will scope the causeway area at the dam and then head towards the trail for a 1-2 mile round-trip hike.



February is a great time to visit this area. There is always the possibility of early arriving migrants and winter species are still here, so anything could show up on the trails. Dress for the weather. Map and trail information are available at Spotting scope can be used at the causeway, but not necessary for the trail hike.

### **February 13 - 16: Great Backyard Bird Count 2015**

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is an annual four-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of bird populations. Please visit the official website at [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org) for more information and be sure to check out the latest educational and promotional resources.

### **Saturday, February 21: Okefenokee NWR**

**Leader:** Debi Hill (904-612-3780)

**Meeting Place:** The main Fish and Wildlife Service entrance, located 11 miles southwest of Folkston off US 1. The great Okefenokee Swamp is the largest intact wilderness swamp in North America. We will be looking especially for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers - we found them last year!

### **February 28: Crosby Saturday**

**Leader:** TBA

**Meeting Place:** 427 Aquarius Concourse, Orange Park, Florida.

Check our website, facebook page or meetup group to find out what is happening on this Crosby Saturday. DAS is working to provide more opportunities for our members and the public to visit and help with projects at the Crosby Sanctuary. Regular work days/field trips are scheduled on the fourth Saturday of the month throughout the 2014/2015 season.



Brand new information kiosk at Crosby Sanctuary. (P. Johnson)

# Crosby Update

## The State of *Our* Crosby Sanctuary, November 2014

Nestled in suburban Orange Park in Northeast Florida are 510 acres of swamp and hammocks called Crosby Sanctuary. Owned by Duval Audubon Society, this limited access nature preserve is home to a full biodiversity of native plants, mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. This special place, now included in conservation lands mapping by Clay County and the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, provides respite amidst a busy, congested backdrop of human dominated landscapes.



Ribbon cutting for the 64 new acres donated by Taylor Morrison Company (C. Bailey-White)

Taylor Morrison (home builders) recently donated 64 acres of land contiguous with Crosby to Duval Audubon. The land was leftover from their adjacent development Orange Park Country Club, which was built in the 1990's. When they could have sold it off to the highest bidder for further development, they instead stepped up for the environment and donated it to Duval Audubon. With this holding we retain a significant buffer of mature live oak hammock between Orange Park Country Club and high quality riparian wetlands within Crosby Sanctuary. Thank you everyone for your support and fundraiser donations that helped cover closing costs.

Crosby's swamp area is dominated by bald cypress, black gum, Carolina ash, American elm, swamp laurel oak, and red maple trees. The property perimeters contain transitional areas of herbaceous marsh, pine flatwoods and several impressive live oak hammocks. Crosby's important wildlife habitats are connected to many thousands of acres of regionally significant

conservation lands, including Jennings State Forest, Cecil Habitat Preserve, Cary State Forest, and Camp Blanding, through riparian habitat corridors. These habitat corridors consist of Little Black Creek, McGirts Creek, Ortega River, and Black Creek.

The connectedness of Crosby allows wildlife utilization by wide-ranging species such as river otter, white tailed deer, raccoon, red fox, bobcat and, believe it or not, North American beaver. The beavers have lived up to their reputation and caused drainage problems by building dams across drainage culverts. We like having them around anyway!

Birds abound. It is an important breeding site for the Prothonotary Warbler, which returns from Central America each year to Crosby from April through



Yellow-billed Cuckoo (D. Cheng)



August. Rusty Blackbirds have been seen there occasionally during wintering and migration periods. There is a vulture roost on the west end of the property that has become the primary residence of local vultures, both turkey and black. It's not uncommon to see 200 to 300 vultures roosting there. In all, over 100 species of birds have been documented on the site. (See [Duvalaudubon.org](http://Duvalaudubon.org) Sanctuaries/Crosby Sanctuary Bird List). Crosby is registered as a hotspot on eBird.org. A Blue-winged Warbler was spotted there this fall.

Over the years, Crosby has provided many opportunities to Duval Audubon Society members and folks from the local community to enjoy nature and conduct volunteer service projects. In the past five years, volunteers have significantly reduced the amount of invasive species in the sanctuary. Our annual Air Potato Round-up has been cancelled due to the lack of air potatoes.

The Sanctuary has also provides us with valuable ecosystem services (for free!) such as flood water attenuation, storm water treatment, temperature regulation, wildlife enjoyment, and nutrient cycling.

The presence of Crosby as an Audubon sanctuary helped to stop a poorly planned Florida Department of Transportation road project/elevated bridge through the area in the early 2000's.

At this time the sanctuary is being used mostly for monthly field trips/workdays. Because of an issue with beavers, a trench has been cut across our main access road to allow water to flow more freely through the swamp. This trench limits access, especially during the rainy season. Future plans include bridging the trench, creating additional trails, and developing trail signage. Recently we built an information kiosk. In the meantime, the wildlife populations flourish and we at Duval Audubon Society know that we have a very special place.

To access our slideshow of Crosby Sanctuary go to [www.duvalaudubon.com](http://www.duvalaudubon.com)>Conservation>Sanctuaries>Crosby Sanctuary Blog and scroll down to Crosby Slide Show.



Crosby Sanctuary (C. Bailey White)



# Introducing Stefanie Nagid

## Your Northeast Florida Policy Associate



Hello Duval Audubon Society! I'm Stefanie Nagid, the new Audubon Florida Policy Associate. I wanted to take this moment to introduce myself and some of the projects I'm working on, but first...

I'm so excited for the passing of Amendment 1 – Florida's Water and Land Conservation Initiative! The citizens of Florida voiced a resounding YES for the protection of our natural resources. With 75% of the votes, we made it clear to the State Legislature that we will no longer put the protection and restoration of our lands and water on the back-burner. I hope everyone takes a moment to celebrate this great victory and then join Audubon Florida in our ongoing efforts to support our public land managers and ensure funding is appropriately allocated over the next 20 years.

Now, a little bit about me. I am a University of Florida graduate with a Master of Science in Interdisciplinary Ecology. I have 15 years of experience in land management and restoration, having worked for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, two Water Management Districts and the City of Gainesville. I am so pleased to have been given the opportunity to work for Audubon Florida and advocate for the conservation efforts in northeast Florida. Some of the projects I am working on in the Nassau/Duval county area include participation in:

- the JaxPort Task Force Deep Dredge meetings
- the revitalization of the Timucuan Shorebird Partnership
- American Oystercatcher monitoring and habitat enhancement research
- climate change and sea level rise discussions with public land managers
- continuing coastal shorebird stewardship

I am always looking for volunteers who want to participate as stewards or advocates for the challenges in our region and I would love to meet with you and discuss our shared interests. I can be reached at [snagid@audubon.org](mailto:snagid@audubon.org) or at 386-288-2794. Happy Birding!

### Want to have your photos in the *Observer*?

You too can have your shot (pun intended) at Audubon Observer fame in one of 2 ways:

1. Upload your photos to Meetup.com and specify permission in the comments box.
2. Submit individual photos to [inez.whipple@gmail.com](mailto:inez.whipple@gmail.com) and specify permission.

For best chances, please submit files as 300dpi CMYK in .jpg or .png format.

Label the image with your last name\_place where taken\_subject. For example: *Smith\_FtCaroline\_osprey*.





# Audubon EagleWatch

by Ann Harwood-Nuss

A Volunteer Citizen Science Program sponsored by Audubon Florida



The bald eagle is our nation's symbol and one of the largest and most majestic birds in North America. Bald eagles are native only to our continent. They suffered a dramatic decline in the 1950's due to the widespread use of the insecticide, DDT. This prompted federal protection and recovery plans, which have resulted in a nationwide increase in the population. Since DDT was banned in 1972, Florida's eagle population has increased more than 300%. From less than 100 active nests in the mid 1970's, Florida now has over 1,500 nesting pairs. Florida has one of the largest populations of bald eagles in the United States, behind Minnesota and Alaska. In 2007, bald eagles were removed from the Endangered Species list, having been declared officially "recovered". Today, bald eagles are still protected by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

under state (F.A.C. 68A-16.002) and federal laws (Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act).

Despite these successes, eagles in Florida continue to face many challenges, most of which are related to habitat loss. Florida's changing environment has resulted in a dramatic increase in bald eagles nesting in urban areas, often in manmade structures. This increased exposure to human activity and its resulting pressure on the eagle population prompted the development of the Audubon EagleWatch Program in 1992. Based at the Audubon Birds of Prey Center in Maitland, the Program started with only 22 volunteers. Today, Audubon's EagleWatch Program has over 250 volunteer citizen scientists throughout the state monitoring about 275 active eagle nests. The Audubon

EagleWatch Program seeks to monitor urban pairs during the nesting season (October-May) to record long-term nesting trends; to monitor active nest locations; identify possible disturbances or threats to nesting success (usually from human activity); and record successful fledging. Volunteers are trained in general eagle nesting biology, applicable laws, identification of nest threats, monitoring techniques and the verification of previously unrecorded active eagle nests. This data is compiled and used to assist the state's Annual Bald Eagle Nesting Survey by documenting both urban and rural eagle nesting activity, successes and failures. The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service also uses EagleWatch data to enhance their conservation and law enforcement efforts.

Audubon EagleWatch Program's recent accomplishments include:

- Monitoring 270+ nests, more than 18% of the state's population
- Utilizing over 250 informed volunteers to monitor active nest sites
- Locating and verifying an average of 6 new nests per year
- Saving nests from destruction by illegal development
- Rescuing fallen eaglets after storms



*All Bald Eagle images in this article are copyrighted by G. Pfoh and are used here with permission. Please do not reuse or distribute.*

## General Information about nesting Bald Eagles

Individual pairs mate for life and typically return to the same nesting territory year after year (nest site fidelity). Nest building and courtship occur in October and November in Florida. Most nests are located in the tallest pine or cypress tree near water (coastline, river, lakes) or pasture land, although in urban areas the birds are increasingly utilizing man-made structures. Many eagles will have more than one nest within their breeding territory as an alternate nest. The breeding territory (average in Florida is 1.25 square miles) is defended vigorously against intrusion by other mature eagles (as well as other raptors). Mating and egg-laying generally occur in November and December, with incubation lasting 33-35 days. Clutch size varies from one to three, but is most often two.

## Bald Eagle Factoids

- Young bald eagles are the fastest growing birds in North America. They begin learning to fly and hunt at only three months of age. They stay with the parents in and around the nest for up to six weeks post-fledging.
- Young birds are uniformly brown, with dark beaks and eyes. As they mature, the brown head and tail gradually whiten and by the age of 5, assume full adult plumage. The beak and eyes become yellow in color.
- Females are larger than males, with a 7- 8 foot wingspan. Most bald eagles can breed at age 4-5.
- Bald eagles may live 15-25 years in the wild and up to 36 years in captivity.
- Bald eagles are opportunistic scavengers with fish comprising much of their diet. They also eat waterfowl, shorebirds, small mammals, turtles and carrion.

## Threats to Bald Eagles

The bald eagle has no natural predators. Their biggest enemy is humans. Causes of bald eagle mortality include collisions with cars and power lines, electrocution, gunshot wounds and poisoning. Lead is highly toxic and a preventable cause of death if bullets/shot and fishing weights were converted to non-lead material ([http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/get the lead out/](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/get_the_lead_out/)). Eagles may also succumb to avian pox, mosquito borne illnesses and



food contamination. Loss of nesting and foraging habitat through urban development seriously jeopardizes nesting success for eagles in Florida. These birds are strongly territorial, particularly during nesting season, and are known to engage in battles over nesting habitats, causing injury and even death. In the last decade, Florida has seen an increase in eagle mortality and injury due to territorial fights.

### **Nest Disturbances and Sensitivity of Bald Eagles to Human Activity**

Bald eagles are intolerant of disturbance during the nesting season. National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines were published in the Federal Register in 2007. They include guidelines about distance buffers between activities and nests; avoidance of certain activities during the breeding season; and avoidance of disturbances at foraging areas and communal roost sites. In 2008, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) adopted the Bald Eagle Management Plan and Rule 68A. This plan supports the continued regulation of nesting habitat ([http://myfwc.com/media/427567/Eagle\\_Plan\\_April\\_2008.pdf](http://myfwc.com/media/427567/Eagle_Plan_April_2008.pdf)).

Excerpted from FWS: [http://www.fws.gov/midwest/eagle/conservation/baea\\_nhstry\\_snstvty.html](http://www.fws.gov/midwest/eagle/conservation/baea_nhstry_snstvty.html):

*The bald eagle nesting period consists of 5 phases: courtship and nest building, egg laying, incubation and hatching, early nestling period, and late nestling period. Eagle sensitivity to humans varies among these 5 phases, with eagles being most sensitive to human disturbance during the courtship and nest building phase.*

*Bald eagles may respond in a variety ways when they are disturbed by human activities. During the nest building period, for example, eagles may inadequately construct or repair their nest, or may abandon the nest, both of which can lead to failed nesting attempts. During the incubation and hatching period, human activities may startle adults or cause them to flush from the nest. Startling can damage eggs or injure young when the adults abruptly leave the nest.*



**NO ACTIVITY IS PERMITTED WITHIN 330 feet of a nest during the nesting season.**

*Prolonged absences of adults from their nests can jeopardize eggs or young. Depending on weather conditions, eggs may overheat or cool and fail to hatch. Young nestlings rely on their parents to provide warmth or shade, and may die from hypothermia or heat stress if adults are forced away from the nest for an extended period of time. Eggs and juveniles are subject to greater predation risk while they are unattended.*

*If human activities disrupt the adults' foraging and feeding schedule, the young may not develop healthy plumage, which can affect their ability to survive.*

*Older nestlings may be startled by loud or intrusive human activities and prematurely jump from the nest before they are able to fly or care for themselves.*

*Human activities that cause any of these responses and lead to injury, a decrease in productivity, or nest abandonment could be, considered disturbance under the Eagle Act and thus a violation of the Act.*

**For more information:**

Audubon EagleWatch Program <http://fl.audubon.org/audubon-eaglewatch>

Bald Eagle nest locator in Florida <https://public.myfwc.com/FWRI/EagleNests/nestlocator.aspx#search>

Audubon Center for Birds of Prey: 407-644-0190

**WILDLIFE ALERT EMERGENCY NUMBER TO REPORT FISH AND WILDLIFE VIOLATIONS: 1-888-404-FWCC**

**ANN HARWOOD-NUSS, M.D. is an Emeritus Professor of Emergency Medicine, University of Florida College of Medicine. She is an active and deeply committed participant in the Audubon Florida EagleWatch program. She also serves on the Board of Directors of Audubon Florida, the Community Hospice of NE Florida Board of Directors, and is Vice Chair of the Jacksonville Public Library Foundation.**



## Enjoy Nature?

Looking for something fun to do on the holiday break? Join us for a fun-filled morning of counting birds at our second annual Christmas Bird Count for KIDS (CBC4KIDS).

Each team of 4-6 youth birders (plus one non-birding adult) are welcome to register. Don't have a team? No worries, we'll help you find one. Each team will be led by a local birding expert to discover and count as many birds as possible.

**Who:** Kids ages: 8-16 years old

**Where:** Camp Chowenwaw

**When:** Saturday January 3, 2015, 8 to 2

**Why:** Environmental Stewardship, Family Fun, Nature

**Cost:** FREE, Pre-Registration REQUIRED

**Register at:** [Christmas Bird Count 4 Kids](#)

# CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 4 KIDS



# Tips for Better Wildlife Photography

by Carol Bailey White

Photographing wildlife, especially birds, can be challenging. Lighting conditions are often less than optimum, and our subjects can be small, distant, and fast-moving. This article will focus on (focus on – get it?) information to help beginning photographers capture better wildlife photos.

## Gear

A camera that can accept interchangeable lenses is best – it will usually produce sharper, higher-quality images - but you can still get great shots using a point-and-shoot camera with a long zoom to get closer to your subjects without spooking them. I haven't had much luck getting good photos with my cell phone camera, especially when it's zoomed out all the way, but cell phone cameras are improving rapidly, so that may be an increasingly viable option.

Learn your camera settings and know what various shooting modes your camera is capable of. Even the most basic point-and-shoot cameras have modes such as Portrait, Landscape, Sports, and Night, and many have additional, more advanced capabilities that may be helpful in capturing wildlife photos.

If you have a DSLR (a digital camera with interchangeable lenses), you have even more shooting options, and using the fully automatic mode is almost never the best choice for wildlife and nature photography. Why? Because in automatic mode your camera makes all the decisions; you won't have control over the exposure or even be able to select the main point of focus. Make sure to learn the basics of operating your camera in manual mode, including:

- Shutter speed – the faster the shutter opens and closes, the less chance there is for a blurred image due to movement. Shutter speed is expressed in fractions of a second (125 = 1/125 second, 500 = 1/500 second, etc.) The downside of a fast shutter speed is that your camera gets less time to collect light, so in order to get a proper exposure you also need to understand...
- Aperture size – this is the size of the opening that lets light onto the camera's sensor, separate from the shutter and usually expressed as an "f-stop"



value such as 1.4, 5.6, 11, etc. (Oddly, the smaller the number, the larger the opening, so an f-stop of 1.4 is "wide open" and lets in a lot of light, while an f-stop of 22 is quite small and lets in very little light.) The larger the aperture opening, the more light is let in for the duration of the shutter opening, so in low-light situations you may need to use a larger aperture size in order to be able to get enough light to avoid images that are underexposed (too dark). It's a balancing act, and one that I am constantly experimenting with, along with...

- ISO – this can be thought of as a sensitivity factor. Higher ISO settings (for example, ISO 3200) make the camera's sensor more sensitive to the light that hits it while the shutter is open, so in low-light situations, a high ISO setting may be necessary. Of course, it comes with a downside: shooting at a higher ISO usually results in a "noisier" image, or one that has a more obvious graininess, which can affect the sharpness and overall appearance of

your photos.

- Modern digital SLR cameras have far more modes and capabilities than I can cover here; I can only recommend that you read your camera's operating manual, set your camera to manual mode, and experiment with different shutter speeds, aperture sizes, and ISO settings to get a feel for how they all work in relation to one another to get a correctly exposed image.

## Zoom

As I mentioned above, the ability to zoom in on your wildlife subject is essential in order to get a close-up image without disturbing the animal. Similar to a telescope, the zoom factor of a camera lens refers to how much it can magnify distant subjects and make them appear closer. Your camera will probably have both an optical zoom and a digital zoom feature, and it's important to understand the difference between the two:

- Optical zoom is a true zoom, where the optics of the lens itself are used to bring the subject closer. This results in a higher-quality image because there is no in-camera cropping; all of what the lens captures is recorded on the camera's sensor.

Zoom lenses for a digital SLR (the kind where you can switch them out) are always optical zoom not digital.

- Digital zoom is really just a feature of digital cameras in which the center of the image is automatically cropped by software in the camera itself, resulting in a closer-appearing subject. However, the image quality is much lower due to the cropping, since a significant amount of what the lens actually captured is cut out in the process.

Be careful when evaluating the zoom factor of a camera you may be considering for purchase, as sometimes the optical and digital zoom factors are combined in advertising for the camera. For example, a camera may be advertised as having a 10X zoom, but it actually has only a 3X optical zoom with a 7X digital zoom added to it to make it a total of 10X. For better wildlife photos, get the camera with the highest optical zoom that you can afford. For those who have digital SLRs, a zoom lens that goes up to at least 300mm is best. A longer zoom will bring your subject even closer, but it'll be more expensive and usually heavier, so some may not want to go that route.

## Focus

Another factor is focus, which I mentioned briefly earlier. It sounds pretty obvious to say, but it's important to make sure that your camera is actually focused on your subject before you take the photo. With digital SLR cameras it's possible to actually select a particular point of focus, so if you have one with that capability, learn how to switch the focal point and practice moving it around so you can do it quickly when you need to.

An alternative method of controlling the focus point, which also works well with point-and-shoot cameras, is to lock the focus before you take the photo. Look through the viewfinder (or the screen, if your camera doesn't have a viewfinder), and place your subject in the center of the image. Press the shutter down halfway to lock the focus on your subject (you will often see a little square or marks appear to show where the focus is locked) and then, while still holding the shutter halfway down, recompose your photo the way you want, then press the shutter down all the way.

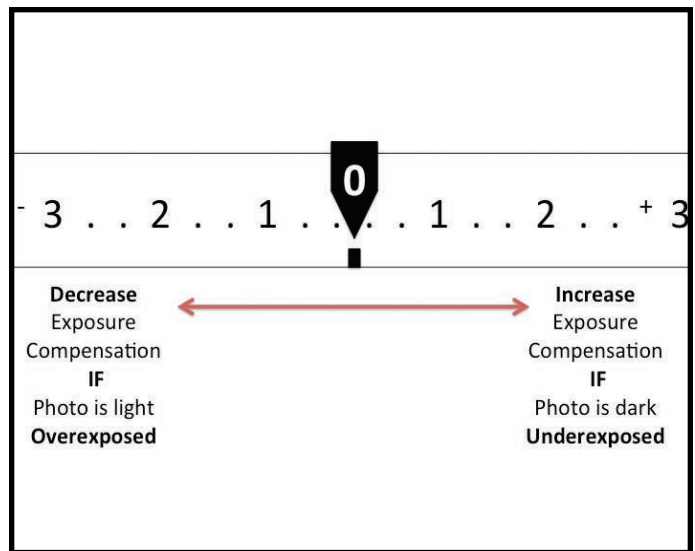
## Exposure

Getting a proper exposure can be a challenge, especially when you are shooting a small, dark subject (let's say a





bird) against a bright sky, on white sand, or in a snowy setting. In these situations, the automatic exposure function may cause your subject to be underexposed because the camera's internal light meter averages out the lighting in the scene as a whole, and can be tricked by the brightness of the background. Most digital cameras have an exposure compensation feature which allows your camera to compensate for a dark subject on a bright background. You will have to experiment with this in order to see what setting will result in the best exposure for your subject, but I usually start with plus one or two notches above the center point and go from there. Below is what the exposure compensation feature may look like on your camera; it's usually found somewhere in the Menu options.



## General Tips

Enough of the technical stuff! Here are some other tips that I have found helpful when trying to capture great photos of birds and other wildlife:

- Be patient! Birders know that in order to even be able to see some birds (especially those flitty woodland birds that can be SO hard to find), you have to stop, listen, and look for movement. It's the same with photography – you may need to settle in for a while in order for critters to resume their normal activities and let themselves be seen.
- Recognize that many of your shots will be terrible! Maybe it's just me, but the majority of my wildlife photos (especially those pesky birds) are either out of focus, improperly exposed, or just plain boring, so it can be frustrating. But every now and then I get that great shot that makes it worth all the effort, so shoot lots of photos and be prepared to delete any that don't make the cut.
- Practice the art of pressing the shutter button slowly, especially if your camera is on the heavy side. This will reduce camera shake and result in a sharper photo, and is especially important when shooting in poor lighting conditions. Using a tripod or monopod along with your camera's timer is a great way to eliminate camera shake as well, although it's not necessarily the most practical way to shoot.
- If a tripod or monopod isn't an option and you're shooting in a low-light situation, you may want to look around for something to brace the camera on or against to provide more stability. Railings, car roofs, even tree branches can work in a pinch, and it can really help to reduce blurring due to a longer exposure.
- Lighting is critical to good photos – after all, light is what creates the image! The best natural lighting to work with is a slightly overcast day – this will provide more even light and reduce harsh shadows on your subject. If the sky is clear, try to avoid shooting in the middle of the day. Instead, try shooting in the morning or early evening – the light will be softer and provide warmer highlights.
- Turn off the automatic flash on your camera! It will only disturb the very animals you are trying to photograph, and probably won't help with lighting your subject since the light from the flash only extends out about fifteen feet. Instead, use a tripod or monopod, or look for something to brace the camera on as I mentioned above.
- Try to get a shot in which the animal or bird is either looking in your direction or at least has its head turned somewhat toward the camera, and try to focus on the eye closest to you. This makes for a more visually appealing photograph that draws the viewer in. Also, try to position your subject so that there is more space in the direction in which it's looking. In other words, if the bird is looking to the right, position it closer to the left side of the frame so it will have some (figurative) space to look into. This is even more important if your subject is moving – if it's close to the edge of the picture and moving in that direction, it just feels wrong.

- A good compositional rule of thumb is to mentally divide your image into thirds both vertically and horizontally, and place your subject (or its most important feature) roughly where a horizontal line would intersect with a vertical line. This is called the “rule of thirds,” and following it can help you create a more pleasing composition than one in which the main subject is simply centered in the photo. Of course, it isn’t a hard-and-fast rule, it’s just something to keep in mind when composing your photos.

Lastly, please be respectful of the animals or birds you are trying to photograph and do your best not to disturb them in their natural environment. Last winter’s Snowy Owl irruption in NE Florida resulted in hundreds of photographers descending on Little Talbot Island State Park and I understand some of them were, shall we say, less respectful than they should have been, just so they could get a better photo. I don’t know if any harm was done to the bird in the process, but in my opinion it’s not worth the risk.

Photographing wildlife can be lots of fun and very rewarding. I hope this article will help you improve your own photography, as I think the process of researching and writing it will help mine. Happy shooting!



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*Carol Bailey White is a member of the Duval Audubon Society and can frequently be seen “shooting” birds and other creatures on our field trips. All images in this article are courtesy of Carol and may not be reproduced without her express permission.*



# Volunteer Opportunities

Check out these ways to help the birds!

**Dec 20: Christmas Bird Count 4 Kids at the Jacksonville Zoo:** Help the Jacksonville Zoo's 1st annual CBC4Kids. They are looking for general volunteers to help set-up, play gopher, and tear down. They may also need some people to serve as helping adults. No birding experience is needed for this one. Must like kids :) Contact: Christina Dembiec, Community Education Manager at the Jacksonville Zoo at 904.757.4463 Ext. 107 or dembiecc@jacksonvillezoo.org.

**Jan 3: Christmas Bird Count 4 Kids at Camp Chowenwaw:** This event is DAS' first annual CBC4Kids and we're super excited about it. We'll need 8-10 expert birders plus helping adults for go with the kids to count the birds. We'll also need set-up, tear down, and general gopher volunteers as well. Can't make it that day but still want to help? How about donating money toward pizza and drinks for the kids? Have a spare pair of binoculars we could borrow for the day (not your good ones, of course!). Or maybe you know a business that would like to sponser this event or

donate give-away items for the kids. This promises to be a LOT of fun! Contact: Debi Hill or Inez Whipple at [inez.whipple@duvalaudubon.org](mailto:inez.whipple@duvalaudubon.org)

**January 24, February 28: Crosby Saturdays at Crosby Sanctuary (427 Aquarius Councourse, Orange Park, FL):** Come out and help us with any one of several projects to improve our own sanctuary. We begin with a short bird walk at 8am and then begin work at 9. Wear boots and bring your garden gloves! Check MeetUp.com for more information. NO Crosby Saturday in December.

**April 11: Celebrate Earth at Camp Chowenwaw County Park:** We need someone to lead a guided bird walk early in the day (8:15 or 8:30am). We would also like to have a table with information, displays, or an additional activity. If you're interested contact: Ann Stodola, Park Ranger for Clay County Division of Parks and Recreation, 904.529.8058 or [Ann.Stodola@claycountygov.com](mailto:Ann.Stodola@claycountygov.com)



Field trip to Huegnot Memorial Park (L. Hamilton)