His name is Enrico and his discovery, at 16 years old, has made the record books. Audubon of Florida researchers on Tern Key recently discovered the oldest wild Roseate Spoonbill.

The researchers were conducting a new Spoonbill Satellite Telemetry Project made possible by generous support from the Ocean Fund of Royal Caribbean International and Celebrity Cruises, and Louis Wolfson, III, President of Audubon House and Tropical Garden, in Key West.

Researchers from the Audubon Tavernier Science Center used a lot of patience and a little luck to recapture Enrico in April to deploy a satellite telemetry transmitter on the bird. This is the first year of Audubon’s program to follow breeding spoonbills of Florida Bay to undiscovered nesting and foraging sites, and along little-known migration paths.

“Enrico is more than 16 years old and is still making whoopee out in the wilds of the Everglades. The previously recorded known life span of a wild spoonbill was seven years,” said Research Director Jerry Lorenz, Ph.D. “Until now, we had no idea whether fledged spoonbills return to their natal colony to breed themselves. Enrico really impressed us. At his age, it’s awe inspiring.”

Researchers first observed the bird in 2004 at the colony and feeding in a lake. He wore an identifying leg band with a green stripe across its top, and the band was placed above the joint on its leg.

Since 2003, Audubon researchers have been placing bands below the joint on spoonbill chicks in Florida Bay. The band issued by the US Geological Survey Bird Banding Lab (BBL) was imprinted with a code too small to read unless the bird was in hand.

On the last day Audubon researchers set out to catch spoonbills for the program, Enrico practically fell into their hands. The researchers had selected a nest, placed a trap to catch a bird by its feet using thread, and then waited in a blind hoping a spoonbill would return. When one did, they saw that it was the mysteriously banded bird they had been scrutinizing for more than two years. Researchers gently recorded his band number, placed the satellite transmitter on him, and released the bird unharmed.

The mystery was solved within a few weeks. The USGS Bird Banding Lab in Laurel, Maryland, reported that Enrico was originally banded in 1990 by Drs. George Powell and Robin Bjork, former Audubon researchers, at which time they noted Enrico “was too young to fly.” In 1989, it was Powell and Bjork who hired Lorenz to assist in their spoonbill study.

“It’s kind of like being a grandfather, only in reverse” Lorenz said. “We now have a way to track the oldest known wild spoonbill—and possibly the oldest known large wading bird—on the planet.”
Achievements in the State Legislature

The 2006 legislative session was good to the greater Everglades ecosystem. Approval of significant budget items for restoration, clean up and land acquisition projects were balanced by successful defense of policies critical to maintaining South Florida’s environment. Audubon worked closely with the Everglades Trust and other allies to advocate for appropriations and against weakening of conservation laws.

Babcock Ranch - The biggest success of the legislative session was approval of HB 1347 appropriating $310 million for the state’s share of the purchase of 73,000 acres of the Babcock Ranch. The bill allows continuation of a working cattle ranch, a concept for which Audubon advocated. The ranch is a beautiful example of what private land managers can do to control invasive exotic species. Ranching and land conservation can go hand-in-hand and be good for birds as well as people. We commend developer Syd Kitson, the Department of Environmental Protection, and Lee and Charlotte counties for working together to balance development with preservation.

Florida Keys Area of Critical State Concern - Audubon worked with key allies including World Wildlife Fund and the Everglades Trust to reach an agreement with legislative leaders on a timetable for allowing the removal of state oversight of Florida Keys land use and wastewater plans. While initially opposing Representative Ken Sorenson’s bill to phase out the “critical area” designation, the groups eventually settled on a later date and a review process that should protect both habitat and contribute to improved water quality.

Stopping or Improving Bad Policies - Audubon worked to prevent passage of amendments that would weaken local governments’ ability to set tighter environmental rules for protecting water and wetlands.

Grassroots Made the Difference During the Session - Thousands of individuals took time to communicate with legislators through the Everglades Conservation Network and the Florida Conservation Network. These online lobbying tools allow Audubon to get timely information out and rally support or opposition. Thanks to all who participated during the 2006 session. To join the electronic network, visit www.ga1.org/natureadvocate.

Legacy Everglades Budget

The Legislature gave Governor Bush everything he asked for and more in the way of money for Everglades restoration. Here is the breakdown:

- $310 million Babcock Ranch
- $100 million Land for Everglades Restoration
- $33 million from Florida Forever for Land Acquisition
- $40 million Alternative Water Supply
- $25 million for Lake Okeechobee
- $25 million for the Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands/C111 Florida Bay
- $10 million for Loxahatchee River/L-8 Water Storage
- $20 million for Florida Keys Wastewater Funding
- $19.250 million for Indian River Lagoon
- $4 million for St. Lucie River
- $1 million for Loxahatchee Slough
- $3.7 million for Loxahatchee River Preservation Initiative
Audubon of Florida and the Tropical Audubon Society celebrated a major victory toward protecting the Coastal Everglades. Miami-Dade County Commissioners denied all but one of the development applications to extend the Urban Development Boundary (UDB) line further into the Everglades.

The boundary separates the urban areas of Miami-Dade County from the Everglades, Biscayne Bay, and an important buffer of agricultural lands. With their vote, these elected officials set an example for other counties to protect Everglades restoration while creating opportunities to balance environmental protection and development pressures.

The Coastal Everglades in Miami-Dade County contain fresh and saltwater wetlands that form the headwaters of Biscayne and Florida Bays. These wetlands provide habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including the Florida panther and Roseate Spoonbill. Several projects within the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) aim to re-hydrate the Coastal Everglades; however, increasing development pressure will reduce restoration by minimizing or eliminating critical project components. Maintaining the existing UDB helps prevent development from threatening restoration of the Coastal Everglades.
Nine applications to move the UDB toward the Coastal Everglades, and one text amendment that would have forced uncontrolled movement of the UDB, were submitted to the County Commissioners. Audubon and others launched the Hold the Line Campaign, uniting more than 140 organizations and 19 municipalities, all opposed to moving the UDB. The campaigners were united in a belief that the needs of the community must be met before new development further stresses infrastructure, drinking water supply, and the environment.

Last November, the Commission forwarded all applications to the State for review. In addition, Miami-Dade County asked the State for a substantial increase in its water supply permit to meet the demand new development would create. In an unprecedented response, Governor Bush, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) refused the County’s water permit request, stating that additional withdrawals from the aquifer would damage the Everglades and Biscayne Bay. In recommending denial of all nine UDB-related proposals, the State sent a strong signal: urban sprawl that damages the natural environment will not be permitted.

Public support for holding the line swelled after this unprecedented response. A poll commissioned by CBS-Channel 4 found 75 percent of registered voters in Miami-Dade County felt the UDB should not be moved, with 76 percent convinced that moving the line would threaten the environment, increase traffic, and cause water shortages. Five of the applicants to move the UDB withdrew their proposals. At the final hearing in April, the County Commission voted to deny four of the remaining applications. Only an application, for a Hialeah industrial park, which has more positive attributes than the others, was approved despite the state’s recommendation for denial.

This is a victorious moment for Audubon, the residents of Florida, and the Coastal Everglades. However, now is the time to use this victory to secure lasting success. The UDB victory is an opportunity for Miami-Dade County to fully implement water conservation programs and alternative water supply projects. It is an opportunity for the state to legally reserve from further permitting water that is necessary for restoring the Everglades and Biscayne Bay. This is also an opportunity for local, state, and federal governments to ensure that the best ecological alternatives are chosen for the multiple Everglades restoration projects within Miami-Dade County. Finally, it is an opportunity for residents and organizations to remain vigilant to ensure the UDB continues to provide a buffer for natural systems.

With their responsible actions to Hold the Line, Commissioners Carlos Gimenez, Sally Heyman, Vice-Chairman Dennis Moss, Katy Sorenson, and Rebeca Sosa created opportunities for improving our lives and our environment now and for future generations. Audubon also thanks Governor Jeb Bush, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez, Executive Director Carol Wehle of the South Florida Water Management District, and Secretary Colleen Castille of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection for their leadership. The UDB victory is an achievement that gives us time to direct Miami-Dade County and the State of Florida along a sustainable path of responsible development and environmental protection. This is an opportunity that must not be missed.
Consent Decree:
Protecting Everglades Water Quality

Since the original lawsuit on water quality was settled in 1991, the State-led clean up has made some progress to build and expand Storm Water Treatment Areas (STAs).

Today, water is cleaner but has not reached the 10 parts per billion of phosphorus level required. Audubon of Florida scientists reviewed the South Florida Water Management District’s Long-term Plan for Achieving Water Quality Goals and developed specific recommendations. In testimony in the water quality case, Audubon experts outlined important steps toward meeting water quality goals. They include:

- Review STA performance to date and determine the total amount of water treatment needed in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) to achieve 10 ppb;
- Study the cost and benefits of expanding STA 1 West to determine the size needed to treat water from the S-5A Basin;
- Manage STAs to guarantee optimal performance; and,
- Strengthen Best Management Practices (BMPs).

BMPs are techniques farmers can carry out to reduce the amount of phosphorus in runoff from their fields. BMPs have been required in the EAA since the early 1990’s and generally have produced good results. The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences of the University of Florida (IFAS) suggests that two particular BMPs related to “water management” and “sediment control” provide the most dramatic results.

The court has not yet incorporated BMPs into a formal recommendation. The techniques have been sent to a Technical Oversight Committee established under the Consent Decree for consideration. Special Master John Barkett has also repeatedly urged state agencies to consider strengthening BMPs to help reduce phosphorus pollution.

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Restoring the Everglades is as much about recovering historic water flows as it is about ensuring that the water is clean. These unique wetlands are a low-nutrient system and are significantly harmed when high levels of phosphorus are dumped into them from agricultural and urban runoff. That is why it is so important that the most stringent oversight is maintained to ensure water quality cleanup.

Over the past few months, Audubon of Florida and its partners have been working to ensure that the Everglades Consent Decree is not weakened. The consent decree provides federal court supervision of the State-led water cleanup effort. State officials approached the White House, U.S. Justice Department, and Department of Interior with the suggestion that the consent decree be dissolved or significantly modified. This effort came after a court order, issued in 2005, finding the State of Florida in violation of interim phosphorus level discharge guidelines in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

Advised that discussions to modify the consent decree were underway, Audubon, the Everglades Foundation and seven other environmental groups campaigned to urge federal officials not to relinquish federal court supervision. In a letter to James Connaughton, Chairman of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality, environmentalists said:

“We have carefully followed the State of Florida in its efforts to implement the Everglades water quality requirements embodied in the consent decree. The state’s actions in 2003 to change the Everglades Forever Act, making the December 2006 deadline for water quality compliance arguably more flexible and less secure, constitute additional reason for retention of the consent decree. Finally, Federal scientists who participate on the Consent Decree’s Technical Oversight Committee continue to provide vital scientific oversight and improve implementation of water quality improvements. These scientists, in recent proceedings held by Special Master John Barkett at the direction of Judge Moreno, have recommended consideration of further expansion of STAs (STA 1 West) and other measures, including strengthening the Best Management Practices applicable in the Everglades Agricultural Area.”

In April 2006, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Department of Interior seemed to close the door on talks to modify the consent decree. In a hearing on the case in Miami, federal attorneys urged Special Master Barkett to require the South Florida Water Management District to undertake additional remedies, including expanding STA 1 West. Federal officials’ actions made it clear that federal court oversight would continue to be an important part of the process of cleaning up South Florida’s water.
Federal Action Needed to Move Everglades Restoration Forward

A key to moving the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) forward is Congressional approval of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) this year. Approved in WRDA 2000, CERP is a federal and state partnership to implement 68 project components designed to bring this important ecosystem back to health.

As this Everglades Report was going to print in May 2006, the U.S. Senate continued to stall important legislation that would authorize restoration of important ecosystems like the Everglades, the Mississippi River, Louisiana’s Coastal Wetlands, and the Great Lakes. WRDA would authorize these ecosystem restoration projects, which in turn would mitigate harmful federal drainage projects, restore more than 300,000 acres of wetlands and significant estuarine habitat, and help secure America’s tourism and outdoor recreation economy.

Specifically, the Indian River Lagoon and Picayune Strand are two crucial restoration projects scheduled for authorization in the WRDA. Both projects help the Everglades by restoring more than 160,000 acres of wetlands and significant estuarine habitat. The projects will also improve water quality for the Everglades, Florida Bay, 10,000 Islands, St. Lucie Estuary, and Lake Okeechobee.

The House has already passed its version (HR 2864), but the Senate has delayed action on its complementary bill (S 728) due to a number of obstacles. Many of these have been overcome, including correction of the harmful “Vitter” provisions that would have eliminated protection of cypress in forested wetlands. Eighty-one senators have signed letters to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, urging him to “schedule floor time for the Water Resources Development Act (S 728)...”

WRDA 2006 should also include provisions to modernize the Army Corps of Engineers and direct limited resources toward projects that will enhance the natural system to the maximum extent, while accomplishing other Corps missions.

Audubon is working to convince the Bush Administration to support WRDA and Senate Majority Leader Frist to schedule floor time. To help, contact the White House, urging it to support the bill and America’s Everglades, at (202) 456-1111, and call Senate Majority Leader Frist at (202) 224-3344 and urge him to schedule floor time for WRDA.

Audubon and Everglades Foundation Leaders Release a Bald Eagle

Joining the eagle release were (from left to right) Paul Gray, Ph.D., Audubon’s Lake Okeechobee expert; Audubon Executive Director David Anderson; Audubon Eagle Watch Coordinator Lynda White; Everglades Foundation President Sen. Bob Smith; and Sue Arnold, who first rescued the bird, from Arnold’s Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. Photo by Jim White.

Everglades Foundation President Sen. Bob Smith joined Audubon of Florida leaders in May to release a bald eagle that had been injured and was found begging for food at the Okee-Tantie Campground and Marina three months ago. Its foot had been fractured, preventing the bird from hunting. After months of rehabilitation at Arnold’s Wildlife Rehabilitation Center and then at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey, in Maitland, the eagle was released to its home around Lake Okeechobee.

“As a long time friend of Audubon, I am honored to be a part of this release of this magnificent eagle,” Senator Smith said. “This is a cause to celebrate the accomplishments of Audubon and the significant work in Everglades restoration.”
Lake Okeechobee: New Weather Conditions, New Solutions Needed

Florida has experienced very wet years over the past two summers, making it increasingly clear that the weather pattern has changed and we can expect to receive more rainfall than most of us are used to from previous decades.

Climatologists have shown that rainfall in South Florida is affected by a phenomenon called the Atlantic Multi-decadal Oscillation (AMO). It now appears we have entered the wetter phase of the AMO cycle, and that South Florida can expect increased rainfall for another decade or two. Consequently, the average annual inflow of water into Lake Okeechobee should roughly double.

The increased rainfall presents a significant challenge to the restoration of Lake Okeechobee and its watershed. Existing restoration plans were designed using the recorded rainfall from 1965-1995, which almost perfectly overlays the period of the AMO cycle with less average rainfall. As a result, water treatment and storage needs were underestimated.

Specifically, the Lake Okeechobee Watershed (LOW) component of CERP as it is currently being designed will only begin to satisfy a small portion of the lake’s water storage and treatment needs. Audubon of Florida stated this last month at the Working Group of the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force meeting. Part of our testimony highlighted some of the weaknesses in the current design of the project:

- Of the project alternatives identified for the LOW Project, Audubon understands that the preliminarily preferred alternative… has a total static storage capacity equivalent to 8 inches of Lake Okeechobee water. Over the past two years, however, the net summer input into the Lake has been about 6 feet. It is clear that this alternative for the LOW Project will only begin to satisfy the great need for storage north of the lake, and that more storage is necessary. Additionally, because this alternative will capture only a fraction of inflows, the rest of the water will flow largely untreated into the Lake, significantly increasing phosphorus inflow and decreasing the ability to meet the phosphorus Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL).”

Audubon is pursuing a multi-faceted plan to deal with the water storage and treatment needs of Lake Okeechobee and South Florida. Storing water upstream is the most efficient way to prevent harmfully deep water levels and allow natural systems to filter water before it enters the Lake. Agencies would be wise to develop plans capable of storing at least 1.2 million acre-feet (equal to about 2.5 feet of Lake level) in Lake Okeechobee’s watershed. Current CERP and Kissimmee River restoration projects get us only a quarter of the way to this goal.

Building new storage and treatment for water entering the Lake and its watershed is a massive undertaking, but one we cannot ignore. It is also a worthwhile long-term investment for humans, wildlife and the natural systems we share.

Reinforce Hoover Dike and Restore Lake Okeechobee

Audubon of Florida helped convince the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) not to recommend that Herbert Hoover Dike be turned into a dam and instead focus on real solutions for protecting people and the environment.

During its May meeting, the SFWMD Board received a recommendation to send a resolution to Congress calling for changing the status of the Dike to a dam, a policy that Audubon insists could put the public in greater danger because it could lead to higher water levels, ultimately destroy the Lake’s ecological functioning, and increase ecological damage to estuaries.

Solutions exist that would both protect residents and the environment:
- Reinforce Hoover Dike,
- Increase water storage upstream to help prevent the Lake from getting too deep in the first place,
- Develop additional water storage projects throughout the Okeechobee watershed and in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA), and
- Build flowage projects to move more water south.

After hearing public comments, the Governing Board decided not to approve the recommendation. Instead, it directed staff to lobby the US Congress for more funding to reinforce the Dike and to assist the US Army Corps of Engineers to develop a hurricane evacuation plan for the communities around the Lake. This was a big victory for the health of Lake Okeechobee and local communities.
Almost 1,000 acres of sensitive wetlands near Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary were protected last year when Audubon of Florida and its partners convinced the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to deny the Mirasol wetland destruction permit. This was a short-lived victory, however, because Mirasol has appealed the Corps decision, and three other development projects are proposed in this critical natural area of the Western Everglades.

These four projects—Mirasol, Parklands-Collier, Terafina and Cypress Run—include at least three golf courses, and seek to build in the critical Cocohatchee Slough watershed, an environmentally critical flowway adjacent to Corkscrew. Home to the largest wood stork rookery in the country, Corkscrew has monitored the wood stork population for more than 50 years. Data from the Sanctuary show that nesting pairs have declined almost 90 percent from between 4,000 and 6,000 pairs in the 1950’s and 1960’s to between 400 and 600 pairs currently.

In May, Audubon, including National Audubon Society and Collier County Audubon Society, joined three environmental partners and filed suit in federal district court in Ft. Lauderdale, challenging the Corps’ recent issuance of the Parklands-Collier golf course development permit. If allowed to proceed, this golf course community development will destroy more than 200 acres of core foraging habitat for the endangered wood stork and illegally impact water quality downstream in the Cocohatchee River and Wiggins Pass Estuary, both of which are designated Outstanding Florida Waters. In addition, the suit charges that the Corps has not followed its own Environmental Impact Statement for Southwest Florida, which requires all wetland and habitat destruction be considered in the context of the cumulative effects of many similar destructions throughout the Western Everglades.

Meanwhile, Mirasol’s appeal of the Corps’ denial of its permit, was still pending at the time this report went to print. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) also denied Audubon’s call to repeal Mirasol’s state permit. Not unexpectedly, Mirasol and the three other projects planned in the Cocohatchee Slough watershed are being modified to eliminate the now-discredited and denied Mirasol regional drainage ditch.

However, no significant lessening of wetland destruction is expected to result from any of these project revisions. They still represent much more than 1,000 acres of direct wetland losses, with damage to more nearby. The modified proposals will be rearing their heads in the state and federal permitting processes during the next few months.

Federal and state studies, including the Southwest Florida Feasibility Study portion of Everglades restoration, have identified the Cocohatchee Slough as a priority restoration area. Audubon and its allies will continue to advocate for the area’s ultimate restoration, and would welcome the participation of these landowners. For now, we continue to vigorously oppose Mirasol, Parklands-Collier and all other attempts to destroy the wetlands and wood stork habitats that surround and support Corkscrew Swamp.

Photo of wood stork by Christina Evans