



Audubon | NORTH CAROLINA

Impact Report

FALL 2023



Great Egret

Meeting the Moment for Birds and the Planet

Audubon's efforts to protect birds and the places they need requires cutting-edge science, innovative conservation methods, and bird-lovers of all stripes who care and who act—so thank you! Our vast network makes us a powerful force for conservation, with the ability to catalyze actions at the scale of the challenges we face.

In response to the loss of three billion birds over the last 50 years and the compounding threats of climate change, Audubon is embarking on a new strategic direction to maximize our impact. Touching down in every office, center, and community we work in, we are shaping a future where birds and people thrive. In North Carolina—and across the western hemisphere—we will protect more habitat, accelerate renewable energy, advance bird-friendly policies, engage broader constituencies, and build upon our conservation achievements from last year.

Because of your support, we were able to make important strides this year. Some of our top accomplishments in North Carolina and beyond include:

- CEO Elizabeth Gray attended the U.S. Climate Action Summit and shared Audubon's efforts to tackle climate change through maintaining and restoring natural climate solutions and supporting responsibly sited renewable energy.
- Audubon North Carolina is launching a new coastal resilience initiative with partners and community members in Tyrrell County to facilitate inclusive,

community-led resilience planning and capacity building efforts.

- The Audubon Conservation Ranching Program certified its 100th ranch as bird-friendly, and we are ending the year with a total 111 certified ranches covering 2.8 million acres.
- Audubon North Carolina staff, research partners, and volunteers banded and tracked thousands of birds as part of new and ongoing research, including sensitive species like Golden-winged Warblers and Black Skimmers. The data will help us better understand and protect these birds across their range.
- Audubon's Conserva Aves team

completed its first request for proposals in Colombia, selecting 12 initial projects covering more than 30,000 hectares.

- Audubon North Carolina and our members successfully advocated for conservation funding increases in the state budget and a landmark native plants policy passed by the legislature.

We are ready to meet this critical moment for birds and the planet and are grateful for partners like you who help support and advance our conservation efforts—from the marshes of the Cape Fear River to the forests of Colombia, South America. **Thank you for supporting this important work.**



Audubon North Carolina coastal biologist Lindsay Addison banding a Royal Tern chick.

Habitat Conservation



Volunteer holding two American Oystercatcher chicks after banding.



Lindsay Addison, Audubon North Carolina's coastal biologist, holding a tagged adult American Oystercatcher.

Coastal Sanctuary Island System

Each year Audubon North Carolina monitors and manages a network of important nesting bird sanctuary islands on the Lower Cape Fear River, providing a safe place for 40 percent of the state's coastal nesting birds to raise and fledge chicks during the summer nesting season. Audubon North Carolina's on-the-ground management is vital to their survival, as these birds face threats from coastal development, rising seas, extreme weather events, and human disturbance.

This summer, we had thousands of successful fledglings and our staff was busy launching new research projects and banding baby birds up and down the North Carolina coast. Lea-Hutaff Island hosted one of the largest Least Tern sites in the state, with 536 pairs, and the Cape Fear River hosted nearly 100 American Oystercatcher pairs across its marshes and dredge islands. The Black Skimmer colony at the south end of Wrightsville Beach faced many challenges this year, including an early nor-easter, predation, and Hurricane Idalia. Over 5,000 pairs of White Ibis nested on Battery Island, along with nearly 1,300 pairs of Brown Pelicans and 900 pairs of herons and egrets.

Research and Banding Coastal Birds

This summer, Audubon North Carolina banded thousands of coastal nesting birds. As part of these efforts, we put the first field-readable bands on Royal Terns in the state, which will give us a better idea of where and when these birds are moving. This work is already paying off in the form of re-sightings

later in the summer and fall—including re-sightings in New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

This summer marked the third year of Audubon North Carolina’s American Oystercatcher datalogger project aimed at studying their foraging behavior and movement along the coast. To do this, Dr. Kate Goodenough, an associate Researcher at LSU AgCenter, and Lindsay Addison, Audubon North Carolina’s Coastal Biologist, harness GPS devices to the birds that collect data every 30 minutes. By getting a better look at their fine-scale movements, we can start to unravel how oystercatchers are using different habitats during the breeding season, how far they have to travel to forage, and what impact those factors have on the health of their chicks. One interesting discovery made so far is that oystercatchers like to forage at night.

Tracking Golden-winged Warblers

This spring, researchers recaptured two NanoTagged Golden-winged Warblers in western North Carolina, giving us a closer glimpse into this bird’s lifecycle. According to data collected with the tracking devices—which send out radio signals that are picked up by nearby Motus towers outfitted with receivers—one of the recovered birds and another tagged in Ashe County last spring traveled south after the breeding season and pinged towers at St. Marks Wildlife Refuge and Chasshowitzka National Wildlife Refuge on the west coast of Florida. After that, the data go dark, although the birds themselves likely traveled to wintering grounds in Colombia or Venezuela, before returning to the very same hillside in North Carolina this spring. These



NC Wildlife Resources Commission Technician Clifton Avery recovered a tracking device carried by this Golden-winged Warbler from North Carolina to its South American wintering grounds and back again, as part of ongoing research by Audubon and our partners.

birds are part of a long-term project to study the movements of Golden-winged Warblers across the East Coast and Midwest to learn more about how this rare songbird moves across its range and what threats might be causing its population to dwindle. In southern Appalachia, Golden-winged Warblers have declined as much as 98 percent since 1966. Audubon North Carolina continues to work with private landowners to manage habitat for this declining songbird, and our new research partnership is already giving us a closer glimpse into its lifecycle.

Pine Island Sanctuary

A series of marsh restoration pilot projects are taking shape at Audubon’s Pine Island Sanctuary. These projects are testing techniques that will revive and reconnect degraded habitat to the sanctuary’s marshes, which will improve the resilience of the ecosystem. These projects will also create important habitat for sensitive bird species that depend on the marsh, such as wading birds, sparrows, and rails.



Least Bittern

Climate Action

Co-creating Inclusive Community Resilience Projects with Nature-Based Solutions

Audubon North Carolina is undertaking a new resilience initiative in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and local partners in northern Tyrrell County, including in the Town of Columbia and the Alligator community, to facilitate inclusive, community-led resilience planning and capacity building efforts. With fewer than 3,300 residents, Tyrrell is the least populous county in North Carolina. Residents

have long suffered impacts from flooding, sea-level rise, and several recent hurricanes like Floyd, Isabel, and Irene. Despite deep ties to the region’s abundant natural resources, there has historically been limited funding available for communities in Tyrrell County to explore nature-based solutions to these challenges. Grant funding provided by NOAA will enable Audubon and community partners in these areas to analyze local challenges and plan for a suite of nature-based projects that will make each community more resilient while also benefiting

birds and other wildlife.

Nature-based solution examples include:

- Beneficial use of dredged sediment for marsh enhancement and island restoration
- Park design to help hold flood waters
- Living shorelines
- Water level management
- Road elevation with wildlife corridors

Offshore Wind

Audubon North Carolina strongly supports properly sited wind power as a renewable energy source that helps reduce the threats posed to birds and people by climate change. However, we also advocate that wind power facilities should be planned, sited, and operated in ways that minimize harm to birds and other wildlife, and we advocate that wildlife agencies should ensure strong enforcement of the laws that protect birds and other wildlife. This year, Audubon North Carolina has continued to work with our partners to ensure offshore wind energy grows responsibly in the state and that we are assessing the impact of offshore wind on our bird resources. Staff currently serve on the NC Department of Commerce’s N.C. Taskforce for Offshore Wind Economic Resource Strategies (NC TOWERS) as well as the Infrastructure Subcommittee of this group which “conducts research, evaluates, and makes recommendations for the Taskforce’s consideration, regarding transmission and other offshore wind-related infrastructure and components.” In addition, we continue to be a coalition partner for Offshore Wind for North Carolina (OSW4NC), with a focus on OSW4NC’s goal to “protect wildlife and enhance regulatory certainty by ensuring that offshore wind is developed in an environmentally friendly and responsible manner.”

Policy

Native Plants & Conservation Funding

From the longleaf pine to the flowering dogwood, North Carolina is home to more than 3,900 native plant species. This past fall, a native plants policy passed the North Carolina General Assembly which will require that native trees, shrubs, and other vegetation are used for landscaping at state parks, historic sites, and roadways. The policy comes after years of advocacy by Audubon members, and gives the force of law to a new policy announced this summer by the N.C. Department of Cultural and Natural Resources. Native plants provide familiar food and shelter for birds, support pollinators, and beautify our communities. These plants are specially adapted to grow and thrive in our state and they require less pesticides and fertilizers, saving time on maintenance.

This legislative session also saw increases to the state's conservation trust funds, another issue that Audubon North Carolina members have spent years advocating for. The budget includes \$30 million in 2024 and \$28 million in 2025 for the Land and Water Fund, and the same amounts for the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. This represents a \$4-6 million increase in annual funding.

Heirs Property

This year, Audubon North Carolina moved the needle on an important bill that would protect family landowners and help them keep their family farms and wildlife habitat intact. The Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act



Northern Flicker

(SB 548, HB 588) passed the House in the spring and would provide important protections and due process for family farms, helping preserve their land and habitat. The bill would also help families access federal conservation funding and disaster relief support. These family landowners, known as heirs property owners, are vulnerable to involuntary land loss and the problem disproportionately affects Black families, and is present in all 100 North Carolina counties. We are hopeful that the long list of bipartisan supporters will help us get the bill through the Senate and across the finish line in this next session.

Wilmington Port Expansion Project

Audubon North Carolina rallied its members and used our scientific expertise to speak up for birds on the Cape Fear River on the proposed Wilmington Port expansion project.

More than 1,000 members from across the state weighed in during the first public comment period in June. The river is one of the most important places for coastal nesting birds in the state, and the project would have major impacts. We are playing a key watchdog role as this project moves forward.

Shorebird Protections

Audubon North Carolina staff, chapters, and 900 members advocated for increased protections of important habitat for shorebirds on sanctuary islands by supporting a longer closure window for coastal sanctuaries. Regulations protecting nesting and migrating coastal birds were approved by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, which now lengthened the window so that closures begin March 1 and end September 15, more accurately reflecting when birds actually begin and end nesting.

Community Building

Lights Out Campaign

Our annual Lights Out Campaign encourages local communities to make the night skies safer for migrating birds from September 10 through November 30. We have seen a wave of towns and cities adopt Lights Out programs thanks to the on-the-ground work of local Audubon chapters. As an essential stopover state for millions of migrating birds, North Carolina has been a leader in the Lights Out movement for over a decade. That momentum is growing with six cities—including Asheville, Chapel Hill, Greensboro, Matthews,

Cary, and Raleigh—adopting Lights Out programs since the fall of 2021. In Raleigh, Wake Audubon secured a Lights Out partnership with the city's most prominent local real estate company, Kane Realty. The partnership will make the capital city's skies safer for birds, and help encourage other local businesses to make similar commitments. By making the night skies darker, the cities will help prevent birds from becoming disoriented during their nocturnal migration flights and allow them to safely make their perilous annual journeys.

Advocacy Day

Audubon North Carolina hosted its annual Advocacy Day event in March, where 80 Audubon members from eight chapters rallied at the General Assembly and met with lawmakers to lobby for native plants, family landowners, and conservation funding. This fall, we saw the results from our advocacy in the passage of a state budget that increased the state's conservation trust funds and requires the use of native plants at state parks, historic sites, and roadways.



Curtis Smalling, Audubon North Carolina's interim executive director, joined North Carolina First Lady Kristin Cooper, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Secretary, Reid Wilson, and Joy Greenwood, Jockey's Ridge State Park Superintendent, at Jockey's Ridge State Park to speak and plant a persimmon tree.

With Gratitude

Audubon North Carolina made significant strides toward our mission to protect birds and the places they need over the last year—successes that would not have been possible without your continued support. Building upon this year's progress, we are primed for even greater impact in 2024. We are deeply grateful for your continued commitment to Audubon and mission to protect birds and the places they need—in North Carolina and beyond. With your help, we're excited to be making an impact for birds across the hemisphere. If you'd like more information about how the work that you support in North Carolina contributes to our ambitious strategic plan, *Flight Plan*, please don't hesitate to contact Maggie Kalergis. **Thank you.**

Contact

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Ruby-throated Hummingbird