Hi everyone! It’s that time of year again.

Manatee County Audubon Society’s Christmas Bird Counts are right around the corner and we always need more volunteers than we get. I have heard from some of you already. If you haven’t confirmed your participation, please email me to let me know if you can participate. If you aren’t sure yet, I can keep you on the list as tentative. Remember, you don’t have to be a birder to help. We need drivers, spotters, and volunteers to write down what we see. Everyone’s help is welcome and needed.

- **Saturday December 17** is the Bradenton Circle count, which is centered in downtown Bradenton and extends from the bay to Lakewood Ranch Boulevard and from the Sarasota County line to I-275.

- **Tuesday December 27** is the Gulf Circle count, which includes Anna Maria, part of Longboat Key, Perico Island, and Cortez. Feel free to invite all your birding friends to participate. Contact me at david@localbirder.com with questions.

President’s Letter from Barbara Singer

You can help protect Florida’s Special Places

**As promised** last month, I want to share with you what you and I need to do if we are to leave those Florida’s Special Places for generations to come.

**Florida’s one-of-a-kind** environment has made our state a destination for generations of humans and wildlife. Audubon of Florida (AOF) has recognized this fact and is spearheading a campaign to save our Special Places through extraordinary protection, active stewardship and civic involvement.

**For over 40 years**, federal, state, local, private and non-profit land conservation efforts have worked to save nearly one-third of Florida for the benefit of people and wildlife. Our waters are held in public trust for the benefit of people and wildlife. Florida has been recognized for its special places, including the state’s Important Bird Areas (IBAs). These IBAs are essential habitats for migratory and resident birds. Florida’s conservation lands and water allow for outstanding recreational experiences, including outdoor education, bird watching and other wildlife observation and study. It is to celebrate these Special Places that Audubon of Florida has initiated this campaign.

**Millions of acres** of Florida’s ecosystem remain unprotected and have been identified for acquisition by both state and federal conservation programs. Yet, political and economic pressures have led to decreased funding for conservation and an increased challenge in the ongoing protection of sensitive lands. State parks have been threatened with closure. SWFWMD is being pressured to identify preserved lands that could be sold to raise revenue or avoid management expenses. Lands designated as environmentally sensitive are now being looked at for hunting to raise capital. All of these threaten the future of conservation in our state.

Continued on page 2

Jeanne Dubi to talk about Celery Fields

Our speaker for Thursday December 15 is Jeanne Dubi, president of Sarasota Audubon, and the foremost authority on the magnificent Celery Fields. Jeanne has helped guide the Celery Fields into being one of the most important ornithological sites in Florida. There are some very important improvements planned for the Celery Fields, and Jeanne is going to discuss the plans for the future. The meeting will begin at 7 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church of Palmetto, 330 11th Avenue West, Palmetto. Be sure to join us for this special presentation on Celery Fields Past and Present.
In this campaign AOF is calling on local Audubon chapters to engage members and volunteers, businesses and public officials to:

- **Identify, list and communicate to improve public awareness of and interest in special places with emphasis on important birds and ecological resources including:**
  - Spreading the word by *Tell, Take and Show* Special Places that need saving.
  - Getting out and volunteering not only at Felts Audubon Preserve but other conservation projects.

- **Encourage people to care about specific places through direct experience and to share their knowledge of and passion for those places with others by:**
  - Involving Audubon members as habitat stewards at Felts.
  - Nominating your Special Place by utilizing AOF’s news blog. You can find that blog on our website at: [www.manateeaudubon.org](http://www.manateeaudubon.org)
  - Work with private landowners to achieve good stewardship by:
    - Encouraging the purchase of conservation easements by government agencies.
    - Supporting innovative financial incentives for landowners to commit their property to conservation.

- **Advocate for protection projects, policies and programs and seek stewardship funding by:**
  - Promoting Florida Forever, Everglade restoration, local land conservation acquisition programs and conservation easements.
  - Encouraging programs for control of invasive exotic species and for prescribed fire as a management tool.
  - Most importantly volunteering at your Special Place.

- **Involve people to report, collect, study and make use of data and other information to improve our understanding of habitats and better connect actions to ecological results by:**
  - Supporting citizen science and monitoring activities to conduct sound field research to understand wildlife trends.

I’m sure your thought is how would I do any of this? Volunteer! Get involved at Felts by volunteering on our website or volunteering with the Manatee County Natural Resources Department’s Volunteer and Education Division to help various preserves. Follow the link on our website.
By Dick Comeau

*Black Skimmer* is one of our classiest birds (tuxedo appearing) that frequents our local Florida beaches and bay areas. They are fascinating to watch as they skim along the surface of the water, dragging their knife-edge thin longer lower bill (mandible) searching for surface feeding fish and crustaceans. The Black Skimmer is the only American bird whose lower bill is longer than its upper bill. They are active all day long but are more active during dawn or at dusk. With their sense of touch they can catch fish during low light or even dark conditions. Young Black Skimmers are born with bills of equal length but after about just four weeks they develop the beginnings of a longer lower mandible like their parents.

*Black Skimmers* are colonial nesting birds in that they nest in large colonies on our beaches, shell bars, and newly formed dredge deposit islands. I have heard they will even nest on gravel rooftops like our Least Terns on rare occasions. Mates take turns scraping, using an exaggerated posture (with the neck, head, bill, and tail raised) kicking sand behind them with alternating foot strokes. They then rotate in their scrape to create a saucer-shaped depression, similar to resting scrapes used throughout the year. The depression takes only a few minutes to create, but the process of nesting may involve several scrapes. Males do more scraping and make larger scrapes than females. The average scrape is 10 inches in diameter and one inch deep. The nest routinely has four eggs which incubate for 21-25 days. The entire nesting period is about 28-30 days. The parents will feed the chicks from three to four weeks after hatching. The parents have been known to travel up to five miles to feed and bring back food for the chicks. Next June or July, plan to visit one of our local nesting colonies (Anna Maria Island for example). Maybe you could even volunteer to help in our Beach Nesting Birds program to become more intimately aware of this wonderful bird species.

**Junior Auduboners spot alligator on Myakka trip**

*By Steve Black*

*The Junior Audubon* met at Myakka River State Park on November 19. In attendance were Matthew and James Press with their parents, and Kaelianna and Grayson McMillan. Due to baseball and the Thanksgiving holidays, we did not have our complete group. The reason we chose to go to Myakka River State Park was we were studying the alligator. This is one of the series of endangered animals that have made a remarkable comeback. The alligator was almost hunted to extinction. There are now over 1.5 million alligators in existence. We managed to find an alligator that was over twelve feet long.

**Thanks to hosts at Felts Audubon Preserve**

*By Carol Webster*

**August 6:** Nina and Martin Young very graciously accepted the job of hosting on a short term notice. They reported “little bird action on this hot summer morning.”

**September 3:** Don Bansen hosted visitors on a beautiful day, with temperatures in the 80s and a little breeze. Don noted “very few birds were sighted and very few visitors, who were all loyal members.”

**October 3:** Deb Hutchinson and Dick Comeau greeted 15 visitors and reported a cool, low humidity. Thirty-two bird species were sighted. There were lots of butterflies but no Painted Buntings.

**November 5:** Carol Webster reported a big crowd of 26 visitors enjoyed the preserve. Also present were 32 Boy Scouts being counseled for merit badges. A new guide will be at the preserve on Open House mornings to guide visitors along the trails. The first guide to do this was Jim Stephenson, and he received many comments on his expertise. Thanks again to Jim. I was happy to receive applications for membership from three visitors.
By Jim Stephenson and Mac Aldrich

In order to promote an appreciation for the Audubon Society among younger people, the Manatee Audubon Society undertook a joint project with local Boy Scout leaders to assist scouts in achieving the bird study merit badge. The first meeting with Boy Scout leaders was held on May 24 and a plan outlined to put the project together. Three Audubon representatives met with two Boy Scout representatives at this meeting. Over the summer, a number of meetings took place and finally three events were planned. The first event was held on November 5.

Thanks to everyone who participated in “Merit Badge Mania” sponsored by the Manatee chapter of the Audubon Society, especially Bob and Nancy Dean, Dee Hanny (Bird Study Counselors), Steve Black (Environmental Science) and Barbara Singer. Close to 30 boys participated in working toward achievement of the Bird Study, Environmental Science, and/or Photography merit badges.

Following an instructional period at the First United Methodist Church in Palmetto, we took a field trip to Felts Preserve where 26 different birds were recorded as having been either sighted, heard, or both. Hummingbirds, an Indigo Bunting, and an American Bald Eagle were some of the highlights of the day. Upon return to the church, snacks and beverages were distributed and a slide presentation about some of the birds and their calls was made by Jim Stephenson. The next event will be held during the Merit Badge Day on February 4 at Lady Queen of Martyrs Catholic Church in Bradenton followed by a campout at Felts Preserve the next weekend.

Some spaces still available for 2012 Bird ID Course

By Nancy and Bob Dean

A few of the 36 seats for the Manatee Audubon Bird ID course are still available. The 2012 course will use digital images of birds to demonstrate bird ID features, as well as the usual review of field trip target birds. Course content has been re-organized to improve content distribution and increase focus on bird ID. Nancy and Bob Dean will teach the 2012 course on January 23, 26, 30 and February 2 (Mondays and Thursdays) from 6:30 to 8:45 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church of Palmetto, 330 11th Ave, West, Palmetto. This course includes two full-day field trips, which begin at 7 a.m. Saturday January 28 and February 4. The fee is $50 for MCAS members. Nonmembers pay $50 plus the MCAS membership fee of $15 per household. Reservations are first come first serve and must be re-confirmed by January 20. To participate, contact Nancy Dean at 941-792-9235 or nancybobdean@juno.com.

Instructors John Ginaven in red jacket and Mike and Nancy Barnes, immediately right, help 2011 MCAS bird course members spot and identify birds from Myakka River State Park Bird Walk. Photo by Barbara Singer

Send your items for The Night Heron to newsletter editor Molly McCartney at mccartney106@gmail.com or call 778-3228