

Living well after 50
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Florida Birds **SWOOP STRUT SOAR**

**At the Florida Birding and
Nature Festival
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Festival Welcomes Florida Nature Lovers

Bird professionals offer rare tours of Florida preservation areas in six counties during peak migration.

BY AMY SCHERZER
LifeTimes Correspondent

APOLLO BEACH - Backyard birdwatchers and serious birders, wildlife enthusiasts and experts, will flock to the Florida Birding and Nature Festival, three-days of exhibitions and excursions to West Central Florida preservation areas, many rarely open to visitors.

"We have some of the best birding sites in Florida," said Ann Paul, festival president. "I love telling people how special the Tampa Bay area is for birds, literally the most fantastic place on the planet. People really do come from all over the world."

Admission and parking are free at the Nature Expo, Oct. 15, 16 and 17, at the TECO Manatee Viewing Center in Apollo Beach. Environmental organizations, government agencies and nature-related vendors and artists will be on display 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in an open-air

space beneath the elevated building at 6990 Dickman Road.

Throughout the weekend, field trippers will be birding and exploring 36 wildlife sites in six counties, accompanied by renowned naturalists and property managers.

"These leaders almost never do this but they are doing it for us," said Paul, who retired in 2020 after 29 years managing seabird nesting colonies throughout the state for Audubon Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries.

Field experiences range from extreme birding in Fort De Soto



FLORIDA BIRDING & NATURE FESTIVAL

Park to a wagon ride through Cockroach Bay Aquatic preserve; a Seven Wetlands tram tour to butterfly spying at the Fred and Idah Schultz Preserve in Gibsonton.

A trip might have just 10 kayakers or 100 passengers aboard the Florida Aquarium's *Ray Spirit II* cruising down Hillsborough Bay to an Audubon sanctuary island where a third of the state's roseate spoonbills as well as numerous white ibis and brown pelicans nest in the spring. Dolphin sightings

are likely en route.

"We've kept the canoe and walking trips small to be as safe as possible in a pandemic," said Paul. "They'll meet on site, no carpools, and masks and social distancing are requested."

Nature lovers opting to avoid crowds these days can sign up for 14 "really interesting Zoom talks," Paul continued.

"Marc Minno wrote the book on Florida butterflies; Jerry Lorenz is the leading biologist in the state on roseate spoonbills."

Other Zoom seminar topics include swallow-tail kites, rattlesnakes, coyotes and caracaras. All field trips and seminars require

registration and a small fee.

"We're the least expensive birding festival in the USA and one of the best," Paul said.

Previous festivals have been held at Eckerd College and HCC, both the SouthShore and Brandon campuses.

"When the 2020 expo was cancelled, we used that time to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) and we are now an independent nonprofit," said Paul, welcoming volunteers to sign up online.

"There's a lot to do and it's fun to get involved and meet other like-minded enthusiasts. We're offering a free seminar of your choice if you sign up to help."



Roseate Spoonbill

Photos by Tom Ball



Gopher Tortoise



Black-crowned Night Heron



Coyote



Photo by Robert Sheets

Florida Birding and Nature Festival

Oct. 15, 16, 17

Three-day festival includes a Nature Expo featuring environmental organizations, government agencies and nature-related artists and vendors at **TECO Manatee Viewing Center, 6990 Dickman Rd., Apollo Beach.**

Also 14 Zoom seminars; 36 expert-led field and boat trips to West Central Florida wildlife sites, and two keynote dinner programs.

NATURE EXPO: Oct. 15 and 16; 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Meet, shop and learn with nature enthusiasts. **Free admission; free parking.** Lunch will be available for purchase from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the cafeteria. Silent auction winners announced at 4 p.m. Must be present to win.

REGISTRATION AND TICKETS:

\$150 (\$75 for students) at www.fbnfestival.org

Field trips and keynotes are add-ons and are not included with registration. **SEMINARS:** Your registration covers all seminars. You must register for the Festival to attend any seminar. **FIELD TRIPS:** You must register for the Festival to sign up for field trips. **KEYNOTES:** Registration is not required to purchase keynote tickets. No registration fee will be added. COVID-19 guidelines enforced.

Andee Richards, Festival administrator **(813) 444-0115**

Ann Paul, Festival president **(813) 624-3149**

EXPERT ZOOM SEMINARS:

Zoom broadcast seminars from experts in their fields. View live Oct. 15 and 16 or subscribe on YouTube afterward.

FIELD & BOAT TRIPS:

Add a Friday, Saturday or Sunday canoe, kayak or walking tour to your registration. Among the guided experiences: Cross Bar Ranch in Spring Hill; Circle B Bar Reserve in Polk County; Egmont Key; the Bullfrog Creek Mitigation Area and the Shultz Preserve.

KEYNOTE DINNERS:

Oct. 15: Welcome by Hillsborough County Commissioner Mariella Smith; keynote address by **bestselling author and award-winning journalist Craig Pittman.** 6 p.m.; TECO Clean Energy Demonstration Room; In-person dinner \$40 with the buffet and two drinks included; \$20 over Zoom. RSVP required.

Oct. 16: **Acclaimed bird photographer Clay Taylor.** Naturalist Market Manager for Swarovski Optik North America, will share his work from 45 years of birding. 6 p.m.; TECO Clean Energy Demonstration Room; In-person dinner \$40 with the buffet and two drinks included; \$20 over Zoom. RSVP required.

Refund policy: *If a trip is cancelled due to safety concerns, participants may request a refund or transfer the fee to an alternate excursion if space is available. In the event the festival is cancelled, participants may roll their fee over to the 2022 festival, donate the fee or request a refund.*

Two evening events round out the expo; both include a buffet dinner with popular keynote speakers.

Well-known *Tampa Bay Times* environmental reporter and author Craig Pittman will speak Oct. 15 in the TECO Clean Energy Demonstration Room. Veteran bird photographer Clay Taylor, manager of Swarovski Optik's North America market, will discuss digiscoping (digi-binocular photography) during dinner Oct. 16.

Keynotes are \$20 over Zoom or \$40 in person, with the buffet and two drinks included.

"The festival date is always timed to coincide with the fall migration of more than 180 species," says board member Joe Guidry, an award-winning journalist known for raising awareness of the state's adverse environmental policies on the *Tampa Tribune* editorial pages.

"You don't have to be an expert birder to enjoy the festival, which is a good thing because I certainly am not.

"Birding fanatic or not, you should have a wonderful time experiencing, and learning about, natural Florida."



Common Yellowthroat

Photos by Tom Bell



Brown Pelican