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# Hobe Sound Beach Shop's Turtle Times

Volume 6 • Number 2 • March 2025

## Our History is a Treasure: Chapter Thirty-Three *By Jan Otten*

In the last issue of *Turtle Times* we learned that VEXILLOLOGY is the study of flags, and CARTOGRAPHY is the study of maps. In this chapter we are going to tackle ORNITHOLOGY (*awr-nuh-thol-uh-jee*), the study of birds. Not "snowbirds" mind you!! But birds of a feather. Most especially we concentrate here on birds of a feather who flock together in Martin County.

According to Vocabulary.com "*Ornithology is the scientific study of birds. It includes all types of birds—from tiny hummingbirds to large, flightless ostriches. This field encompasses bird ecology, evolution, physiology, and bird's preferred habitats, among other specializations. People who study birds are called ornithologists.*"

I guess a good place to start our chapter about birds of Martin County is to learn what is considered the State Bird of Florida. Apparently, the Florida Senate passed a resolution in 1927 naming the Northern Mockingbird as our state bird, but that bill was never confirmed by the Florida House of Representatives or signed into law by the Governor. Nevertheless, whenever researching "The Florida State Bird" the Northern Mockingbird shows up as Florida's official avian symbol. (Avian meaning anything that relates to birds. We know that someone who flies a plane is an aviator, and that may serve as a reminder that avian things have to do with birds.)

The far-ranging musical mockingbird serves as the state bird not only for Florida, but also for Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas. At one time it was the state bird of South Carolina. The Northern Mockingbird has an important role in our eco system because these birds help to disperse seeds throughout their habitat and also control populations of various insects they feed on. Interestingly, they are best known for mimicking the songs of other birds and the sounds of insects and amphibians, often loudly and in rapid succession and they are extremely territorial when raising their young. However, the question remains, why the Northern Mockingbird for the southernmost state when other states claim it and there are other birds more closely associated with Florida?

Recently there have been movements to replace the Northern Mockingbird as Florida's state bird with either the Flamingo or the Florida Scrub Jay or possibly even the Osprey or Roseate Spoonbill. Sometimes also suggested are the White Ibis, Swallow-tailed Kite or Wood Stork. For sure, the strongest arguments for alternatives are for the lovely pink Flamingo which has long been associated with Florida (and not just the plastic yard version) and the Scrub Jay that is a true Florida native only found in South Florida.



Mockingbird photo by Beto.

The Sunshine State officially boasts the observation of approximately 534 species of birds as reported by the Florida Ornithological Society. These include not only Florida resident birds, but also migratory birds who spend the winter here, as well as those just passing through on their way to other wintering grounds in the Caribbean or South America.

Martin County has vast natural areas to view a diversity of bird species. In fact, Martin County, situated in the southern region, has eleven official sites on the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail – a network of hundreds of premier wildlife viewing areas across Florida and is a program of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The Martin County locations include Dupuis Wildlife and Environmental Area; Halpatokee Regional Park; Hawk's Hammock; Nathaniel P. Reed Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge; John C. and Mariana Jones/Hungryland WEA; Jonathan Dickinson State Park; Kiplinger Nature Preserve; Lake Okeechobee Ridge; Rafael E. Sanchez Trail; Maggy's Hammock; Peck Lake Park; and St. Lucie Inlet Preserve State Park.

The name most associated with Birding is Audubon, derived from John James Audubon (1785-1851) who was an American ornithologist and artist who created paintings of birds in North America. His work includes *The Birds of America*, a collection of engravings of birds in eastern North America. His efforts to catalog every bird species in the United States are considered a classic work in ornithology. Without knowing how many there would be Audubon's goal was to draw all the birds in North America. He most definitely didn't have the benefit of published bird guides to help him or the time to accomplish **1**

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it. He eventually stopped at 435 paintings after he exhausted his personal resources.

Audubon's birding travels brought him to Florida between 1831-1832 where he was introduced to approximately fifty new species including several new to science at that time. Many of these bird observations in Florida are noted in his *Ornithological Biography*.

In 1905 the National Audubon Society was incorporated and is considered to be the oldest bird conservation organization in the Western Hemisphere. A quote on their website states, "We remain focused on birds because we know their collective health reflects the health of our planet. What's good for birds is good for the Earth."

To date the National Audubon Society has 507 community and campus chapters, 55 Audubon centers and sanctuaries, and is located in 11 countries. Audubon Florida consists of 44 local chapters and numerous nature centers and sanctuaries, including the world-famous Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary 30 minutes northeast of Naples and Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland just outside of Orlando...

We in Martin County are very fortunate to have a chapter right here in Stuart.

Audubon of Martin County was founded in the Port Sewell home of Mr. & Mrs. S. F. Stephenson in January 1955. Within 42 days the membership grew to 160 members with the principal objective being "The conservation and wise use of America's natural resources." It was the fastest growing chapter in the shortest time of any chapter in Florida's history. In March of 1964 the Reed family of Jupiter Island, through their Hobe Sound Company, gave 4,290 feet, or 123 acres, of Jupiter Island oceanfront, to the Florida Audubon Society, and was named the Reed Wilderness Seashore. They in turn immediately handed over the management to Martin County Audubon. Today it is known as the Nathaniel P. Reed Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge.

Beginning in 1973 through 1993 the chapter purchased 4.7 acres of land between Palm Beach Road and Hibiscus Avenue in Stuart. One of the parcels was the home of Martin County High School agriculture teacher, Clifton "Possum" Long. Long's daughter, Juanita Prine, conveyed to the chapter, the Long home and its property stipulating that it be held in perpetuity as a nature preserve and named in honor of "Possum" Long. The home itself no longer exists, but the Garden Club of Stuart maintains a Memorial Garden immediately surrounding the home site. Today you can visit the Audubon House known as the Possum Long Nature Center located in Stuart on Palm Beach Road at the corner of 7th Avenue. The Audubon House building is a treasured piece of Martin County history as it is in part a building salvaged from Camp Murphy—the WWII encampment located in what is now Jonathan Dickinson State Park.

The Possum Long site also includes a wetland developed in 2011 that today is home to a returning pair of nesting Osprey, Wood ducks, Herons, waterfowl, and other wildlife.

Martin County's, very diverse birdlife, numbers more than 300 species, and like the whole state includes resident and migratory birds. If you pay attention, you can find them in a variety of habitats like beaches, marshes, forests, and mangrove swamps.

Research has provided this list of some of the notable bird species you might encounter in Martin County. This is just a tiny sampling of the many interesting varieties found in this area from Raptors to Shore Birds to Wading Birds to Song Birds:



- **Osprey:** Sometimes called a fish hawk, ospreys are raptors well adapted for fishing. They have long legs and large feet with specialized barbs on the pads, hooked talons, and a reversible outer toe allowing them to easily grasp fish with two toes pointing to the front and two pointing to the rear.
- **Cooper's Hawk:** Another raptor, sited in Martin County as recently as March 8th, 2025, Cooper's Hawks are known for their agility and swift hunting strategies. Their presence is said to be a reminder to be swift in your actions and decisions. You can identify them by their upright posture, with a long tail, bluish-gray upperparts with a contrasting black cap and a red eye. Underparts are pale with dense reddish barring. Their bill is relatively small and strongly hooked.
- **Caracara:** Audubon's Crested Caracara is found throughout south central Florida, and in Texas, Arkansas, Mexico, Cuba and Panama. It is a large species of raptor that can reach a body length of 19-25 inches. The Caracara has a dark brown-black belly, wings, back, and crown, a white lower belly, head, and throat. This species also has a bluish-gray to light bluish dark yellow to white bill, red cere (facial skin) and a white tail with dark crossbars. An unusual-looking raptor it is about the size of an osprey, with a parrot-like



Osprey by Tina Nord.

head, with a heavy bill and longish neck and legs. Although it looks like a long-legged Hawk the Crested Caracara is actually a Falcon. It is the only Falcon that collects material to build a nest. These birds are carnivorous but will eat whatever food sources are available, primarily carrion from road kill, or even live prey including turtles, snakes, small alligators, fish, frogs, crayfish, crabs, insects, bird hatchlings, and small mammals. The actual lifespan of wild Crested Caracaras is unknown, but the oldest in Florida lived for at least 24 years.

- **Roseate Spoonbill:** The Roseate Spoonbill ( Platalea ajaja) is native to the Americas, including Florida. Known for its pink feathers and spoon-shaped bills their habitat is usually marshy areas, mangroves, and coastal regions where they forage for food. They are commonly found in southern Florida, including areas like Florida Bay and the Everglades. With their long legs and rosy, pink color, they are sometimes mistaken for Flamingos. They typically have a lifespan of about 10 years in the wild and can live up to 15 years in captivity. In Florida, the Roseate Spoonbill is designated as threatened by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Endangered and Threatened Species Rule.



Roseate Spoonbill by Lolame.

Interestingly, young Spoonbills, when they are still in the nest, are called Teaspoons as their bills are not as developed as the adults!

continued on page 4



**MARTIN COUNTY  
PROPERTY APPRAISER**  
Jenny Fields, CFA



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What is Tangible Personal Property (TPP)? TPP is everything other than real estate that has value by itself, and is being used in a business or for income-producing purposes.

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- **Florida Scrub-Jay:** This state and federally threatened bird is the only bird species that is considered native to Florida. Its habitat is scrub oak in sandy soils, sand pine and xeric oak scrub, and scrubby flatwoods. They tend to be homebodies that don't migrate and can be found in areas like Central Florida, Atlantic Coast, and Southwest Florida. Jonathan Dickinson State Park is a prime example of their preferred habitat. You can recognize a Florida Scrub Jay by its medium-size, round head, blue feathers and a gray back.
- **Anhinga:** These birds are also known as snakebirds or water turkeys. They swim and dive for their food – they spear their prey with their needle-sharp bill. Once prey is captured, they will often leave the water and eat on dry land. Their preferred diet is fish, but will also eat water snakes, tadpoles, frog eggs and young alligators.



Anhinga photo by Veronika Andrews

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**Cattle Egret:** Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*), are often seen in large flocks heading to and from their roosts and nests. Native to Africa and Asia, this variety of heron is believed to have traveled across the Atlantic to South America in the late 1800s and from there, in the early 1940s migrated north to the US. It is a year-round resident of Florida and is currently found in almost every state and on every continent except Antarctica. They generally live in pastures and wetlands. This small white heron is commonly seen in groups along roadsides and in pastures as constant companions to cattle frequently perched on their backs where it feasts on bugs, ticks and other parasites that plague livestock benefitting cattle, ranchers, farmers and themselves. The Cattle Egret will often follow a tractor plowing, or mowing a field to catch grasshoppers, crickets, spiders and moths that are stirred up. Both male and female are similar in appearance, standing 18-22 inches tall with a 3 ft. wingspan. Coloration is generally white with a yellow bill and dark green legs. Males establish and defend a territory while the female lays two to six light blue-green eggs in a shallow, platform-like nest of twigs. Both parents incubate the eggs for 21-24 days.

Cattle Egret (and friend) photo by Amit Rai.

- **Brown Pelican:** Pelicans primarily eat fish, including species like menhaden, herring, sheepshead, pigfish, mullet, grass minnows, top minnows, and silversides. An adult Pelican can eat up to 4 pounds of fish per day. Driven almost to extinction twice, first by hunting and later by pesticides including DDT, the Brown Pelican today is a shining example of the success of conservation actions, including the Endangered Species Act and the work of the Environmental Protection Agency. It generally has a lifespan of 25 to 30 years in the wild.
- **Sand Hill Cranes:** These large birds, stand 3.2 to 3.9 feet tall, with a wingspan of 5.9 to 6.5 feet. The males who weigh an average of 8.3 pounds are slightly bigger than the females, with an average of 7.2 pounds. They are long legged with grey bodies and sport a red cap atop their heads. This endangered species is often seen in neighborhoods and on golf courses. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) lists the Sandhill

Crane as a Florida threatened species. They're voracious omnivores with a taste not just for grain and plant roots, but also berries, frogs, nestling birds, and insects. The Sandhill Crane represents good fortune, longevity, and immortality.

Sandhill Crane photo by Rfotostoc.




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- Northern Cardinal:** The Northern Cardinal is a mid-sized perching songbird with a body length of 8.3–9.1 in. and a crest on the top of the head. The males are a brilliant red color, while the females are pale brown overall with warm reddish tinges in the wings, tail, and crest, and they share the black face and red-orange bill with the males. They are abundant in states along the eastern seaboard, from Maine down to Florida and have been found as far reaching as southern Arizona, southern California, and New Mexico and as far south as Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala. They are attracted to such natural fruits as blueberry bushes, mulberry trees, and other dark-colored berries. Bird seeds that they like include black oil sunflower, cracked corn, suet, Nyjer seed, mealworms, peanuts, safflower, striped sunflower, and sunflower hearts and chips. Northern Cardinals are non-migratory birds, meaning they typically don't migrate long distances but tend to stay in the same area year-round, often returning to the same general areas, and even backyard feeders, year after year. They have an average lifespan of at least 3 years and there have been reports of them reaching 15 years.

It is not possible here to list and describe the many bird species you might see on your daily dog walks, hikes in a local park, or during a day at the beach. A good way to learn more about the amazing and abundant variety that can be seen right here in Martin County would be to visit the Audubon of Martin County, perhaps buy a good bird guidebook, or if you love watching birds, I highly recommend purchasing a bird feeder that comes with a camera. The camera will alert your cell phone that a bird is there and will allow you to watch up close the birds who visit your feeder to enjoy the seeds you place there. You can snap a photo of the bird, and the program will help you identify the species you are seeing. It is truly an awesome experience!

## Audubon of Martin County

*"Promoting conservation through education about birds and their native habitat, while providing avenues to experience the joy of observing birds in the wild and the beautiful natural scenery around them."*

The Audubon office houses an extensive natural history library, meeting room and award-winning bird photography. The preserve lies behind the Audubon office and includes almost five acres of urban forest that are slowly being rehabilitated through their Native Plant Restoration Project.



If you haven't enjoyed this green sanctuary they invite you to stop by, walk the trails, enjoy the butterfly garden, have a picnic or just spend a quiet hour looking for the many birds who stop by for food and rest. The grounds are open to the public at no charge every day from dawn to dusk.

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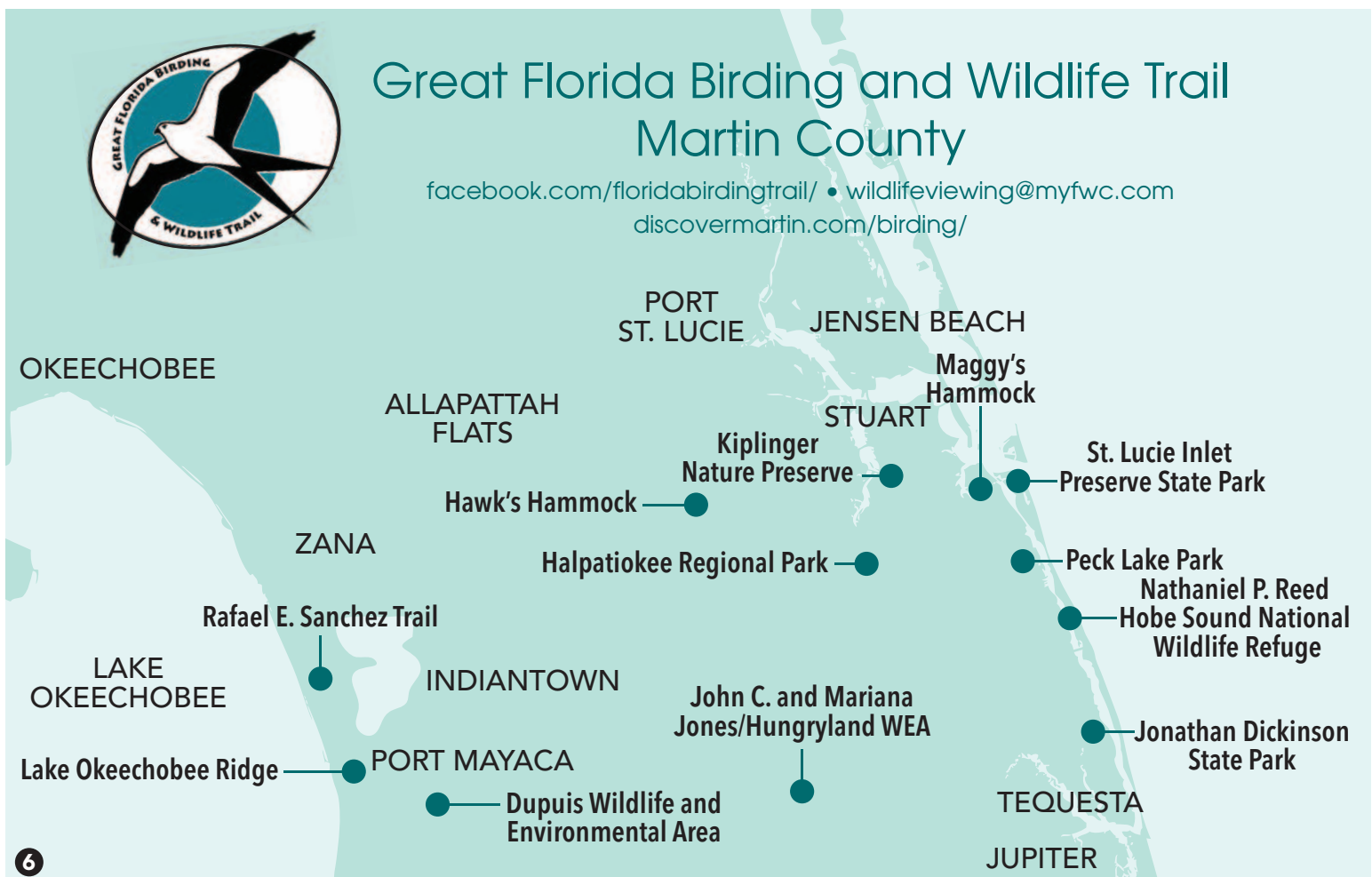
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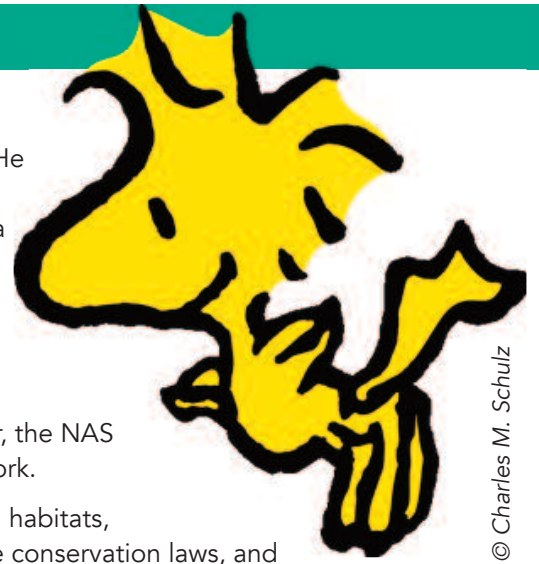


## Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail Martin County

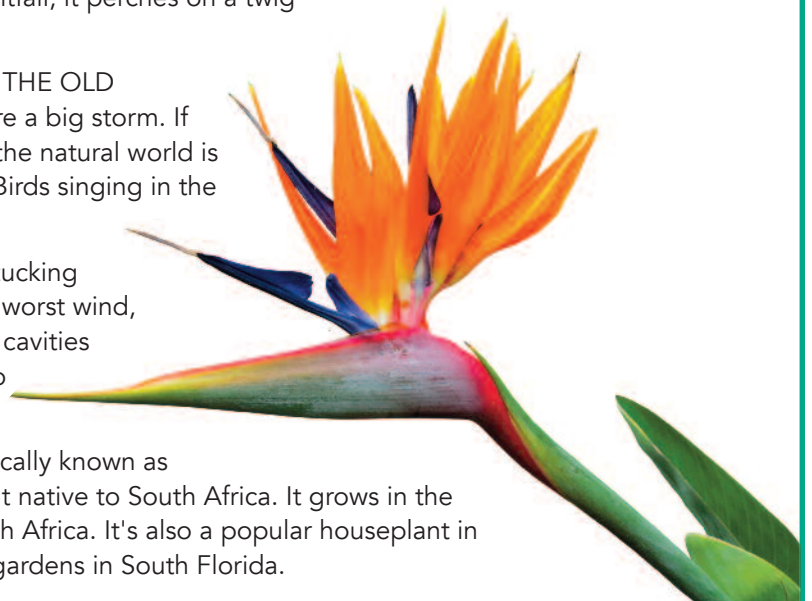
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- I don't think ORNITHOLOGY includes the Snoopy Bird. From Wikipedia: Woodstock is a fictional character in Charles M. Schulz's comic strip Peanuts. He is a small yellow bird of unknown species and Snoopy's best friend. The character first appeared in the March 4, 1966, strip, though he was not given a name until June 22, 1970. He is named after the Woodstock festival of 1969.
- The Great Egret is the symbol of the National Audubon Society (NAS). Its silhouette is featured in the organization's logo.
- The NAS faced criticism for keeping Audubon's name because he was an enslaver with harmful attitudes toward Black and Indigenous people. However, the NAS decided to keep the name because it represents more than just Audubon's work.
- For 120 years and counting, the National Audubon Society has preserved bird habitats, conducted scientific research, influenced policymakers to enact commonsense conservation laws, and engaged communities across the hemisphere to protect the natural resources upon which birds—and we—depend.
- Maitland, Florida, along Lake Sybelia, just outside Orlando, hosted the first Florida Audubon Society meeting in March 1900 to save Florida's imperiled wading birds.
- A group of pelicans, including brown pelicans, is often referred to as a pod, a squadron, a scoop or a fleet.
- The Northern Cardinal is thought to be a sign of divine intervention in your life. In some cultures the vibrant red color of the Cardinal is a symbol of good luck and abundance. Others believe it represents vitality, that if a cardinal crosses your path, it is meant to give you strength and hope. While some think that if you see a Cardinal a loved one who has passed away is watching over you or that it is a message of comfort and encouragement from God or angels.
- In Florida, the fine for intentionally killing a threatened species like the Sandhill Crane can range from \$100–\$1,000. The penalty may also include jail time. It's also illegal to make physical contact with Cranes.
- The world of birds includes a variety of sleeping arrangements. Many songbirds such as Cardinals or Finches sleep perched in the safety of dense trees or shrubs. When such a bird flies into the branches of a tree at nightfall, it perches on a twig and perhaps preens a bit.
- But where do birds go when a storm approaches? From THE OLD FARMERS ALMANAC: Birds tend to get very quiet before a big storm. If you've ever been walking in the woods before a storm, the natural world is eerily silent! Birds also sing if the weather is improving. Birds singing in the rain indicates fair weather approaching.
- From PERKY PET: Because many birds are so tiny, even tucking against the trunk of a tree can be good shelter from the worst wind, driving rain, or stinging snow. Birds will seek out hidden cavities or nestle under branches, brush, or other shelter to keep out of bad weather.
- Bird of Paradise is not a bird at all but is a plant, scientifically known as Strelitzia Nicolai. It is a tropical evergreen flowering plant native to South Africa. It grows in the coastal bush and thicket along the eastern coast of South Africa. It's also a popular houseplant in temperate areas. You can find Bird of Paradise in many gardens in South Florida.



© Charles M. Schulz



Some of the places researched for this History Chapter include:

Audubon of Martin County; All About Birds.org; Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission; Wildlife Habitat Council; Endangered Animal Protection Program; Florida Ornithological Society; National Audubon Society; American Bird Conservancy; SecoEnergy-Nature's Reflections; and more.



# Real Estate Corner – Good Day Hobe Sound!

Today we all hear a lot of buzz about Artificial Intelligence on the News. It seems like it's the next frontier and maybe it is? We hear about artists, wordsmiths, authors, musicians and live human reasoning being replaced by the new super intelligence. Kids are now using AI in school to write great reports and solve complex problems, but does it really know all?

I thought I would ask AI if it was a good time to sell my home in Hobe sound! Here is what I was told by the new supercomputer "Claude"

*Based on my knowledge cutoff in October 2024, I can provide some general insights about the Hobe Sound, Florida real estate market, but you should consult with a local real estate professional for the most current market conditions.*

Hobe Sound, located in Martin County on Florida's Treasure Coast, has historically been an attractive area due to its coastal location and proximity to larger cities like West Palm Beach. Some factors to consider regarding selling a home in Hobe Sound:

1. Florida's real estate market in general had been experiencing strong demand prior to my knowledge cutoff, with many people relocating to the state.
2. Hobe Sound specifically is known for its upscale neighborhoods and access to beaches, which can make it a desirable location.
3. Interest rates and broader economic conditions significantly impact real estate markets, and these may have changed since my last update.

For the most accurate assessment of whether now is a good time to sell your home, I'd recommend:

- Checking recent sales data for similar properties in your area

- Consulting with a local real estate agent who specializes in Hobe Sound
- Requesting a comparative market analysis to understand current pricing in your neighborhood

Would you like to know about any specific aspects of the Hobe Sound market that might help with your decision? My comeback: To Me the answer was a bit vague, however it did admit it wasn't up to date and gave some good advice. Check with your local real estate professional who specializes in Hobe Sound! Wow AI does not yet have all the answers we face to make good decisions and even admitted it!

Just sayin!

## Rich Otten, PSA, C2EX

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## A little Trivia from Dictionary.com:

**spindrift** [ spin-drift ] noun. spray swept up by wind along the surface of the sea

*Be ready for a day enjoying the spindrift along the local waterfront! Pop into the Hobe Sound Beach Shop to pick up a few necessary items.... Tommy Bahama beach chairs, beach towels, new sandals, essential sunscreen, or a pair of sunglasses, swimming trunks, or trendy swimsuit coverups, and of course, beach toys for the kiddos, and don't forget a custom tee shirt to remember the day!*



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# Waves of life

Every time my feet hit the salty Atlantic, I feel the memories rushing back—growing up surfing in Hobe Sound. The smell of seaweed, the salt crusted on my arms, the feeling of paddling out into the often-chunky surf. Waves come and go in sets, and so do the chapters of life. Each one carrying memories. From my first board to my first competition, to the dreams that took me beyond these waters, chasing new waves and experiences worldwide.



Photo provided by Ryan Croteau

I can still picture myself as a seven-year-old, paddling out for the first time, my heart pounding with excitement. By age ten, I was collecting surf trophies locally, the taste of victory had me fired up for more, all I wanted to do was rush to the beach from the pickup line at Hobe Sound Elementary. By sixteen, I had ventured off my small-town shoreline to pursue the goal of professional surfing, traveling the country and chasing swells alongside my brother, Justin.

California became our second home, a place where the dream took shape. The pro junior tour, the WSL Qualifying Series, the relentless pursuit of bigger waves and tougher competition—it all fueled me. But somewhere along the way, I found another passion. Teaching. Watching a student catch their first wave, seeing that spark in their eyes—it gave me the same feeling as winning a heat.

I built a surf school on the West Coast, teaching thousands of students how to properly surf. Many of those students are still riding waves to this day. Some are youth competition surfers and others are older and enjoying the lifestyle and simply-found joy in riding waves. But as the years passed, something inside me pulled me back east.

Florida had never left me.

The idea of returning to Hobe Sound, to give back to the place that shaped me, became impossible to ignore. I didn't just want to visit, I wanted to build something, to create a legacy that would inspire the next generation.

And so, Florida Surf Experience—Hobe Sound Surf Camp was born.

I'm here to give it my all and pour everything into it. My knowledge, my passion, my belief that a kid from this small town can rise to the world stage. I envision groms (young surfers) paddling out with confidence, learning not just the mechanics of surfing but the mindset it requires. Resilience. Patience. Fearlessness. We often get trapped in small towns. So, if I can inspire a new generation of kids to seek out travel and explore the globe for waves, I will be happy. Growing up a lot of kids went down the wrong path and I think surfing was my savior from this. I envision local kids winning competitions and chasing waves to new destinations and I think it all starts at the beginner level, one week at surf camp can really change a kid's life and build new friendships. This is my goal.

When I'm not in the water, I'm training—both in surfing and in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, another discipline that's become a cornerstone of my life. I thrive on pushing my limits, testing myself on the mat the same way I do in the ocean. Whether it's rolling in a Jiu-Jitsu session or fishing on a quiet afternoon, I approach everything with the same grit.

My dream isn't just to coach surfers. It's to create a movement. To put Hobe Sound on the surf map. To mentor the next generation, and better the community. I had great mentors here as a kid. Donnie Mac, Dave McClaine, Chris Watson, Burt Krebs, Bill Koperski, to name a few. They coached me, pushed me into waves, drove me to the beach, and supported me from afar as I ventured out. Kids need this support and Hobe Sound always will have my heart because of what a supportive special community it is and will remain. As core locals we should always step up to make a difference and don't let it lose its charm. With just a small movement like this maybe, just maybe, one of these kids will follow in my footsteps, paddling out onto the world stage, carrying the spirit of their hometown in every wave they ride.

The other day I was walking my dog down the beach, and I saw new kids hauling their boards down the beach. Dads suiting them up in the lot to battle the surf. Just as mine did, and I smile as I throw my dog Gus his stick, watching from the shore. Because I am here, I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

Life changes just like the sets. Just like the tides.

And life is all about the experiences.

This is the Florida Surf Experience.

Always follow your heart.

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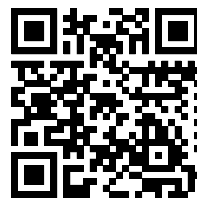
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# The Barn Artists 26<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Show

April 5/6, 2025



Saturday 10am to 3pm/Sunday 10am to 2pm

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## The State of Our Turtles

Now that the clocks have sprung forward, we can look forward to long days, afternoon storms, plenty of humidity, and of course sea turtles nesting on the beach! As we gear up for the new season, it's always good to occasionally look back and see where we've been. Sea turtles and Florida share a deep history. Originally part of the supercontinent known as Pangea, the place we now call Florida ended up on the south side of the Tethys Sea that spanned across the young North American continent. As continents continued to drift and the Tethys Sea receded, North America gradually became one land mass and Florida took its place in what is now the southeast U.S. As seas rose and fell and the Appalachian mountains formed and eroded, Florida gradually took on its current shape between 65 and 35 million years ago (mya).

While all that was going on, sea turtles were evolving. What we generally call the modern sea turtles (recognizable by long flippers, salt glands, etc.) arrived on the scene around 110mya. Two of the four taxonomic groups of early sea turtles became extinct (e.g., the "Archelon"), leaving the other two to gradually become the species we can encounter today. One of the surviving groups led to the leatherback turtle, and the other later diverged into the seven hard-shelled species we find around the world, five of which can be found in Florida waters. Coincidentally, that divergence happened around 40-50mya, right in synch with the newly forming Florida peninsula. Though it all may have looked different back then, we can imagine newly formed sea turtle species (in evolutionary terms) nesting on newly formed beaches (in geological terms), so the relationship runs deep!

Though ice ages have come and gone since then (i.e., sea level fluctuations), Florida has remained relatively stable in size and shape for the last 10-12,000 years. However, big changes to its flora and fauna were in store with the arrival of our very own species, Homo sapiens. The first to arrive were the indigenous people who used sea turtle meat, eggs, and shells for food, tools, and jewelry, but not to the extent that populations were measurably depleted. Things were to change drastically with the arrival of the Europeans, who found great value in sea turtles as a

source of meat for the wildly popular 'turtle soup' and the highly prized 'tortoiseshell' that was sourced from hawksbill turtles throughout the Caribbean. In fact, Key West was the center of the turtle trade in this hemisphere at a place called "Turtle Kraawls", where a Dutch entrepreneur developed an impressive set of in-water corrals adjacent to a canning and processing plant. Millions of pounds of sea turtles were processed through the facility over the span of approximately 100 years, depleting sea turtle populations by 90% or more in some places. Though not extinct, they became ever more difficult to harvest, lost commercial value, and by the late 1970s new legislation was enacted to protect imperiled species, which sea turtles clearly were. This legislation led to the Endangered Species Act, which has been instrumental in steering the protection and recovery of numerous species, including the Bald Eagle.

Since then, there has been a precarious balance between new threats to sea turtle populations and the remedies at hand to minimize them. First and foremost to deal with is the explosive population growth that Florida has experienced since the 1960s. Coastal ecosystems are hardly recognizable in some places, and a constant onslaught of pollutants and waste of all sorts reach every corner of the environment. Nearly one million boats motor around and within the state, including commercial fishing fleets that feed an ever-growing demand for seafood. All of these activities directly impact sea turtles in one way or another, but innovative countermeasures have not only stabilized Florida's nesting populations, but in some cases even fostered impressive increases. Lighting ordinances, nest protection efforts, beach maintenance projects, and even specialized 'turtle-excluder devices' installed in shrimping trawls have all contributed to the stabilization of sea turtle populations in Florida. And when you add on the general popularity of sea turtles (think of 'Crush' from the Finding Nemo movie), exposure and educational programs have made a huge difference in turning the tide on behalf of their recovery.

As for the numbers themselves, last year was a typical year for all three species. Loggerhead turtles fell short of the record set in 2023, but still laid over 110,000 nests across Florida's beaches. Green turtles typically follow a bi-annual pattern of nesting activity and 2024 was expected to be a slower year. They followed suit, and ended up with just over 14,000 nests (over 60,000 in 2023). Lastly, our leatherbacks placed just under 1,800 nests, which doesn't represent a record, but still contributes to an overall statistical increase in statewide nesting since the 1990s. We can't say what's in store for this season, but we welcome them back and wish them the best!



A green turtle returning to the ocean after nesting on Singer Island. Photo by Larry Wood.

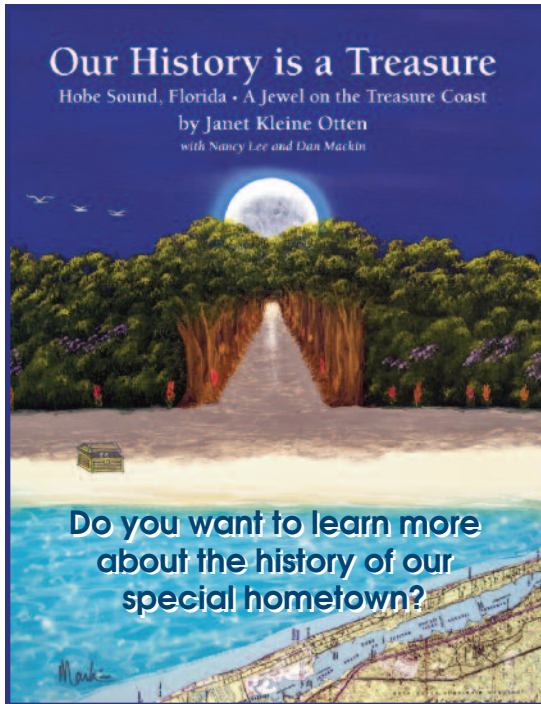
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