

NATURE MATTERS

FISH & WILDLIFE FOUNDATION OF FLORIDA



FALL 2025 NEWSLETTER

The Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida is a nonprofit organization that seeks to protect our outstanding animals and plants and the lands and waters they need to survive.

A LETTER FROM OUR CEO

On Instagram she is @Taylor2short, on YouTube find her at @TobiesTroop. In person she’s a 4’11” force of nature. An expert on rehabilitating and caring for primates and other abandoned exotic pets, Taylor Stanberry was also this year’s winner of the Governor’s 2025 Python Challenge, catching 60 Burmese pythons in ten days. Yes, 60.

Taylor is the first woman to win the \$10,000 grand prize, part of the \$40,000 donated this year by INVERSA Leathers, Rotary Clubs of Florida, Mr. and Mrs. C. Martin Wood III, the Garcia Companies, Edison National Bank/Bank of the Islands, and the Bergeron Everglades Foundation. In all, 934 hunters from 30 states and Canada participated in this year’s Challenge, catching a record 294 Burmese pythons. Run by Invasive Species biologists at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) in collaboration with the Governor’s office and our Foundation, the annual Challenge brings international attention to the problem of invasive species that overrun native species and ecosystems. More than 1,400 pythons have been caught over time by contestants, part of the 16,000+ pythons captured to date by FWC and South Florida Water Management District-licensed hunters. Beyond the Challenge, Taylor also works year-round removing pythons as part of FWC’s PATRIC python program.

Critically endangered in their Southeast Asia home range, Burmese pythons were introduced to Florida in the 1970s as part of the exotic pet trade. Many owners who found it challenging to care for these snakes released them into the wild. Then in 1992, Hurricane Andrew was



reported to have destroyed a python breeding center, which resulted in hundreds more snakes being let loose. The U.S. Department of Interior banned their import in 2012.

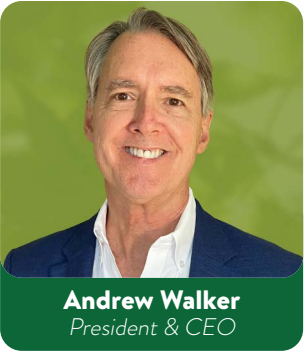
Burmese pythons can, and do, eat just about anything, including alligators and deer. It’s believed pythons have caused a 90 percent loss of native mammals in the Everglades.

Florida is ideal territory for introduced species, be it Brazilian pepper, water hyacinth, or Argentine black and white tegu lizards. Few have had the impact of pythons, whose Florida population is conservatively placed at 30,000 snakes. Innovation is our best hope for reducing these numbers. Our Foundation has helped the Conservancy of Southwest Florida fund its python program, in which radio-tagged males lead hunters to clutches of other males and females. FWC and we are also working with INVERSA Leathers, a company dedicated to creating high-value consumer markets for products made from invasive species. INVERSA’s development of leather made from lionfish, for example, has led to

removal of 40,000 of these invasive predators from Caribbean waters. INVERSA has also collaborated with leading global designers like Gabriela Hearst to use Florida invasive python leather in their fashion lines.

Innovations will continue to come; science and technology are still relatively new to this game. Biologists are inspired by the great successes of the past — controlling gypsy moths — and by the great failures to save iconic trees like the American chestnut and American elm. Our Florida Coral Rescue Center, run in partnership with SeaWorld, Disney, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and others, is also a response to a (likely non-native) disease impacting 20 species of stony corals. We need our refugia for native plants and animals, to buy us time to solve or at least expertly manage the challenges our worst invasive species present.

So congratulations and hats off to Taylor Stanberry, one of many people doing her part to buy us that time.



CLAM DUNK IN THE TITUSVILLE CAUSEWAY



As the gateway to the NASA Kennedy Space Center and Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, the Titusville Causeway has always been a prized spot for watching rocket launches and wild Florida. Yet behind the stunning views, years of storms, rising seas, and constant wave action have steadily eroded this shoreline. The damage has taken a toll on water quality, wildlife habitat, and the recreational experience for both locals and visitors.

A large-scale restoration effort is changing that story. This June four million “Florida super clams” became the newest recruits in this mission to heal the Indian River Lagoon.

Nicknamed “super clams” for their extraordinary resilience, these hard-shell clams come from a small group that survived a devastating algal bloom in 2011 when most of their kind perished. Their descendants have been carefully bred for strength and superior water-filtering ability. Our partner Sea & Shoreline deployed them by drone to imitate nature’s spawning process. Now safely burrowed in the lagoon floor, each clam can filter up to 20 gallons of water per day, helping restore clarity without the risks that traditional netted clusters pose for manatees, dolphins, and turtles.

The Titusville Causeway Multi-Trophic Restoration is Florida’s first project to bring together several natural solutions in one plan. Alongside the millions of clams, 2,000 feet of hybrid breakwater reefs have been installed, nearly five acres of seagrass will be planted, new living shorelines will take root, and reshaped sandy banks will protect the area against future storms. Together, these efforts will calm wave action, rebuild habitat, and help keep the water clean for years to come.

This \$4.2 million project is a collaborative success made possible by DRMP engineers, Sea & Shoreline, Brevard County Natural Resources, the St. Johns River Water Management District, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Senator Debbie Mayfield, the Tourist Development Council, and generous funders like Fox Rock Foundation and Florida Power & Light. Our Foundation proudly contributed \$525,000 to help bring this vision to life.

“We are committed to reversing this decline.”

Seagrass and eelgrass meadows are the lifeblood of Florida’s coastal ecosystems. They trap sediment, filter out pollutants, slow erosion, store carbon, and feed manatees, countless fish, and crabs. When these underwater meadows disappear, entire food webs begin to crumble.

“We are committed to reversing this decline,” shared the Foundation’s Director of Conservation & Strategic Initiatives Tindl Rainey. “Across Florida, our Foundation invests in science-based projects to restore and protect aquatic vegetation. In the Indian River Lagoon alone, we have funded eight seagrass planting sites to jumpstart recovery.”

Burmese Python (Python bivittatus) | Photo by Andy Wraithmell

INVESTING IN FLORIDA'S FUTURE CONSERVATION CHAMPIONS

We believe the best way to safeguard wild Florida for generations is to empower the people who will care for it next. Two new internships, each sparked by generous donors, are already turning that promise into reality.



Southeastern Myotis (*Myotis austroriparius*)

A LEGACY TAKES FLIGHT

When small-mammal researcher Jennifer “Jen” Eells lost her life while monitoring Florida’s bats, friends, colleagues, and supporters rallied to keep her passion alive. Their collective tribute, the Jen Eells Small Animal Research Internship, now gives college students an immersive introduction to wildlife science.



Lily Hutson

“One day I’m handling bats, the next I’m helping with gopher tortoises. It’s absolutely life-changing.”

Its inaugural intern Lily Hutson, a 19-year-old biology major at the University of South Carolina, spent the summer in Gainesville rotating through field projects with FWC teams. “One day I’m handling bats, the next I’m helping with gopher tortoises,” Lily said. “It’s absolutely life-changing.”

Beyond new field skills, Lily has built a network of mentors, including FWC conservation biologist Jess Rodriguez, Jen’s best friend, who are guiding her toward a full-time career in conservation after graduation.

CHARTING A COURSE FOR REEF RECOVERY

Meanwhile, the first grant from the Koons-Ayala Marine Fisheries Science & Conservation Endowment, established by longtime supporters Connie and Garner Koons, is already advancing vital reef research.

University of Central Florida graduate student Taylor Hill is using climate models and cutting-edge genetic tools to map how Florida’s reef-fish populations are connected today and how warming seas may shift those links tomorrow. Her work will pinpoint critical spawning and nursery grounds, inform where artificial reefs should be built, and help managers protect the genetic diversity fish need to thrive.



Taylor Hill

“Knowing my research can make a tangible difference drives everything I do.”

“Florida’s reefs are a foundation for both marine life and the people who depend on them,” Taylor said. “Knowing my research can make a tangible difference drives everything I do.”

From sunrise bat surveys in pine flatwoods to late-night DNA sequencing in reef labs, Lily and Taylor are walking different paths that point toward the same horizon: a thriving wild Florida for future generations. Their journeys, inspired by the passion of one researcher and the generosity of one family, remind us that conservation is, at its heart, a relay. Each generation learns, discovers, and then passes the baton forward.

WE WENT BIG FOR FLORIDA'S SPRINGS

ICYMI: our Protect Florida Springs license plate made its billboard debut this spring! Planted in spring country, the two larger-than-life signs were a reminder that small actions, like updating your license plate, can have a massive impact on the places and wildlife we love.



Funds from the Protect Florida Springs plate support on-the-ground conservation across the state. Thanks to Floridians who’ve already purchased the plate, we’ve awarded more than \$2.4 million in grants to restoration, research, and education efforts.

MORE THAN \$258,000

to protect manatees through research, habitat mapping, and public education

MORE THAN \$225,000

for spring-based education programs

MORE THAN \$142,000

for restoring vital habitats like eelgrass and submersed vegetation

DEDICATED FUNDING

for cleanups and economic studies that make the case for long-term conservation

So yes, your plate matters! It helps fund the scientists, educators, and volunteers working every day to keep our freshwater ecosystems flowing.

Haven’t made the switch yet? Find out how to match your plate to your passion by scanning this QR code.



Melodie Griffin, *Director of Grants*

Melodie discovered her passion for wild Florida shortly after graduating from Auburn University when she moved to Florida to work in animal nutrition at Walt Disney World. Though the role gave her an initial glimpse into the state’s wildlife, it was her husband, a Florida native and passionate outdoorsman, who introduced her to the state’s beauty. Together, they embarked on adventures airboating through the Everglades, riding through dense cypress forests, and lobstering in the clear waters of the Gulf. Her favorite Florida animal is the gentle, charming manatee since they remind her to pause and appreciate life’s simple pleasures.

Melodie’s connection to nature, however, began well before encountering manatees. Growing up in northern Virginia, she spent her summers boating on the Potomac River. **One summer in particular left a lasting impression: the fresh clam chowder tasted unmistakably of oil due to river pollution. This experience planted the seeds of Melodie’s lifelong commitment to conserving the health and beauty of the natural world.**

Melodie joined the Foundation in March and quickly got to work. In her role, she manages the Foundation’s extensive grantmaking portfolio, including grants funded by specialty license plates, to ensure they align with state statutes. Much of her time is dedicated to collaborating closely with grantees, providing them the guidance and support necessary to achieve their conservation goals. She finds particular fulfillment in meeting grantees in person, witnessing firsthand the passion and tangible impacts of their work. “Experiencing the dedication of our partners is incredibly inspiring,” Melodie shared.



“Experiencing the dedication of our partners is incredibly inspiring.”

When she’s not meeting grantees, you can find her and her husband outdoors, continuing to enjoy the beauty of wild Florida. Today, she finds her greatest joy exploring Florida’s scenic trails on horseback.



Florida Everglades | Photo by Tim Donovan

HITTING THE BULLSEYE FOR CONSERVATION AND EDUCATION

On a cool April weekend, more than 600 archers gathered in Gainesville for the 2025 Florida National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP) State Tournament.

Our Foundation has supported the tournament for four years, fostering the values that archery instills: discipline, patience, and self-confidence. Our \$30,000 sponsorship this year, funded by a grant from our *Wildlife Foundation of Florida* specialty license plate, helped expand the reach and impact of the NASP. With over 400 schools participating across the state, NASP introduces students from all backgrounds to archery, many for the first time. The program has been especially effective in reaching women and

minority students, offering a new way to connect with nature and conservation through a sport that values focus over flash.

For many, it’s also their first step toward a lifelong appreciation for wild Florida. Recent surveys show that NASP is a powerful gateway to outdoor recreation and conservation engagement. A growing number of students are purchasing bows, expressing interest in hunting, and pursuing safety education. At the same time, more than half report feeling more connected at school and more motivated in the classroom because of their involvement in archery. It’s a rare program that builds both



academic confidence and a deeper connection to the natural world. By supporting NASP through license plate funds, our Foundation is investing in the future of Florida.

TRACKING FLORIDA KEYS BONEFISH SPAWNING GROUNDS

Thanks to a \$35,000 grant from our Foundation, Bonefish & Tarpon Trust (BTT) is diving in to understand where bonefish spawn in the Florida Keys. Building on a major win in 2023 when a spawning aggregation was successfully documented in the Upper Keys, BTT has turned its attention to three additional reef locations suspected to be critical for the species’ reproduction. With a network of tagged fish and underwater acoustic receivers, they’re collecting data around the clock to uncover the mystery of where thousands of bonefish gather to spawn under the light of the full and new moons.

Known as the “grey ghosts of the flats,” bonefish are one of Florida’s most iconic and elusive gamefish. Found primarily in the shallow waters of the Florida Keys and Biscayne Bay, these

fast, stealthy swimmers offer world-class catch-and-release fishing and can live over 20 years. A recent study by scientists at the University of Miami estimated the value of a single bonefish in the Florida Keys to be \$3,500 each year. That’s nearly \$75,000 over the lifespan of the fish! Though much of their biology remains a mystery, their value to Florida’s economy and coastal ecosystems makes protecting their spawning grounds more important than ever.

So far, seven spawning events have been detected, most of them at night, led by migratory fish coming from as far as Islamorada. By identifying and protecting these precious spawning sites, BTT, with our support, is helping to ensure these iconic fish have a future in our waters.



“Though much of their biology remains a mystery, their value to Florida’s economy and coastal ecosystems makes protecting their spawning grounds more important than ever.”

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THE FUTURE OF FLORIDA'S CORAL REEF

For more than five years, the Florida Coral Rescue Center (FCRC) in Orlando has quietly led a global effort to safeguard the future of Florida's Coral Reef thanks to the partnership of SeaWorld, Disney Conservation, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and our Foundation. As the largest gene bank for rescued Florida corals, FCRC is a lifeline for species struggling against climate change, disease, and habitat loss. But beyond being a sanctuary, FCRC is also a world-class coral spawning center, successfully breeding species that have never reproduced anywhere else in human care.

One of those groundbreaking successes is grooved brain coral (*Diploria labyrinthiformis*). This species is highly susceptible to stony coral

tissue loss disease in the wild, making it all the more important to spawn genetically diverse specimens on land. This summer FCRC broke records by welcoming hundreds of thousands of the coral babies into the world. With full tanks at both FCRC and partner facilities, the Coral Restoration Foundation put the 200,000 extra bundles of joy back onto Florida's Coral Reef.

The success of these spawning events is a testament to the immaculate care FCRC staff provide to rescue corals. Corals can be very finicky when it comes to spawning and will only do so when happy (i.e. perfect water chemistry, temperature, consistent feeding cycle, etc.)

Florida's Coral Reef stretches 350 miles and supports a quarter of all marine life, but threats like stony coral tissue loss disease, rising ocean temperatures, and invasive species have devastated large sections. That's why the work at FCRC is critical. By preserving genetic diversity and breeding heat- and disease-resistant corals, scientists are giving your reef a fighting chance. **With continued research, funding, and public support, these efforts could rewrite the future of coral restoration, not just in Florida, but worldwide.**

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Universal Insurance Holdings

PROVIDING COVERAGE FOR OUR CORAL

As a company that understands the risks posed by climate change, Universal Insurance Holdings Inc. (UVE) is committed to sustainability and corporate responsibility, generously donating \$10,000 to our Restoring Our Reefs fund. But their commitment to protecting Florida's Coral Reef goes beyond their financial contribution. UVE employees joined us for a lunch-and-learn with Islamorada Conservation and Restoration Education, where they deep-dived into the challenges facing the reef and how their donation will directly support restoration efforts.

"As a leading provider of property and casualty insurance, we are keenly aware of the critical role a healthy coral reef ecosystem plays in protecting our communities and environment. Florida's Coral Reef is not only a natural treasure but also a vital barrier that safeguards our shorelines and supports marine biodiversity," said Stacey Tomko, VP of Marketing at UVE. **"We are proud to contribute to the great work being done by the Foundation. This is more than a donation, it's a commitment to preserving our environment and ensuring a resilient future for all." Partners like UVE make coral restoration work a reality.**

DONORS

NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT YOU.

THANK YOU TO ALL THE INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS WHO
DONATED FROM JANUARY 1ST, 2025 THROUGH JULY 31ST, 2025.

Photo by Andy Wraithmell

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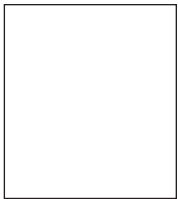
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FRONT COVER IMAGE: Blue Heron (Ardea herodias) | Photo by Andy Wraithmell • BACK IMAGE: Photo by Tim Donovan