

**Minutes of the
Meeting of the Board of Directors
Monday, September 15th, 2025**

Board Members in Attendance

Mrs. Laura Russell, Chair; Mr. Joshua Kellam, Vice Chair; Mr. Kent Shoemaker, Second Vice Chair; Ms. Valerie Boyd, Treasurer; Mr. Robert Spottswood, Jr., Secretary; Mr. Carlos Alfonso; Mr. Keenan Baldwin; Ms. Kathy Barco; Mr. Ed Burr; Mr. Jim Etscorn; Mr. Preston Farrow; Mr. Todd Jones; Mr. Joe Neber; Mr. Townsend Tarpani.; Mr. Nick Wiley; Mrs. Daphne Wood; Mr. Roger Young, FWC Executive Director.

Board Members Not in Attendance

Mr. Paul Avery, Mr. Rodney Barreto, Mr. Jerry Pate.

Staff in Attendance

Mr. Andrew Walker, Mr. Will Bradford, Ms. Michelle Ashton, Mrs. Emily Dey, Ms. Melodie Griffin, Ms. Francesca Klypchak, Ms. Julie Lane, Ms. Tindl Rainey, Ms. Dani Richter, Ms. Rachael Schirmer, Mrs. Erin Smart, Ms. Mary Sunukjian, Mr. J.P. Urban.

Guests in Attendance

Mr. John Lacy, The Lacy Group/Merrill Lynch; Mr. George Warthen, FWC Chief Conservation Officer; Mr. Rett Boyd, FWC Assistant Executive Director; Ms. Jennifer Goff, FWC Deputy Director of Habitat and Species Conservation; Mr. Ron Mezich, FWC HSC Section Leader; Mr. Josh Gamblin, Stolen Saddle Ranch Manager; Ms. Christina Kontos, Babcock Ranch Environmental Conservation Manager & Wildlife Biologist; Mr. Syd Kitson, developer of Babcock Ranch.

I. Call to Order

Chair Laura Russell called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. and welcomed the Board, staff, and guests to Lake Timber Lodge in Babcock Ranch. She thanked all attendees for making the time to be present, whether in person or via Zoom, and expressed special appreciation to the team at Babcock Ranch for hosting the meeting.

II. Presentation on Babcock Ranch Innovations

Chair Russell introduced Ms. Christina Kontos, who provided an overview of Babcock Ranch's approach to ecological stewardship, sustainability, and habitat protection. Ms. Kontos described the integration of residential development and environmental and energy conservation that defines Babcock Ranch. Her presentation highlighted key aspects of the site's long-term water quality monitoring, wildlife tracking, and prescribed burn management, which support a wide variety of native species and ecosystems.



Board Members expressed admiration for the scale and intentionality of Babcock Ranch’s environmental design. Mrs. Daphne Wood and Mr. Joe Neber commented on the importance of leveraging such models to inspire similar efforts elsewhere in the state.

III. Consent Agenda

Chair Russell introduced the Consent Agenda, which included the approval of the minutes from the June 3, 2025 Board meeting; the final versions of the Foundation’s FY26 principal goals and budget; and the Grants Committee’s recommendations for grant requests under \$50,000.

Chair Russell noted the FY26 budget had been updated since the June meeting to reflect final FY25 numbers, which include an operational surplus and a few small adjustments. We continue to anticipate distributing approximately \$20 million in programmatic funds to FWC and other organizations. Budget priorities and programmatic focus have not changed since the Board’s discussion in June. Similarly, the final version of the FY26 principal goals reflected updated benchmarks but no substantive revisions from the draft reviewed previously.

Mrs. Kathy Barco, Chair of the Grants Committee, briefly reviewed the approximately forty under-\$50,000 requests for *Wildlife Foundation of Florida* (deer) tag grant funds. The committee recommended funding 34 proposals totaling \$312,000. She thanked Director of Grant Programs Mrs. Melodie Griffin for her work in collecting and synthesizing the proposals and the committee for its thoughtful vetting.

With no further discussion, Mrs. Wood moved to approve the Consent Agenda. Mr. Joshua Kellam seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

IV. FWC Director’s Remarks

Col. Roger Young, executive director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), began by explaining steps the agency is taking to ramp up security at FWC public meetings that concern potentially controversial topics, while balancing both safety and public participation.

The Bear Hunt

Director Young reported the Commissioners approved a lottery-based Florida black bear hunt for the fall. Mr. George Warthen in responding to a question from Mr. Keenan Baldwin, described how out-of-state applications will be handled.

NASCAR Partnership

Director Young has FWC has formalized a partnership with NASCAR that will debut at the Daytona 500 in February 2026. The partnership will build upon existing NASCAR relationships with Bass Pro Shops and other NASCAR sponsors, giving FWC a high-visibility platform for outreach on hunting and outdoor heritage. Mr.

Neber noted that NASCAR's broad reach provides an opportunity to connect with communities that are central to both fishing and hunting traditions.

Second Amendment Tax Holiday

Director Young also highlighted Florida's new Second Amendment Sales Tax Holiday, which began September 8th and continues through December 31, 2025. This tax holiday, also called the Hunting, Fishing, and Camping Sales Tax Holiday, was created as part of the 2025-2026 state budget and allows consumers to purchase a wide range of related items, including firearms, ammo, and camping gear without paying state sales tax.

V. Foundation CEO's Remarks

Mr. Andrew Walker, Foundation president & chief executive officer, opened his remarks by highlighting the recent success of the 2025 record-breaking Python Challenge, thanking Ms. Richter and her staff for raising \$40,000 in lead gifts to support the Challenge.

"Nature-Deficit Disorder"

Mr. Walker referenced an intriguing study reported in *The Guardian* purporting people's psychological connection to nature has declined by more than 60 percent since 1800 in the United Kingdom, based on the number of references to nature in literature over the past 225 years. The study also found UK citizens now spend less than five minutes outdoors each day. The study's authors describe this as an "extinction of experience" that threatens future conservation support, and they emphasize the need for early engagement programs and urban greening projects. Mr. Walker noted one positive: the number of references to nature in English-language literature may have bottomed out; in the past two decades it has begun to increase.

The 2024-2028 Strategic Business Plan

Mr. Walker delivered the first-year progress report on the Foundation's Plan. He highlighted progress on several initiatives, including expansion of our conservation partnerships to now include work with NASA and the U. S. Space Force to mitigate for habitat loss and impacts on seven threatened species on and along the coast of Merritt Island. MOU's with NASA, USFWS, and the Space Force are being prepared. We would act as conservation banker for mitigation funds paid by various rocket companies at the Kennedy Space Center, and we will work with each agency to use those funds to offset habitat and species loss due to the increasing number of rocket launches and rocket pads at Kennedy. FWC staff have joined these conversations and will be an informal party to the work.

Current rocket launches may already be affecting marinelife and the coastal fishery; the Foundation will encourage more acoustic studies of the impact on marine as well as terrestrial wildlife in FL and in Texas where the large SpaceX Starship is being tested before relocation to Kennedy.



Mr. Walker also updated the Board on Okaloosa County's reefing of *The SS United States*, which has been stripped of all chemicals and fuel and is awaiting final inspection. The County hopes to sink the ship before the end of the year. Garner and Connie Koons are providing \$2 million toward the project via a gift to our Foundation.

Mr. Walker closed by reaffirming the Foundation's commitment to the ambitious goals laid out in the strategic plan and thanked the Board for their guidance in the first year of implementation.

VI. Finance & Audit

Treasurer Ms. Valerie Boyd reported the Finance and Audit Committee met on September 11, 2025. She observed the Foundation continues to experience solid growth in many areas, including charitable gifts for operations. The Foundation did have a year-to-year decline in program contributions in FY25 [note: largely due to a one-time \$400,000 gift from Bass Pro Shops for Lake George restoration received in the previous fiscal year]. At the same time, total charitable gifts of \$5,000 or more increased from 43 such gifts in FY24 to 72 gifts in FY25.

Director of Finance Mrs. Erin Smart reported the Foundation closed the year with a total net surplus of \$15 million, including an operating surplus of \$137,000 despite the intentional spend-down of unrestricted reserves received in prior fiscal years but spent in FY25. Total assets under management at year-end stood at \$105.7 million. Mrs. Smart said the FY25 audit has been finalized and that the Foundation anticipates receiving a clean audit opinion.

Mr. Kent Shoemaker noted that year-over-year financial comparisons, along with a review of the composition of the \$105.7 million in assets under management, provide important context for understanding both progress and any potential areas of concern for the Foundation.

Mr. John Lacy of The Lacy Group/Merrill Lynch presented the quarterly investment report. He described how the Foundation's portfolio had performed amid market fluctuations and confirmed that all investment accounts remain in compliance with the Foundation's Investment Policy. Mr. Lacy affirmed the portfolio's stability as the Foundation enters the new fiscal year and noted that for FY 25, the portfolio experienced a 12.41 percent total return on investment, well exceeding the S&P 500 PR performance of 7.78%.

VII. Visit from Syd Kitson

The Board welcomed Mr. Syd Kitson, founder of Babcock Ranch, who shared remarks about the community's vision and its integration of conservation into large-scale planning. Mr. Kitson described Babcock Ranch as a living model for how development can coexist with nature, highlighting renewable energy use, wildlife corridors, and water management practices. He emphasized the goal of making the project a replicable example across Florida.

Chair Russell thanked Mr. Kitson for hosting the meeting and for his leadership, noting that Babcock Ranch's work reflects the Foundation's mission to ensure Florida's natural heritage is preserved for future generations.

VIII. Conservation

Director of Conservation & Strategic Initiatives, Ms. Tindl Rainey, presented highlights from the Foundation's summer conservation work. She reported that 45 acres of submersed aquatic vegetation were restored or protected through plantings at Weeki Wachee River and Indian River Lagoon, along with fencing at Lake George. She noted that one million clams were released at Titusville Causeway to improve water quality and support seagrass restoration, and that permits have been requested for a new 20-acre eelgrass project in the Sebastian River. Ms. Rainey also shared that four additional landowners have enrolled in FWC's pioneering Florida panther payment-for-ecosystem-services (PES) project, supported by an increased Foundation contribution now totaling nearly \$500,000. She also updated the Board on the white paper the Foundation has commissioned in partnership with University of South Florida to make Transfer of Development Rights programs a much more innovative and effective conservation finance tool. She concluded with progress photos of the Weeki Wachee eelgrass restoration, a short video of the Titusville clam release, and an update on FDOT's first wildlife overpass under construction on I-4.

Panther PES Program Presentation

Following Ms. Rainey's overview, Ms. Jennifer Goff, Deputy Director of FWC's Habitat and Species Conservation Division, presented an overview of the Panther PES Pilot Program, which she and Mr. Ron Mezich oversee. Sixty-nine landowners applied, and the 15 highest-ranking applicants [note: now 19] stewarding 40,000 acres of vital panther habitat were offered enrollment.

Ms. Goff answered a number of Board member questions about how incentives are structured, how long agreements will last, how landowner trust is being built, and what monitoring practices are in place. She also said FWC is partnering with Montana where a similar program is underway to exchange data and strengthen the approach. She closed with personal reflections on her path into wildlife conservation and her commitment to ensuring the program's long-term success.

Stolen Saddle Ranch Presentation

The Board then heard from Board member Mr. Baldwin and Mr. Josh Gamblin, manager of the Baldwin Family's Stolen Saddle Ranch. Mr. Baldwin expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share the Ranch's work, emphasizing the significance of private landowners in advancing habitat restoration across Florida. Mr. Gamblin described recent restoration projects at the Ranch, highlighting how their new land management practices are having an immediate benefit for wildlife.

Board members responded enthusiastically, with Mr. Robert Spottswood Jr. and others commenting on the value of seeing such efforts firsthand. Mr. Walker asked about the response of neighboring landowners, and



Mr. Baldwin explained that sharing data has been instrumental in demonstrating the compatibility of conservation with working lands.

IX. Coastal Corridor

Mr. Spottswood opened the discussion on the Coastal Corridor, describing it as one of the most important conservation opportunities before the Foundation. Board members discussed the program's governance and possible long-term structure. There was discussion of whether the Foundation is the appropriate host of this initiative should it continue, and whether future funds from the legislature, if any, should be directed back to FWC – the agency's preference – or to an organization founded for the purpose of managing the program. Ms. Barco voiced concern over the possible political and legal ramifications of the Foundation having received a legislative grant of this size.

Following discussion, Mr. Ed Burr moved to confirm the *ad hoc* coastal corridor committee of Foundation board members and FWC staff; borrow up to \$2 million from Foundation reserves to initiate this work; and establish as needed an external line of credit up to \$15 million to complete the project. Mr. Baldwin seconded. The motion carried, with Mr. Preston Farior, Mr. Kellam, and Director Young abstaining. Mr. Rodney Barreto was not present.

Chair Russell closed the discussion by affirming the Board's commitment to shaping the Coastal Corridor into a landmark conservation effort.

X. Grant Requests

Ms. Barco, Chair of the Grants Committee, presented one grant request for the Board's consideration. She reported that FWC had requested \$100,000 to increase surveillance for chronic wasting disease in Florida following recent detections in white-tailed deer in Georgia near the state line. Ms. Barco explained that the Grants Committee had carefully reviewed the request and recommended its approval. She further noted that much of the surveillance work is being carried out in cooperation with taxidermists, who provide deer tissue for testing. This partnership has proven essential.

Ms. Barco moved for approval of the grant request. Mrs. Wood seconded. The motion carried unanimously, with Mr. Farior, Mr. Kellam, and Director Young abstaining. Mr. Barreto was not present.

XI. Communications & Events

Ms. Michelle Ashton, director of communications & events, reported continued growth across the Foundation's communications channels. The Foundation's social media audience has surpassed 40,000 followers, thanks principally to Ms. Rachael Schirmer's creative work. Our monthly E-newsletter continues to perform strongly, with an average open rate of 41 percent and below-industry unsubscribe levels.

Ms. Ashton highlighted recent campaigns, including *Leave a Wild Legacy* and *Baby Corals, Big Hope*. She also reported on the Foundation's first billboard campaign promoting the *Protect Florida Springs* license plate, which generated more than 1.3 million impressions and exceeded industry click-through benchmarks, contributing to an increase in plate sales.

Turning to events, Ms. Ashton shared that planning is well underway for *A Night for Nature 2026*, to be held March 27. She announced that GL Homes and Ducks Unlimited have already been secured as sponsors, with the Host Committee actively recruiting additional support

Ms. Ashton then presented a slideshow of potential award honorees for the event, including Clyde Butcher, Luca Martinez, Elle Barbeito, and Robert Spottswood Sr. Following discussion, the Board reached consensus to move forward with Mr. Butcher for the Chris Janson Creativity in Conservation and Mr. Spottswood Sr. for the Lifetime Conservation Achievement Award.

XII. Fundraising

Ms. Dani Richter, director of philanthropy, presented the major gifts and revenue report. She provided updates on the Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network (FYCCN) campaign to build an overnight camp at Tenoroc in Lakeland (projected cost of \$30M) and to make substantial improvements to the aging Everglades Youth Camp in Loxahatchee (\$14M). Lake Flato Architects are creating final designs for our campaign brochure, which is expected to be ready in November.

Ms. Richter also updated the Board on campaign to triple the size of the Florida Coral Rescue Center (FCRC) in Orlando (\$2.5 - \$3.0M) and transform it into the state's largest coral-propagation center. A grant application for \$2.3 million has been submitted to the coral program administered by FDEP, and the Foundation plans to submit similar requests this fall and winter to other potential major donors, including the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Mrs. Richter reported that nationwide, overall giving was slightly above inflation in 2024, while the proportion of charitable gifts for environmental and animal welfare causes remains at about 3 percent of all giving. The Foundation has sustained a 40 percent donor acquisition rate, driven by a strong social media strategy and consistent earned media. Her team is looking at ways to improve our donor retention rate, to overcome the fact that many donors give during a crisis (manatee starvation, hurricane recovery) and not year after year. She also noted that 90 percent of the donor base contributes less than \$5,000 annually, which is typical for nonprofits.

XIII. Governance

In the absence of Mr. Shoemaker, Chair Russell led the Governance discussion. She noted that the Foundation has room to welcome two to four new members to the Board and encouraged Directors to consider qualified candidates for nomination. She emphasized the importance of continuing to strengthen the



Board’s capacity with individuals who bring diverse skills and perspectives who are nonetheless aligned with the Foundation’s mission as a conservation organization also dedicated to outdoor recreation and youth outdoor education.

XIV. Open Session

Chair Russell opened the floor for open discussion. Ms. Barco shared her thoughts on the Foundation’s 2024 – 2028 Strategic Business Plan, commending the clarity of the goals and encouraging members to remain actively engaged as the plan advances into its second year of implementation. Several members voiced agreement, noting that the Strategic Business Plan provides important direction for both program development and fundraising.

XV. Closing Remarks

There being no further business, Chair Russell thanked the Directors, staff, and guests for their continued commitment and contributions. She expressed appreciation for the thoughtful discussions throughout the day and for the dedication shown to advancing the Foundation’s mission.

Chair Russell then adjourned the meeting at 2:55 p.m.

Mrs. Laura Russell, Board Chair

Date

Mr. Robert Spottswood Jr., Secretary

Date

Mr. Andrew Walker, CEO

Date