NATURE MATTERS

FISH & WILDLIFE FOUNDATION OF FLORIDA



FALL 2026 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.

Nick Wiley | *Executive Director*

THE FLORIDA MODEL OF CONSERVATION

In some places, the transition from summer to fall can be a bold statement of chilly breezes and explosions of bright foliage colors. But here in Florida, the signs of seasonal change are more gradual and subdued, more like cypress domes slowly turning from green to gold. Summer doesn't give way to fall so easily here, so we have to be more tuned in to nature to fully appreciate this special time of year. **As a reader of this newsletter, I know you are among the more tuned in, and you know the very survival of our fish and wildlife also depends on their sensitivity to seasonal transitions. They are hard-wired to sense the gradual shift in their exposure to sunlight as fall days grow shorter. Biologists call this "the power of photoperiod," and it is a primary driver of movements, migration, breeding behavior, and more.**

Even with the slow and subtle nature of fall transitions in Florida, there is still so much going on in the outdoors and so many rewarding experiences ready for the taking. Many of you face serious dilemmas, like whether to chase bull reds as they move into inlets and deeper waters for spawning; or set up your tree stand to hunt the rut; or brush up your duck blind as teal sweep in on the leading edge of the migration. Or you may have to choose between exploring a quiet beach to see shorebirds fueling up for their journey toward the equator or kayaking a shimmering spring run as swallow-tailed kites glide above you on their way to the Amazon. Choices, choices, choices, and you know because you are tuned in to the seasonal rhythms of wild Florida.

Throughout the history of conservation in Florida, those who are most tuned in to the natural rhythms of fish and wildlife have been the most passionate and generous in supporting conservation. If you mark your calendar every year for the date whitetails start working scrapes, when northern bobwhites start their covey calls, the last days you see hummingbirds at your feeder, or the first days you see pelagic fish move nearshore chasing bait runs, you are an important part of Florida's conservation community, and you are a legitimate reason we are so blessed with abundant fish and wildlife resources today. You enthusiastically support nonprofit conservation organizations that bring us together as volunteers, give us a unified voice, raise funds, support wildlife and fisheries science, and engage effectively in conservation policy.

Hickory Mound | Photo by David Moynahan

> *"A simple thank you isn't nearly enough, but please accept this one as a first installment. Thank you!"*

And here is some breaking news to illustrate the power of your support: following the splendid example set by Florida's Wildlife Corridor, you will read further in this newsletter about the launch of Florida's Coastal Corridor. With your encouragement, our elected officials are supporting conservation in the form of funding for Florida's coastal fisheries habitats. They understand these investments take care of what makes living in Florida so special while sustaining our outdoor recreation economy. Initial funding for Coastal Corridor will expand and connect our network of reef habitats to enhance marine ecosystems, support the life cycle needs and movements of coastal and pelagic fish, increase and enhance fishing opportunities, and support the economies of our coastal communities. Without the strong voices of people like you who are tuned in to the value of conservation, these wise investments in Florida's Wildlife Corridor and Coastal Corridor would never even get off the ground.

I want to close with a salute to Florida's vibrant network of nonprofit conservation organizations that work tirelessly to support Florida's conservation model. If you are among the tuned in, I know you have one, or two, or three favorite conservation organizations. I know because I see the bumper stickers and specialty license plates as I drive across the state. Our Foundation is proud to serve as a member of this community. As we stand with and support the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), our Board of Directors and professional staff are committed to growing partnerships and unity across this community, growing investments in conservation, and helping deliver high-visibility impacts with these investments. We know you, because you are tuned in, understand and appreciate these conservation impacts and will help inspire others to tune in as well and join this worthy cause. Together we will conserve Florida's fish and wildlife resources and make certain current and future generations continue to be profoundly awed by experiences with fish and wildlife, especially when autumn eases across our lands and waters.

-Nick Wiley





“THE CHALLENGES FACING FLORIDA’S WILDLIFE AND HABITATS ARE SIGNIFICANT, BUT SO IS THE COMMITMENT OF THE PEOPLE WORKING TO PROTECT THEM.”

-Laura Russell

Laura Russell | *Outgoing Board Chair*

A HELPING HAND FOR WILD FLORIDA

Much of a Board Chair’s work happens away from the spotlight. It can be found in thoughtful questions, difficult decisions, long conversations, and the steady confidence that keeps an organization moving forward. For the past three years, Laura Russell has brought all of that and more to her role as Board Chair of the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida.

During her tenure, the Foundation strengthened its financial footing, expanded partnerships, supported conservation efforts across the state, and prepared for an ambitious new chapter. Through it all, Laura remained focused on what mattered most: ensuring the Foundation could deliver lasting results for wild Florida.

> *“Serving as Board Chair has been a great privilege. Florida has given my family so much and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to give something back. I have seen firsthand what is possible when dedicated staff, Board members, donors, and partners come together around a shared love for this extraordinary state.”*

One of the most significant developments under Laura’s leadership was the launch of Florida’s Coastal Corridor, a long-term initiative to strengthen the interconnected coastal habitats that fish, wildlife, and people depend on. Her tenure also included the Foundation’s transition to new executive leadership. Her thoughtful leadership helped provide stability through the transition while ensuring the organization remained focused on its mission and future.

“Laura has led with wisdom, humility, and a genuine passion for conservation,” Nick said. “She understands that our greatest accomplishments are rarely the work of one person or organization. They come from building trust, bringing the right people together, and staying focused on the long view. Florida’s Coastal Corridor is a perfect reflection of that approach, and the Foundation is stronger because of her leadership.”

Under her leadership, the Foundation also helped connect young people with the outdoors, protect iconic species, and provide nearly $750,000 in hurricane relief to 120 FWC employees and their families following devastating storms. Laura was instrumental in the success of *A Night for Nature*, the Foundation’s annual celebration that raises funds for Florida’s natural future. She even coined the event’s name!

Yet for Laura, the most meaningful measure of success has never been a single project, event, or number. It has been the community of people behind the work. “I leave this role with tremendous confidence in the Foundation’s future,” she said. “The challenges facing Florida’s wildlife and habitats are significant, but so is the commitment of the people working to protect them. I am especially proud of the strong, collaborative organization we have built and excited to see where that spirit takes us next.”

Laura’s vision has helped position the Foundation for the opportunities ahead. Her impact can be seen in the partnerships strengthened, the conservation work advanced, and the ambitious ideas now taking shape along Florida’s coasts and throughout the state. **Most of all, it can be seen in a Foundation prepared to think bigger, work together, and continue protecting wild Florida.**

FLORIDA'S COASTAL CORRIDOR TAKES SHAPE

What began as an ambitious vision for Florida's coast is now taking shape beneath the water.

This fall the first habitat structures connected to Florida's Coastal Corridor were deployed, marking the beginning of a long-term effort to strengthen the coastal ecosystems that fish, wildlife, and people depend on. As the structures settled onto the seafloor, they became the first physical pieces of a much larger plan, one designed to support healthier fisheries, more resilient habitats, and thriving coastal communities for generations.

1ST HABITAT STRUCTURES DEPLOYED THIS FALL

Launched by our Foundation in partnership with FWC, Florida's Coastal Corridor will connect and strengthen critical habitats along the state's coastline. The initiative includes artificial reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves, and other coastal environments that work together as one living system. For many marine species, no single habitat can meet every need. Young fish may shelter among mangrove roots or seagrass before moving to reefs and deeper waters as they grow. Baitfish gather around structured habitat, attracting larger recreational and commercially important species. Marine turtles, dolphins, and countless other animals also rely on healthy coastal ecosystems during different stages of their lives.

Florida's Coastal Corridor recognizes those connections and takes a broader view of how conservation can help them endure.

The first deployments are an important step in that work. In places where natural hard-bottom habitat is limited, carefully designed structures can create shelter, feeding areas, and surfaces where marine life can grow. Over time, these structures can become active underwater communities filled with fish, corals, sponges, oysters, and other organisms.

They can also expand opportunities for anglers and divers while helping relieve pressure on natural reefs. By creating additional places for marine life and outdoor recreation to flourish, the Corridor will support both Florida's environment and the people whose livelihoods, traditions, and quality of life are connected to the coast.

The initiative is expected to grow over the years through projects developed with scientists, local governments, conservation organizations, reef builders, businesses, anglers, boaters, divers, donors, and coastal residents. Each project will respond to local conditions and conservation needs. Some communities may benefit most from new artificial reef habitat. Others may focus on restoring seagrass, mangroves, or the connections among them. Together, these individual projects will form a statewide network that is stronger than any single site could be on its own.

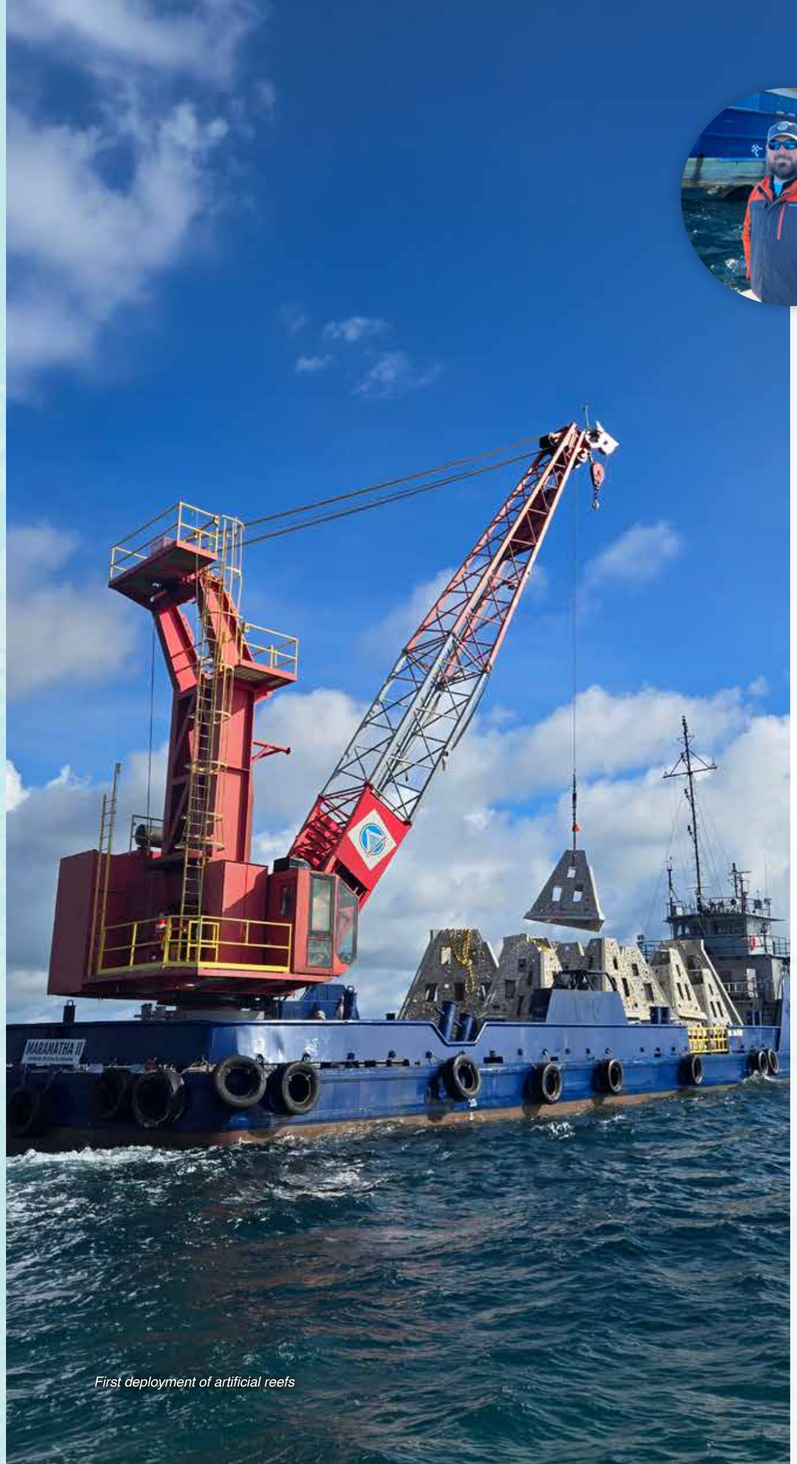
That spirit of collaboration is already at the heart of the first deployments. They represent years of planning, scientific expertise, partnership, and a shared belief that Florida can invest now in a healthier coastal future.

"Florida's Coastal Corridor is an investment in the future of our state," said Foundation Board Secretary Robert Spottswood, Jr. "These first deployments turn a bold vision into action, creating new habitat for marine life while supporting the anglers, boaters, divers, and coastal communities that make Florida so special. This is only the beginning, and I am proud to see such strong partnerships coming together to build something that will benefit generations to come."

The habitat structures recently placed beneath the waves may be the first pieces of Florida's Coastal Corridor, but they will not remain empty for long, gradually transforming into living habitat. Above the surface, the work will continue, one community, partnership, and project at a time.



Green sea turtle (Chelonia mydas)



First deployment of artificial reefs

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Mike Norberg

Coastal Corridor Project Director

For Mike Norberg, a connection to wild Florida began early. Growing up in the Panhandle, he spent much of his time camping, hiking, boating, and scuba diving. He especially treasured time spent fishing with his dad, whether they were catching pompano from the beach or loading up the car for a trip to the old Pensacola Bay Fishing Bridge. "My parents introduced me to the outdoors from an early age and helped instill a lifelong appreciation for nature," Mike shared. "I've always loved spending time in or on the water."

That lifelong connection now shapes his work as the Foundation's Coastal Corridor Project Director, a role he began in January 2026. Mike leads the development of Florida's Coastal Corridor, which was established through a 2025 legislative appropriation to create artificial reef habitat across the state. The initial investment is helping lay the groundwork for a much larger vision: a network of interconnected coastal habitats that supports healthy ecosystems, strengthens marine fisheries, and expands public access to Florida's waters. "I'm excited to be part of the early development of this program and to work with a team so focused on the vision and its successful implementation," he said. The Coastal Corridor brings together many of the things that have mattered to him throughout his life: healthy waters, thriving fisheries, outdoor access, and the opportunity to help protect the Florida experiences that first inspired him.

Although most of his time is focused on the Coastal Corridor, Mike has also gained a deeper appreciation for the full breadth of the Foundation's work. "Conservation and maintaining access to fish and wildlife resources is a team effort, and the Foundation truly delivers on supporting those goals through both public and private funding opportunities," he shared.

A HARVEST THAT GOES FURTHER

By the time donated venison reaches a Florida family's table, it has already passed through many hands.

A hunter chooses to share the harvest. A processor prepares the meat. Food banks and community partners help deliver it where it is needed most. Together, they transform a valuable natural resource into healthy meals for families across the state.

Florida Hunters for the Hungry has been bringing those pieces together for more than 25 years. With support from a $20,000 grant funded by our Wildlife Foundation of Florida specialty license plate, the organization is now expanding its reach and helping even more legally harvested wild game go to good use.

One of the biggest challenges is making sure hunters have a participating processor within reach. With help from the grant, Florida Hunters for the Hungry added three USDA-inspected processors in Milton, Madison, and Groveland, opening new opportunities for donations in the Panhandle, north Florida, and central Florida. "The Foundation's support has made a tremendous impact on our ability to expand our wild game donation program and provide nutritious protein to families in need across Florida," said Tracy Grevert, State of Florida Director.

In 2026 Foundation grant funding supported the processing of 3,700 pounds of donated wild game, providing more than 14,800 meals. "We are extremely grateful for the Foundation's investment in our mission to connect Florida's hunting community with families who need nutritious protein," Tracy said.

Florida Hunters for the Hungry and FWC are collaborating on the Farmers and Conservation Wild Game Harvest Initiative. The program will explore opportunities to collect deer removed under authorized depredation permits, which allow landowners to address damage to agricultural operations.

Rather than allowing the meat from those deer to go unused, the initiative aims to process and distribute it to families in need. The partnership can support farmers, provide food banks with a valuable source of protein, and contribute to deer health monitoring, including chronic wasting disease surveillance and sampling.

It is a practical solution with benefits that extend from Florida's farms and forests to kitchens across the state.

> *"Hunters have a long tradition of giving back to Florida's wildlife and communities, and this program carries that spirit even further,"*

said Melodie Griffin, Director of Grants at the Foundation. "By connecting donated venison with families who need it, Florida Hunters for the Hungry ensures a valuable natural resource is used responsibly while bringing hunters, processors, food banks, farmers, and conservation partners together around a shared purpose."

Each donated pound represents a meal for someone who needs it and another example of how Florida's outdoor heritage continues to strengthen our communities.



Burrowing owl (Athene cunicularia) | Photo by Ron Bielefeld

THE LONG WAY HOME

For two tiny Florida owls, the route home included a cruise across the Atlantic, a year in Spain, multiple quarantines, an international flight, and more paperwork than most seasoned travelers will ever encounter.

Their unlikely journey began in February 2025 when two burrowing owls slipped aboard Royal Caribbean's Allure of the Seas before it departed Miami. By the time crew members discovered them, the ship was already headed across the Atlantic to Cartagena, Spain. The owls, later named Benito and Concho, spent the voyage exploring the ship's green spaces, solarium, and miniature golf course. Crew members provided food and water under expert guidance before safely capturing the pair and transferring them to Spanish wildlife officials when the ship reached port.

Getting aboard may have been easy. Getting home was anything but.

Benito and Concho first received care at the El Valle Wildlife Recovery Center near Cartagena. They were later moved to a specialized wildlife rescue center near Madrid, where staff continued preparing them for a possible return to Florida.

Repatriating wild animals across international borders is rare and complicated. It requires cooperation among governments, wildlife agencies, veterinarians, rescue centers, and transportation officials. Permits must be secured, health screenings completed, and quarantine requirements satisfied on both sides of the journey. Without that extraordinary commitment, the owls would have remained in captivity because they could not be released into the wild in Spain.

Instead, conservation partners across two continents began working to bring them back where they belonged. Our Foundation helped pay for the owls' return flight and supported their care during the process, ensuring that thousands of miles would not stand between Benito, Concho, and a life in the wild. "We were proud to help fund the return of these burrowing owls to Florida and support their care along the way," said Tindl Rainey, our Managing Director, Programs & Strategy.

> *"Seeing them safely released back into the wild is a great example of what strong conservation partnerships can make possible."*

On February 10, 2026, nearly a year after their accidental departure, the owls boarded a flight from Madrid to Miami. The birds entered another quarantine, where veterinarians confirmed they were healthy and ready to return to the wild. Meanwhile, FWC biologists searched for an appropriate home. They chose Dinner Island Ranch Wildlife Management Area, a sprawling south Florida landscape of pasture, prairie, pineland, and wetlands with habitat known to support burrowing owls. Biologists prepared an existing vacant burrow and installed an artificial one to provide the newcomers with immediate shelter.

On March 12, Benito and Concho were banded so biologists could identify them in the future, then placed inside their new burrow. A short time later, they emerged, surveyed their surroundings, and flew into a nearby pasture. After a year of ships, rescue centers, airports, and quarantine facilities, the globetrotting pair were once again doing something wonderfully ordinary: they were being wild Florida owls.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR A WILD COMEBACK

A healthy forest is not always a quiet one. Sometimes it crackles with carefully managed fire. The landscape may look temporarily disturbed, but this work helps create the open, diverse habitat Florida's wild turkeys need to thrive.

Through the Florida Wild Turkey Cost-Share Program, land managers are improving those habitats one acre at a time. The long-running partnership among FWC, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Florida Forest Service has invested more than $7 million in habitat restoration since 1994. Funding from our Wildlife Foundation of Florida specialty license plate helps continue the work on public lands across the state.

27 PROJECTS | **151,000** ACRES ENHANCED

In 2025 the program supported 27 projects across 21 wildlife management areas, state forests, and other managed properties. Together, they improved or enhanced more than 151,000 acres, the program's largest annual impact to date. Much of that success began with fire. In northwest Florida alone, restoration teams helped complete 95 prescribed burns covering more than 109,000 acres. Elsewhere, crews used roller chopping, herbicide treatments, longleaf pine restoration, and other management practices to bring natural ecosystems back into balance. They also tackled some particularly stubborn neighbors.

Invasive plants such as cogongrass, Chinese tallow, kudzu, and Japanese climbing fern can crowd out native vegetation and alter the habitats wildlife rely on. Treating these plants across thousands of acres gives native species room to recover and helps land managers protect the progress made through prescribed fire and other restoration work.

Florida's forests evolved with frequent natural fires, which keep dense vegetation from overtaking the landscape and allow sunlight to reach the forest floor. Without fire, many habitats gradually become too thick and shaded for the grasses, wildflowers, insects, seeds, and fruits that wildlife depend on. For wild turkeys, that variety is essential. Open forests and grassy areas give adults room to feed and watch for predators. Hens need suitable cover for nesting, while young poults depend on insect-rich areas where they can forage and move safely.

Although wild turkeys are at the center of the program, they are far from the only beneficiaries. Gopher tortoises, eastern indigo snakes, Bachman's sparrows, northern bobwhite quail, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and many other species rely on the same open, fire-maintained landscapes. Decades of habitat management have even helped the red-cockaded woodpecker population shared by Blackwater River State Forest and Conecuh National Forest recover after it was once at risk of disappearing.

The benefits extend to people, too. Because the work takes place on public lands, healthier forests create better places to hunt, hike, camp, watch birds, and experience wild Florida.

"Habitat restoration is rarely a one-time job," said our Executive Director Nick Wiley. "Forests continue growing, invasive plants return, and the natural cycle of fire must be maintained. Success comes through consistent care, year after year and acre after acre."



Photo by Tim Donovan



"SUCCESS COMES THROUGH CONSISTENT CARE, YEAR AFTER YEAR AND ACRE AFTER ACRE."

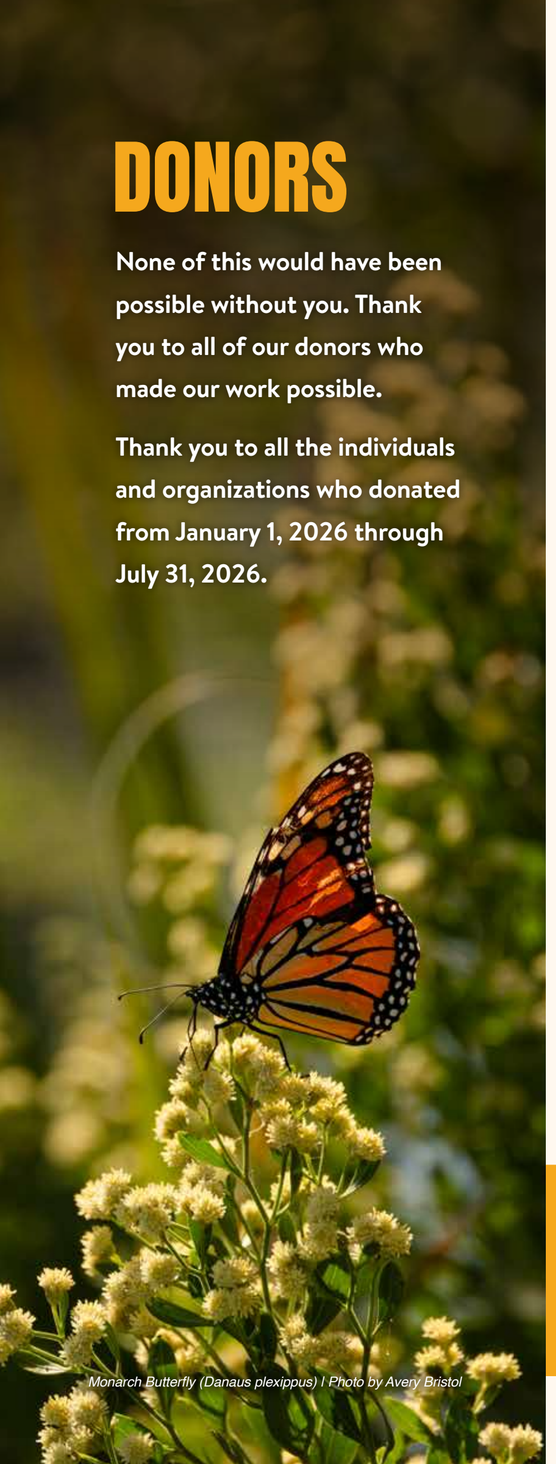
-Nick Wiley

Osceola Turkey (Meleagris gallopavo osceola)

DONORS

None of this would have been possible without you. Thank you to all of our donors who made our work possible.

Thank you to all the individuals and organizations who donated from January 1, 2026 through July 31, 2026.



Monarch Butterfly (Danaus plexippus) | Photo by Avery Bristol



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Osceola Turkey | *$500-$999*

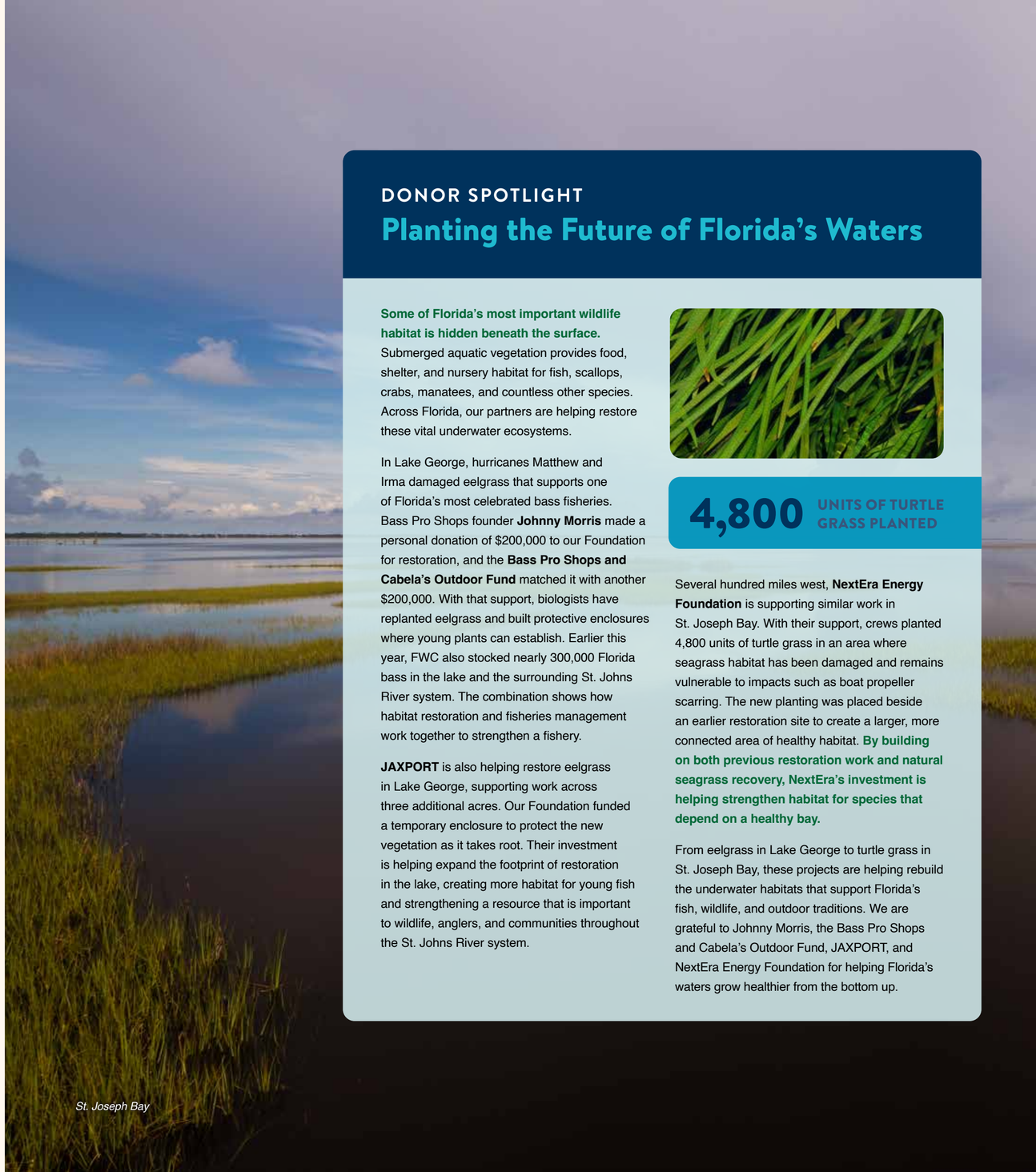
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St. Joseph Bay

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Planting the Future of Florida's Waters

Some of Florida's most important wildlife habitat is hidden beneath the surface. Submerged aquatic vegetation provides food, shelter, and nursery habitat for fish, scallops, crabs, manatees, and countless other species. Across Florida, our partners are helping restore these vital underwater ecosystems.

In Lake George, hurricanes Matthew and Irma damaged eelgrass that supports one of Florida's most celebrated bass fisheries. Bass Pro Shops founder **Johnny Morris** made a personal donation of $200,000 to our Foundation for restoration, and the **Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Outdoor Fund** matched it with another $200,000. With that support, biologists have replanted eelgrass and built protective enclosures where young plants can establish. Earlier this year, FWC also stocked nearly 300,000 Florida bass in the lake and the surrounding St. Johns River system. The combination shows how habitat restoration and fisheries management work together to strengthen a fishery.

JAXPORT is also helping restore eelgrass in Lake George, supporting work across three additional acres. Our Foundation funded a temporary enclosure to protect the new vegetation as it takes root. Their investment is helping expand the footprint of restoration in the lake, creating more habitat for young fish and strengthening a resource that is important to wildlife, anglers, and communities throughout the St. Johns River system.

4,800 UNITS OF TURTLE GRASS PLANTED

Several hundred miles west, **NextEra Energy Foundation** is supporting similar work in St. Joseph Bay. With their support, crews planted 4,800 units of turtle grass in an area where seagrass habitat has been damaged and remains vulnerable to impacts such as boat propeller scarring. The new planting was placed beside an earlier restoration site to create a larger, more connected area of healthy habitat. **By building on both previous restoration work and natural seagrass recovery, NextEra's investment is helping strengthen habitat for species that depend on a healthy bay.**

From eelgrass in Lake George to turtle grass in St. Joseph Bay, these projects are helping rebuild the underwater habitats that support Florida's fish, wildlife, and outdoor traditions. We are grateful to Johnny Morris, the Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Outdoor Fund, JAXPORT, and NextEra Energy Foundation for helping Florida's waters grow healthier from the bottom up.

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FRONT COVER IMAGE: Photo by Tim Donovan • BACK IMAGE: Roseate Spoonbill (Platalea ajaja)