Which Bird Best Represents Florida?

National Audubon Day is April 26th and in this issue our writers have featured some favorite, iconic Florida birds. Our state bird, the Northern Mockingbird, is also the state bird of Texas, Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas (only the cardinal represents more states than the mockingbird). Would one of these other birds be a better choice for Florida state bird? Go to this link or scan the QR code to vote for your favorite! Results will be reported in the June 2023 issue of The Bench.

Flamingos for Florida

By the Florida Flamingo Fairy aka Jennifer Tonge-Martin, Master Gardener Volunteer

The American flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) is indeed native to Florida, the only state where they are present in the wild. The first European explorers to Florida noted flocks of thousands. Flamingos, like many other birds, were decimated by the ladies’ hat fashion industry. But small numbers remained in the Caribbean and central America, and a few sightings were documented in the Keys and even the Everglades. This “Caribbean flamingo” was imported back to Florida in the 20’s and 30’s for the tourist trade. The flock at Sarasota Jungle Gardens, for example, has
They are one of the largest flying birds in the world, about five feet tall with their neck outstretched. Their dramatic pink coloring comes mostly from the tiny crustaceans they strain out of wetlands with their impressive black bills.

https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/birds/waterbirds/american-flamingo/

The Awesome Anhinga
By John Dawson, Master Gardener Volunteer

Traveling through any quiet fresh waterway in Florida, you may spot an odd sight: a large dark bird with wings spread wide towards the sun. This is the anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*), a member of the darter family. It hunts by spearing small prey with its sharp, slender beak. This waterbird can be found throughout the southern coastal areas of the United States. When swimming, only its long neck and head are seen above the water, giving it the nickname “snake bird.”

Unlike most waterbirds, anhingas do not have special oil glands to waterproof their feathers. This would create too much buoyancy and make prolonged underwater diving difficult. Their wings therefore become waterlogged. To fly properly, Anhingas spread their wings to dry them, hence the “pose.” They have unusually low metabolic rates and unusually high rates of body-heat loss. Spreading their wings allows them to absorb solar warmth.

Often confused with cormorants, the two can be distinguished by their beaks: anhingas have long sharp spearing beaks while cormorants have shorter beaks with a curve at the end. Cormorants also lack the turkey-like tail of anhingas. Anhingas prefer freshwater habitats while cormorants prefer saltwater, although they may nest close together.
Amongst Florida’s six heron, four egret, and two bittern species in the Ardeidae family of birds, the great blue heron (Ardea herodias) is the largest in North America. Widely adaptable to wetlands, marshes, shorelines, and across multiple cold-hardiness zones, this bird is a not an uncommon sight throughout wetter habitats in the United States.

The body is gray-blue, and the bird’s neck can be seen either coiled like an “S” or extended. Whilst it moves about quite slowly on foot, look out for the super-fast strike when it hits prey. One of the curiouser features of this bird is its hoarse croaking call: for such an elegant bird, it is an ugly sound! Specialized chest feathers help keep fish scale build-up off and their particularly keen eyesight (a high percentage of rod receptors) allows them to hunt at night as well as during the day. Their diet is primarily aquatic animals.

There is a white “version” of the great blue. It is often called a “phase” in bird books, but this is misleading, implying that great blues go through a stage where they are white. This is not true. The white great blue heron is a “morph” -- we know this because the white one is only ever spotted in extreme southern Florida. https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great_Blue_Heron/id

AMERICAN WHITE IBIS
Text & photos by Norma Kisida, Master Gardener Volunteer

The American white ibis (Eudocimus albus) is a medium-sized, nomadic wading bird easily recognized by its bright red-orange curved bill and long legs. Ibises are white with black wing tips which are usually visible only when flying. The juveniles are brown. They are native birds and common in Florida. In ancient Egypt, the ibis represented Thoth, the god of wisdom and learning!

The birds’ preferred feeding grounds are coastal marshes, flooded fields, mangroves, swamps, and lake edges. They use their long bills to sweep side to side and probe for food such as crabs, crayfish, insects, small fish, frogs, and snakes. However, in response to land development, they have made a remarkable adaptation to suburban and even urban life. Ibises are often seen foraging in groups in residential neighborhoods and around ponds for grubs, insects, worms, snails, frogs, and toads.

Major threats to the American white ibis are land development, which decreases their natural habitat, and pesticides used in agricultural and residential areas. https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/white-ibis

https://www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2021/this-iconic-bird-everglades-moving-burbs
A TRUE FLORIDIAN: THE ROSEATE SPOONBILL
By Joy Derksen, Master Gardener Volunteer

The roseate spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*) is my choice for the state bird of Florida. Texas and Louisiana have some, but few other states have year-round nesting groups. Found only in the Americas, spoonbills have lived in Florida for a long time, even making it into Audubon's *Birds of America* book. Despite being hunted nearly to extinction by feather collectors, spoonbills are making a comeback. Spoonbills stay here year-round, live monogamously, and raise two to five chicks on the shore or in mangrove tree nests.

Working hard, swishing their sensitive bills back and forth, spoonbills find and eat small fish, crabs, shrimp, and crayfish. These foods contain carotenoid pigments which give the birds their colorful red and pink feathers. Young birds are pale and must eat enough of this diet to obtain the vibrant adult coloration. The adult birds' colors are gorgeous and suited for beach wear! Both male and female spoonbills have red and pink on their wings, tails, legs and even their irises. The chest and neck are white. If you look at a spoonbill closely you will notice that it has a green head. As the bird ages, it loses feathers and becomes bald.

Spoonbills are suffering from habitat loss and overuse of pesticides which run off into the water and foul their food sources. Many Floridians have characteristics in common with this bird: a love of seafood, penchant for bright colors, and balding in old age. If we make the habitat better for spoonbills, we will make the habitat better for ourselves.

https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/birds/waterbirds/roseate-spoonbill/
https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/species/spoonbill/

Osprey, the "Fish Hawk"

Text & photo by Maureen Hirthler with Amy Stripe, Master Gardener Volunteers

The osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is a magnificent raptor reaching more than two feet in length and six feet across its wings. Soaring above Florida's waterways with its distinctive cry of successively high-pitched chirps and "M" shaped outstretched wings, the osprey executes perfect dives to capture fish for its diet. A reversible fourth toe and spines on their feet help them snatch and hold prey from lakes, rivers, canals, swamps, and coastal waters.

Once caught, the hapless fish faces forward – as that is the way it is caught (from behind) – but also to provide aerodynamics for the bird as it flies home with dinner.

Males and females mate for life and return to the same nesting area, where neighborhood residents look forward to their annual arrival and hatching of the chicks. They build large, distinctive stick nests and can be found in urban and undisturbed settings throughout the state. With loss of natural nesting habitat, artificial nesting platforms provide stability for the mating pairs from year to year.

Although ospreys are distributed world-wide, their year-round presence here in Florida represents a special glimpse into the beauty and diversity of our wildlife. University of Florida operates an "osprey cam" at a ballfield to monitor a pair of nesting birds https://wec.ifas.ufl.edu/extension/ospreycam/, but unfortunately, the site is down this year due to a change in the light pole where they traditionally nest. Stand by. Chesapeake Conservancy osprey cam viewers saw the return of “Audrey” on March 17 and now await the arrival of “Tom” to the nest site.

https://www.chesapeakeconservancy.org/ospreycam
Florida is home to about 470 species of native birds. Among them is the Florida scrub-jay. It is not only a true Floridian, but endemic, meaning it is found nowhere else on the entire planet. Florida scrub-jays, *Corvus coerulescens*, cannot simply live anywhere on the peninsula, but only in an ancient upland habitat called the Florida scrub.

Nestled in the scrublands are thorny shrubs and other low-growing vegetation, saw palmetto, and scrub oaks. Florida scrub-jays have not only adapted to the scrub’s harsh desert-like conditions but rely on its open patches of sand and understory plants to forage for food and keep an eye out for predators.

They have complex social systems and unique behaviors not typically seen in other species of scrub-jays. Rather than take to the air, Florida scrub-jays spend much of their time hopping about foraging for acorns and feeding on insects.

Florida scrub-jays do not venture far from their place of birth. While females incubate eggs, males stay close to the nest to protect and feed the females. Hatchlings remain with their families for most of their lives, helping to care for the next brood. If a parent is killed, one of the youngsters may assume a parental role. Together, the family will forage for food while one acts as sentry.

Unfortunately, Florida scrub-jays are dangerously close to extinction. Florida’s human population has quadrupled over the last decade, and scrublands have been fragmented due to development and agriculture. Only 7,700 to 9,300 individual scrub-jays or 3,000 to 4,000 family groups remain. For the last century, scrub-jay populations have declined 80 to 90%, and only 10-15% of the Florida scrub remains.

You can help the Florida scrub-jay by supporting scrub-jay preserves, protecting scrub patches in your property or neighborhood, and maintaining a maximum height of 10 feet for vegetation if you live near a scrub-jay habitat. Get involved: The Florida Audubon Society works with volunteers to monitor scrub-jays through their Jay Watch program.

For more information:
Jay Watch [https://fl.audubon.org/get-involved/jay-watch](https://fl.audubon.org/get-involved/jay-watch)
[floridastateparks.org/learn/florida-scrub-jay](floridastateparks.org/learn/florida-scrub-jay)
“The Florida Scrub-Jay: A Species in Peril 1, UF/IFAS Extension, Steve A. Johnson, Miller, and Blunden, WEC
[https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/florida-scrub-jay](https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/florida-scrub-jay)
Q: I keep finding this fruit on my property along a tree line. Do you know what it is? There aren’t any fruit trees there.

A: This fruit is a fig, not one to eat, but the fruit of Ficus pumila, the creeping fig. This plant is most often seen as a house plant, although it is sometimes used outdoors as a groundcover or for screening. The small, heart-shaped leaves make this plant attractive when contained, but its adhesive tendrils enable the creeping fig to cover and climb up and over any structure, including trees.

I suspect this vine has climbed into the trees and is thriving and reproducing, as seen by the fruits you are finding. The University of Florida/IFAS Assessment has deemed this plant to be a high invasive risk and has labeled it as ‘not suitable’ for use outdoors in any part of Florida.
Nothing says “Hello, Spring!” like cheerful yellow flowers! Native Florida greeneyes, coreopsis, and starry rosinweed will brighten up any garden. They all do their best in full sun, are fairly drought tolerant, easily (sometimes too easily!) reseed, and are not picky about soil.

Florida greeneyes (*Berlandiera subacaulis*) has vibrant yellow ray florets surrounding a head of greenish tubular disk florets that emit a light chocolate fragrance. Found naturally in sandhills to mixed upland forests, it is suitable for Zones 8b-10b. Propagation is best done with seeds as they have a large tuberous tap root. It is a bee magnet!  [https://www.fnps.org/plant/berlandiera-subacaulis](https://www.fnps.org/plant/berlandiera-subacaulis)

Coreopsis spp. (often called tickseed) is the Florida State Wildflower (zones 8a-11). There are 12 native species. The bright green leaves are a nice complement to the yellow flowers. Bees are frequent visitors.  [https://www.fnps.org/plant/coreopsis-leavenworthii](https://www.fnps.org/plant/coreopsis-leavenworthii)

Starry rosinweed (*Silphium asteriscus*) is a robust perennial that blooms year around in Central Florida. Suitable for Zones 8a-10b, it attracts both bees and butterflies. In full sun it may reach five feet, in shade two feet. With multiple flowers on each stem, it is a nice alternative to sunflowers. Birds enjoy the seeds, and bees and other pollinators abound.  [https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/bees/plants/Details/467](https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/bees/plants/Details/467)  [https://www.fnps.org/plant/silphium-asteriscus](https://www.fnps.org/plant/silphium-asteriscus)

**Spring Plant Sale - April 29**

Manatee County Master Gardener Volunteers will be holding a spring plant sale featuring wildflowers, natives, and more on the grounds of Extension at 1303 17th St., W., Palmetto from 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M.

Sign up is free on Eventbrite: [https://bit.ly/3y0JqjV](https://bit.ly/3y0JqjV)
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 4/11/23</td>
<td>10:00AM</td>
<td>Food Waste Prevention &amp; Composting</td>
<td>According to Project Drawdown, reducing food waste is the #1 personal action individuals can take to mitigate climate change. This class is being held during Food Waste Prevention Week to bring awareness to the problem and to provide strategies everyone can implement to reduce food waste including prevention and composting. <a href="https://www.eventbrite.com/e/food-waste-prevention-composting-tickets-519121585637">https://www.eventbrite.com/e/food-waste-prevention-composting-tickets-519121585637</a></td>
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<td>Friday 4/14/23</td>
<td>10:00AM</td>
<td>Plant Propagation for Beginners</td>
<td>Join UF/IFAS Extension Master Gardener Volunteers to learn how to get free plants! Plant propagation is a great way to get more plants for the price of one, methods covered will include collecting and starting seeds, stem cuttings and division. <a href="https://www.eventbrite.com/e/plant-propagation-for-beginners-tickets-519131515337">https://www.eventbrite.com/e/plant-propagation-for-beginners-tickets-519131515337</a></td>
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<td>Tuesday 4/18/23</td>
<td>10:00AM</td>
<td>Grafting &amp; Air Layering</td>
<td>Join UF/IFAS Environmental Horticulture Associate Professor Dr. Andrew Koeser and Residential Horticulture Agent Alyssa Vinson for an introduction to grafting and air layering. <a href="https://www.eventbrite.com/e/grafting-air-layering-tickets-519147693727">https://www.eventbrite.com/e/grafting-air-layering-tickets-519147693727</a></td>
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<td>Friday 4/21/23</td>
<td>10:00AM</td>
<td>Native Plants for Florida Yards</td>
<td>Adding native plants to your landscape has numerous benefits, from conserving water to attracting more birds and butterflies to your yard. Native plants can provide enormous beauty and new levels of enjoyment to your outdoor experiences. Learn which plants will do the best in which conditions. <a href="https://www.eventbrite.com/e/native-plants-for-florida-yards-tickets-519158245287">https://www.eventbrite.com/e/native-plants-for-florida-yards-tickets-519158245287</a></td>
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<td>Friday 4/21/23</td>
<td>11:00AM</td>
<td>No Stem Left Behind</td>
<td>Join UF/IFAS Extension for a conversation about how to get the most out of your backyard garden. Carrot greens? You can eat 'em, Sweet potato vines? You can eat 'em. Join us to learn how. We will discuss planting and care of common Florida vegetables and fruits along with their nutritional benefits and recipes that'll knock your stalks off! <a href="https://www.eventbrite.com/e/no-stem-left-behind-tickets-546368411627">https://www.eventbrite.com/e/no-stem-left-behind-tickets-546368411627</a></td>
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