

southwest florida update



marshes, Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve © Jeff Ripple

Sarasota County: More Than Five Years of Conservation Work

Since The Nature Conservancy began working with the Sarasota County Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program five years ago, we have helped protect almost 15,000 acres of land in Sarasota County. Highlights from 2004 include the acquisition of a 3,600-acre ranch, which includes five miles of Myakka River frontage, and the establishment of a 2,000-acre easement in the northern part of the county that will allow for public trails linked to the county's greenway system. The Conservancy is also funding signage, interpretive materials and trail markers on two county preserves — Red Bug Slough and Manasota Scrub — to enhance the public's enjoyment of the sites. A Conservation Speakers Series in Sarasota is planned for early 2005.

Partners With County Land Protection Programs

The Nature Conservancy continues to partner in conservation efforts throughout southwest Florida. In addition to pending acquisition on several tracts in Hendry County, staff have been providing input to the citizen oversight committee in Collier County as the Conservation Collier program gets up and running. We are also helping Charlotte County prepare for a referendum in November to support a local land acquisition program.

Scrub and Scrub-Jays in Southwest Florida



Florida scrub-jay © Eric Blackmore

The Nature Conservancy's Jay Watch Program involves highly trained volunteers who regularly record Florida scrub-jay activity over a two-week period every summer. This year, Jay Watch was expanded to include sites in Sarasota and Manatee counties, in addition to original sites in Highlands and Polk counties. The program documents links between habitat management and the vitality of scrub-jay populations, providing information for land managers to adapt their practices to improve scrub-jay survival. The Conservancy is also providing information for the development of a scrub-jay habitat conservation plan in Sarasota County. Noted ornithologist John Fitzpatrick, who serves on the Conservancy's national Board of Governors, is contributing to this effort.

Babcock Ranch

The Nature Conservancy is working with a broad coalition of federal, state, local and nonprofit organizations to protect Babcock Ranch. The 91,600-acre ranch contains pine flatwoods and pristine cypress swamps that provide essential water resources and habitat for wildlife, especially the Florida panther. In June, The Nature Conservancy announced a \$50,000 pledge toward the acquisition of Babcock Ranch. A member and his wife made the money available to the Conservancy specifically for acquisition costs. Since then, almost \$100,000 of private funding has been raised. Protecting Babcock Ranch will secure a contiguous corridor of conservation lands from Lake Okechobee to Charlotte Harbor and will provide wildlife habitat for wide-ranging species and migratory birds.



Cypress swamp © SFWMD

Marine Ecoregional Plan



sea fan © Bill Keogh

Last year, a team of Conservancy scientists began a comprehensive, scientific, planning process to identify threats to Florida's marine environment and develop strategies to improve and protect it. The Conservancy is working with a broad range of resource experts, including state and federal partners, agencies, academics and other conservation groups. The Central and South Florida Marine Ecoregional Plan will help coordinate conservation strategies to improve the long-term survival of critical coastal and marine habitats, and the many plants and animals that live there. The plan will also serve as a decision-support tool for future management issues.