



Corkscrew
Swamp Sanctuary

Along the Boardwalk

March, 2008

www.corkscrew.audubon.org

Volunteer Recognition Dinner

Saturday, March 22

4:30–7:30 PM

Blair Center

Sign up in the Bunting House.
See Sally for more information.

Stephen Kress to speak on planting natives for birds

Stephen Kress, author and Vice-President for Bird Conservation for the National Audubon Society and manager of the Society's Maine Coast Seabird Sanctuaries, will present a lecture in the Blair Center classrooms on March 19 at 1 PM.

There is an admission fee of \$12 for volunteers and Audubon members and \$15 general admission. Seating is limited; make reservations by contacting Lori at 348-9151, ext. 113

Kress is an associate at the Laboratory of Ornithology. He is author of *The Audubon Guide to Attracting Birds*, *North American Birdfeeder Guide*, *The Audubon Society Bird Garden*, *The Audubon Society Birder's Handbook*, *Project Puffin*, *Saving Birds* and the



Golden Guide *Birdlife* as well as many scientific papers on seabird biology and conservation.

Kress will discuss the inter-relationships between wild birds and plants that offer vital food, shelter and nesting habitats.

Owners of properties of all sizes can attract more birds and a greater variety of

birds by planting vegetation in a manner that mimics natural plant communities. Such plantings not only provide food, but they also offer nesting sites and shelter from weather.

His presentation discusses how planting the proper mix of native fruiting and flowering trees, shrubs and vines will help meet the needs of birds throughout the season.

There will be specific recommendations about which plants to select and how to arrange plants on both backyard and larger property scales. Using slides taken in model bird gardens and at his own property in Ithaca, New York, his presentation emphasizes why native plants are usually best for birds.

To further enhance the backyard for birds, Dr. Kress will discuss how to create brush piles, water pools, hedges and how to encourage cavity-nesting birds.

The program also includes specific suggestions for how to attract hummingbirds with plants and how to make backyard habitats safer places for birds.

While many of the world's great environmental problems may seem beyond reach, any property owner can create an oasis of natural habitat that provides food and shelter for resident and migratory birds.

Quick ID Guide: Female Red-winged Blackbird vs. Starling

We think of Red-winged Blackbirds as all black with the yellow and red shoulder patch. That's just the male. It's not so with the female. It has spots and streaks and is more brownish.

Habitat is the first clue to distinguish between a female Red-winged Blackbird and a Starling.

The Red-winged Blackbird prefers wet or marshy areas. The Starling prefers drier areas, usually

close to human habitation. It's country bird versus city bird.

Second, look at coloration. The female Red-winged Blackbird is dark brown with fine, light tan streaks. The Starling is black with lots of small white

specks, although the wings have a brownish tint.

If a close look is possible, consider the head. The female Red-winged Blackbird has a thick bill and a light bar that goes through and over the eye

to the back of the head. The Starling has a long, thin bill and lacks the eye bar.

Finally, consider location. If it's under the Bunting House feeders at Corkscrew, odds are that it's a female Red-winged Blackbird.



STARLING



RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

Bird Trivia

Why is there such a variation of color in Osprey eggs?

Discover the answer at www.collieriaudubon.org/birding.html

In Case a Visitor Asks

Anhingas and Cormorants are in different families, but both are members of the order *Pelecaniformes*, with pelicans, frigatebirds, boobies.

The Anhinga has a straight pointed bill and a very long, broad tail. It swims with only its head above water and is often seen soaring high, sometimes with a kettle of vultures. Both male and female have white-silver markings on the backs of the wings.

The Cormorant has a straight bill with a hooked tip and a relatively short tail. It swims on the water's surface, more like a duck, and flies in an untidy line. It lacks the bright wing markings.

What's the difference between an Anhinga and a Cormorant?



Anhingas hunt by swimming under water, spearing fish with their bills like herons or egrets. Cormorants dive and catch fish in their hooked bills, similar to the way that ducks feed.

Cormorants have an under layer of insulating feathers that enables them to thrive in colder climes. Anhingas lack the insulating layer and are restricted to warmer areas. The Cormorant spreads its wings to dry the under layer of feathers while the Anhinga spreads its wings to warm up.

Cormorants are faster swimmers and hunt faster swimming fish, often competing with people for food and game fish. Anhingas are slower swimmers; the fish they typically hunt are not desired by people, so they have no economic impact on commercial or sport fishing.

February Sightings



A Great-crested Flycatcher stirs after an early morning rain shower (February 15).



A Florida Panther walks down the road by the north dike tower (February 19—photo Art Blatt).



A Brown Thrasher forages under the Bunting House feeders (February 5).

Intern is ornithologist in progress

Brad Kolhoff is a recent graduate of the Environmental Studies Program at Florida Gulf Coast University where he focused on General Ecology. Someday he hopes to pursue a graduate degree in Ornithology.

Although born in Columbus, Ohio, he has lived in Dunedin, Florida, for the past 22 years.

Brad takes an interest the great outdoors: fishing, camping, hiking, canoeing, and birding. These hobbies have shaped the interest he has in the envi-



ronment to the point where a career in Ecological Sciences is his eventual goal.

At FGCU, he worked under the supervision of ecologist Dr. Win Everham, whose primary interests include observing how forests “respond” to disturbances such as fire and hurricanes, or both.

Under the tutelage of Dr. Everham, Brad worked extensively in the Fakahatchee Strand, Six Mile Cypress Slough, the Central Ridge Scrub, and on campus at Florida Gulf Coast University.

Drought, no doubt

Statistics compiled by Assistant Sanctuary Director Jason Lauritsen confirm that this year's drought at Corkscrew is the most severe ever.

- Rainfall recorded at the visitor center for 2007 was 16” below average.
- Since September 1, water levels have set new monthly lows for the lettuce lakes. In other words, each month, starting in September, has recorded the lowest lettuce lake water levels on record at Corkscrew.
- On February 14, water levels were already 7” below the average dry season low, and 23 inches below the average level for mid-February.

Water Lettuce

Pistia stratiotes

Water Lettuce is easy to identify: it resembles the top a floating open head of lettuce. It is found singly or in abundance at both lakes.

The leaves are light green on top and greenish-white on the underside. They are thick, hairy and ridged, enabling them to float and even support the weight of small wading birds that walk on them hunting for prey in the water. The leaves seem to have the consistency of a styrofoam cup. Roots hang below the plants and may extend for 18-20 inches.

Although it flowers, the blooms, *below*, are not seen except by very, very close examination.



Experts disagree as to whether or not water lettuce is native to the United States.

It has been documented as present in Florida since as early as 1765 when explorer William Bartram described and drew the plant at Lake George. This led many to believe water lettuce was native to North America.

It is native to South America where there is an abundance of regionally native insects associated with water lettuce, but the absence of coevolved herbivorous insects in North America is a strong argument for an exotic origin.

Water Lettuce is a member of the *Araceae* (Arum) family, which includes Gold Club and Green Arum which are also seen from the boardwalk. Water Lettuce is the only free swimming member of the family, forming no lasting shoots or tubers.

While it is a perennial in tropical and subtropical climates, in habitats with dry or cold seasons, individual plants die



completely, which contrasts with other member of the Arum family. When the lakes dry down but the peat remains moist, some Water Lettuce may survive until the summer rains return.

Although Water Lettuce is not winter-hardy, it will continue to grow when water temperatures drop to as low as 59 degrees

Water lettuce can propagate by growing stolons (stem-like shoots) which produce new rosettes. The stolons are brittle and break easily, helping the plant expand to new areas.

It also reproduces by seed. The seeds sink into water where they are covered by old roots and the remains of leaves.

Seed production is important because seeds can remain dormant for months and withstand drought and freezing.

Pollinators are unknown, but viable seeds have been produced in greenhouses in Zurich, Switzerland, where *Pistia* is definitely not native.

Pollination could be so generalized that any small animal such as little dipters or beetles could do the job, or it could be by asexual reproduction (*apomixis*, a fancy word for self-pollination). There is no definitive answer as yet.

On the down side, all parts of the plant are poisonous. If ingested in large quantities, it can cause intense burning and swelling of the lips, tongue, and throat; nausea; vomiting; and diarrhea. Nothing in the swamp eats it.

Whether it's native or exotic, Water Lettuce can pose many of the same environmental problems as Water Hyacinth, although to a much lesser degree.

Thick Water Lettuce mats can clog waterways and greatly reduce biological diversity. The mats eliminate native submersed plants by blocking sunlight, they alter immersed plant communities by pushing away and crushing them, and they also alter animal communities by blocking access to the water and/or eliminating plants the animals depend on for shelter and nesting.

By blocking the air-water interface, really dense Water Lettuce mats deplete oxygen in underlying water and sediments, eliminating many underwater animals such as fish.

Water Lettuce is on the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's list of Prohibited Species, and as such it is unlawful to purchase or transport this plant in Florida.



The Water Soldier

The scientific name for Water Lettuce is *Pistia stratiotes* (pronounced: *pis-tee-a / stra-tee-o-teez*). It comes from the Greek *pistos* (water) and *stratiotes* (a soldier).