




# A Message from our President

Dear Marion Audubon Society member,

The new year is here, and birding in Marion County is thriving! The year 2024 saw several new heights. Tami Reece and Tom Hince have established new county Big Year records, raising the bar even higher. Be sure to check out Tom’s article in this newsletter for more details.

Project 150 is progressing well and actively collecting data, even though some hotspots have shown little change. The goal of Project 150 is to increase the number of eBird checklists and the total species count in ten selected county hotspots. Reaching a total species count of 150 will bring significant continued attention to each hotspot. While some hotspots may reach this goal soon, others may require more effort. I encourage you to visit one or more of these hotspots regularly and help us achieve the 150 species status.



Project 150 Target Hotspots			
	Jan. 1, 2024	Jul. 1, 2024	Jan. 1, 2025
Ocala NF Juniper Springs	142	142	142
Big Sun Soccer Complex	133	138	145
Tuscawilla Park	131	136	136
Ocala Regional Sportsplex	123	127	127
Marshall Swamp Trail	120	126	127
Blue Run of Dunnellon Park	120	120	126
Soulliere Ponds	117	118	124
Glen Hill Farm	114	115	116
Ft McCoy Sod Farms	105	110	110
Rotary Sportsplex	104	107	112

As the year begins, we can look forward to the Spring Migration of 2025, with many activities planned. Please check our website for the full event calendar.

While you’re out birding, remember to engage with others and share information about the Marion Audubon Society. Anyone can become a member, and we frequently offer free public events. Don’t forget to capture a photo of our QR code (see below), which leads directly to the club’s sign-up page, so you can have it handy on your phone.

I hope you take advantage of the lovely cool weather and enjoy watching as many birds as possible.

Happy Birding,  
Kent Weakley  
President,  
Marion Audubon Society



MARION AUDUBON  
MEMBERSHIP CLUB  
SIGN-UP



Congratulations to our  
Top eBirders and record  
breakers from 2024:



- Tom Hince  
268
- Tami Reece  
253
- Scott Robinson  
242
- Steve & Darcy  
Shaddix  
231
- Brett Bickel  
229
- Elizabeth  
Stakenborg  
226
- Douglas Richard  
196
- Michael Baker  
188
- Kent Weakley  
185
- Alice Horst  
183
- Michele Reyes  
176
- Michael Warren  
174
- Paula Poblete  
160
- Raci Ulusoy  
158
- Michael Brady  
153
- Jason Glatt  
151
- Josephine  
Muncie  
149
- Candi Wallace  
149
- Wendy Milstein  
148
- Curtis Garth  
146

# Upcoming Events and Programs

## Winter Featured Speakers

By Liz Stakenborg, Membership Chair

February 11, 2025 at 7:00 pm – Mikayla Frierson will be presenting “Does This Bird/Animal need to be Rescued?” Mikayla is the founder and president of Rescuing Ocala Wildlife (ROW). She moved to Marion County in 2022 and is passionate about humane education, conservation and values cultivating a lot for wildlife and the outdoors within future generations. Mikayla has been involved in numerous bird and animal rescues in our area. ROW recently purchased a property in South Ocala with plans to build a public wildlife hospital. Their goal is to have non-releasable animals to share with the public, while continuing their mission of rescue and rehab in Marion County and the surrounding areas. ROW relies solely on the support of individual donations and the invaluable contribution of volunteers. Please consider making a donation to help this valuable resource in our community. Click [HERE](#) for Mikayla Frierson’s “Does this Bird/Animal need to be Rescued?”

April 8, 2025 at 7:00 pm – Michele Reyes will present “I’m going on a trip and I want to see some birds –now what?” Michele is past president of Marion Audubon and has been instrumental in bringing new programs to our group including the Ocala Nature Club for our younger birders. She has also mentored many birders and her patience and knowledge make her perfect for this role. Michele started birding while fulltime RVing and quickly learned how to anticipate which new birds she might encounter whether visiting a new state or country. Learn the tools and strategies she uses to make the most out of your next trip. Click [HERE](#) for Michele Reye’s “I’m going on a trip and I want to see some birds- now what?”

These speakers are included in the Winter/Spring Events Schedule below.  
Find us on Facebook for news, Instagram for photos and on Meetup for events.

### **Marion Audubon Society** **Winter/ Spring 2025 Schedule**

[MarionAudubon.org](http://MarionAudubon.org) — [Marion Audubon Meetup](#) — [Like us on Facebook](#)

Please RSVP through the Meetup app which will also keep you informed of all events. If you’re not on Meetup, you will miss out on some special last-minute opportunities for members!

#### **FREE GUIDED TOURS**

Join us as we walk around the park looking and listening for birds. We will identify what we find and teach you how to identify birds on your own. These tours are open to everyone. Wildlife photographers welcome.

#### **Sparrows! Halpata Tastanaki Preserve**

**Trip Leader(s): Alex Witkowski**

15430 SW Highway 484, Dunnellon, FL 34432

Saturday, February 8 @ 8 AM

#### **Sunnyhill Restoration Area – Blue House**

**Trip Leader: Liz Stakenborg & RH Davis**

19411 SE Hwy 42, Umatilla, FL 32784

Monday, March 24 @ 8 AM

#### **Marjorie A. Hoy Park - Orange Lake Overlook**

**Trip Leader: Scott Robinson**

19865 N US Hwy 441, Micanopy, FL 32667

Saturday, April 26 @ 8 AM

#### **Global Big Day - Ocala Wetlands Recharge Park**

**Trip Leader: Kent Weakley & Michele Reyes**

2105 NW 21st St, Ocala, FL 34475

Saturday, May 10 @ 9 AM

## **SPECIALTY WALKS AND EVENTS**

Our specialty walks, designated (Δ), are for paid members. These offer an opportunity to explore new birding hotspots in and near Marion County for new and experienced birders and photographers. Additional events will be added, so be sure to keep an eye on the Meetup page to see walk details and sign up. Driving instructions are essential for some locations and will be posted for the event.

**Become a member today through our website: [MarionAudubon.org](http://MarionAudubon.org)**

### **Δ World Equestrian Center**

**Trip Leader(s): Tami Reece**

1750 NW 80th Ave., Ocala, FL 34482

Saturday, February 22 @ 8 AM

### **Δ Shorebirds! Lighthouse Point Park**

**Trip Leader(s): David Simpson**

5000 S. Atlantic Ave., Ponce Inlet, FL

Saturday, March 15 @ 9 AM

### **Δ Fort De Soto Park**

**Trip Leader(s): Maxfield Weakley**

3500 Pinellas Bayway South, Tierra Verde, FL 33715

Saturday, April @ 8 AM

## **ZOOM (ONLINE) EVENTS**

Marion Audubon educational events/speaker series are online using Zoom. These are posted on Meetup and this is where you will find the Zoom link to attend the events. These events are open to the public and are free to attend unless otherwise posted.

### **Does This Bird/Animal need to be Rescued?**

**Presented by: Mikayla Frierson, founder and president of Rescuing Ocala Wildlife**

Tuesday, February 11 @ 7 PM via Zoom

### **How Do I Know Which Gull/Shorebird That Is?**

**Presented by David Simpson, one of Florida's premier Birders**

Tuesday, March 11 @ 7 PM via Zoom

### **Ohio's Wood Warblers**

**Presented by Tammy Martin. Tammy leads birding tours focusing on warbler migration in Northern Ohio for Road Scholar**

Tuesday, March 25 @ 7 PM via Zoom

### **I'm Going on a Trip and I Want to See Some Birds – Now What?**

**Presented by Michele Reyes. Michele is past president of Marion Audubon and mentor for many birders both young and old!**

Tuesday, April 8 @ 7 PM via Zoom

**Dates and events subject to change.**

**Check the Meetup app for updates before the event, especially when the weather is questionable.**

# Backyard Birding Tour

Alachua Audubon Society is excited to bring back our ever-popular Backyard Birding Tour in partnership with our local Wild Birds Unlimited store. This fundraising event allows participants to tour several homes in the greater Gainesville area that attract various species of birds to their yards using favorable landscaping (usually with a heavy emphasis on native plants), different types of feeders, and multiple water sources. You will be able to see colorful overwintering birds and ask questions about how you can implement some of these practices yourself.



Tickets are \$15 each (children under 12 are free). You can register for the event and purchase tickets at Wild Birds Unlimited, or through the AAS website (<https://alachuaaudubon.org/events/backyard-birding-tour/>), or clicking on the flyer above. You can also register directly through the mobilize link (<https://www.mobilize.us/audubon-chapters/event/745048/>). Pay for your tickets here: <https://alachuaaudubon.org/donate/>

## Associated News

### 2024 Statistics

by Michele Reyes

It was a record-setting year in Marion County. The previously held Big Year record of 251 species, held by Tom Hince, was broken by a relatively new birder, Tami Reece, with 253, and Tom, himself, with an astounding 268 species! A big congratulations to both on an excellent year of searching and finding many uncommon and rare species in our area! Thanks to the eagle eyes and identification skills of our local birders, ELEVEN new birds were found for the first time ever in Marion County. Our list now stands at 308 birds! Below are the new county birds with their finder(s):

- Franklin's Gull (Elizabeth Stakenborg)
- Fox Sparrow (Tom Hince)
- Vaux's Swift (Tami Reece, Paula Poblete, Cilia Rodriguez)
- Swainson's Hawk (Greg Drawbaugh)
- Whimbrel (Tom Hince)
- Black Skimmer (Scott Robinson)
- Crested Caracara (Alice Horst)
- Gull-billed Tern (Bill Oyler)
- Wilson's Phalarope (Brett Bickel)
- Bullock's Oriole (Dottie Dunlap/Alice Horst)
- Horned Lark (Scott Robinson)

Thanks to some great finds by Scott Robinson, Marjorie Hoy Memorial Park (aka Hoy or OLO) became the top location to bird! This is a place that most of us had never birded previously. Check out our top 10 sites with number of birds reported this year.

1. Marjorie A. Hoy Memorial Park at Orange Lake Overlook 195
2. World Equestrian Center 168
3. Orange Creek Restoration Area 164
4. Ocala Wetland Recharge Park 158
5. Ocklawaha Prairie Restoration Area 150
6. Carney Island Recreation and Conservation Area 147
7. Sunnyhill Restoration Area 136
8. Heagy Burry Park 126
9. Big Sun Soccer Complex 121
10. Halpata Tastanaki Preserve 110

Last January we challenged everyone to report at least 100 species in 2024, and 50 people did, which beat the record set the previous year of 41 people! In addition, 1203 people submitted a checklist in Marion County this year! Looks like our activity and locations are attracting birders from other areas.



# Christmas Bird Count Wrap-Up

with Pat Larsen

December 14th, was a successful birding day for Marion Audubon's Christmas Bird Count. The weather was good, starting in the high 50s with light wind, increasing to the mid-70s with gusty winds in the afternoon. This gave the teams a good day of birding.

Forty-four volunteers worked together in 12 groups taking a census of birds within our 15-mile count circle. They walked (about 35 miles), drove (another 217 miles), rode golf carts (14 miles), and took a boat to cover the area and its many habitats. A total of 119 bird species were observed.

Four rare birds were found and reported: Brown Creeper (Scott Robinson), Western Kingbird (Liz Stakenborg), Rufous Hummingbird (Susan Pepper), and Least Flycatcher (Valerie Wilmot). Although not reported as rare, other highlights included Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, Canvasback, Northern Shoveler, Red-breasted Merganser, Redhead, Black-throated Green Warbler, and Bachman's Sparrow.

Thank you everyone who participated in the count. And special thanks for supporting your often confused compiler in her steep learning curve!

Don't forget to set aside next year's CBC date: Saturday, December 13, 2025. See you then!

Pat Larson  
CBC Coordinator

## Requesting your assistance...

Andrés León, a Ph.D. D Candidate at the University of Florida, is conducting a research study titled “Bird Photography's Rise on Social Media: Motivations and Factors Shaping the Birders’ Community.” This study is part of his PhD dissertation, and it aims to explore the factors influencing the growing trend of displaying and sharing bird photographs on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and other online channels.

To participate, please complete this brief survey which takes 10-15 minutes. It's voluntary and information will be kept confidential. No names will appear in the research or publication.

[PLEASE CLICK HERE FOR SURVEY](#)

Renew your membership for 2025?  
Our current count is 116 members!  
Join or easily renew online thru our website:  
: <https://marionaudubon.org/membership>



Want an official  
MAS name tag?  
We will be placing an order soon.  
Cost is \$6.00

Email [marionaudubonmemberships@outlook.com](mailto:marionaudubonmemberships@outlook.com) To be added to the list.



## 2024 – A MARION BIG YEAR REVIEW

By G. Tom Hince

Biggest and best ever – that pretty much sums up the year 2024 for Marion County birding! Two birders (Tami Reece and yours truly) broke the all-time Marion County birding Big Year record, more total species were recorded than any previous year (278), and an amazing eleven new species were validated for the county for the first time!

The concept of a birding big year is simple. During a big year, a birder must positively identify as many species by sight or sound within a defined geographic area – in this case Marion County. For the purposes of this comparison, all totals are those reported on eBird. I am also using eBird data to define Marion County. For eBird, a birder needs to be in the county, but the birds could potentially be outside (this occurs occasionally at sites like Heagy-Burry Park where birders stand in Marion County but frequently record birds flying over Alachua County).

In 2017, Doug Richard (eBird reviewer for Marion County) set the bar for the county big year record with an impressive total of 209 species. This record stood until 2020, when Scott Robinson tallied 210 species (and almost all found in the northernmost part of the county). After my wife Kathi and I retired to Marion County in the October 2020, I took up the challenge of doing a Marion County big year in 2021. It was an excellent year bolstered by many first records for the county pushing my record total up to a whopping 252 species!

Club president Kent Weakley took up the challenge in 2022 and had a banner year with 254 species. Scott Robinson had an impressive 242 species that same year. However, early in 2023, eBird did a major adjustment to list totals by removing non-countable exotic species (such as Red Junglefowl) which had previously been added into totals. This adjusted totals to 251 species for my 2021 big year, and 250 for Kent! Yes, Kent – you were robbed!

In 2023, no one seriously challenged the record. But in 2024, both Tami Reece and I took a run at breaking the record of 251. Tami had an exceptional year breaking my old record by three species with a tally of 254! In achieving that total, she found a great string of rarities including Golden-winged Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo, and Black-billed Cuckoo. Best of all, she was able to share these birds with many others. I owe her a big thanks for the Golden-winged Warbler and Black-billed Cuckoo which were personal county firsts. In mid-December, Tami and Paul Poblete were able to verify the presence of Vaux's Swifts – a very rare western vagrant. Originally found by J. Don on Dec 1<sup>st</sup> and not confirmed to species, Tami and Paula were able to verify their identity and obtain good views and photos.

My motivation for attempting a second big year was that there was unfinished business, so to speak. In 2021, I had a great year, but there were no tropical storms or hurricanes affecting Marion County. These storms frequently bring a host of oceanic and coastal species inland significantly increasing big year species totals. The passage of Hurricane Ian on Sep 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022 is a great example. On that one day, I recorded SIXTEEN species I had not seen during 2021!

The forecast for 2024 was that it would be a very big year for hurricane activity – and indeed it was. I felt that a big hurricane year could potentially add 15-20 species to the big year record. As it turned out, that estimate was pretty much dead on. The year turned out to be phenomenal and my final big year tally was 268 species – breaking the record by seventeen species! I know there are a lot of Team Tami supporters out there – and I apologize for stealing her thunder. But knowing Tami she will be back soon taking another shot at the record.

Storms were a big part of our record big years. One small and two big storms brought a huge bounty of coastal birds into the county. Among the flurry of rare birds were Black-capped Petrel, Cave Swallow, Whimbrel, American Oystercatcher, Black Skimmer, Sooty, Royal, Caspian, Black, Sandwich and Common Terns, and Magnificent Frigatebird.

Another big factor was the promotion of Marjorie A. Hoy Memorial Park by Scott Robinson. His daily field work there revealed the incredible number of great birds at this site. This quickly has become THE best site for fall migration in Marion County.

During the fall of 2024, highlights included an incredible THIRTY-TWO species of warblers (with rarities such as Nashville, Canada, Wilson's, Golden-winged and Cerulean), Black-billed Cuckoo, Philadelphia Vireo, Alder and Least Flycatchers, Gray Kingbird, Dickcissel, and Lark Sparrow.

Best of all, many of these rarities stuck around for several days or more. In addition, many uncommon migrants like Cape May Warbler, were easily seen in numbers. This site is sure to provide some spectacular birds for years to come.

The boom in birding coverage was another major factor in the high species totals recorded in 2024.

n Marion County, over fifteen thousand individual checklists were submitted to eBird – representing over a quarter of ALL the checklists submitted in history.

The number of active birders clearly increased significantly over the last two years. During my 2021 big year, I personally found all but four species on my list. But in 2024, I benefited from twenty-one species found by other birders! Highlights of these included Swainson’s Hawk and Common Goldeneye (both found by Greg Drawbaugh), White-faced Ibis and Gray Kingbird (found by Liz Stakenborg), Black-billed Cuckoo, Golden-winged Warbler and Vaux’s Swift (found or verified by Tami Reece), American Oystercatcher and Black Skimmer (found by Scott Robinson), Franklin’s Gull (found by Noah Steinberg), Canada Warbler (found by Doug Richard), Crested Caracara and Bullock’s Oriole (found and identified by Alice Horst), Western Tanager and Wilson’s Phalarope (found by Brett Bickel), Willet (found by Ken Thayer), and Red-necked Phalarope (found by Michael Warren).

To everyone who shared their wonderful sightings this year – a huge THANK YOU!

Now that the year is over, I’ve had some time to reflect. The biggest personal highlights were the incredible fall out of birds from Hurricane Milton.

The first two hours of daylight after the passage of the storm were incredible. Over a thousand Common Terns, a single Black-capped Petrel (although initially misidentified!), Cave Swallows and a single Whimbrel made for an unforgettable day. Another great shared memory was finally getting definitive views of the Vaux’s Swifts (on my fourth attempt!). This was my personal 300<sup>th</sup> bird species all time for Marion County, and I was lucky to share it with my wife Kathi!

Like all records, there is no doubt that the 268-record total can and will be broken. More coverage and more birders will make more species available. Indeed, the cumulative total of 278 species seen by all birders this year was TWENTY more species than when the old record was set in 2021! Climate change will bring more storms and storm birds. And birders have become more aware of where to go and how to find storm blown birds. Best of luck to all who take on the challenge!

Photos by Tom Hince



On a chilly December day an enormous flock of six thousand Lesser Scaup overshadowed several incredible rarities.



Lincoln's Sparrow was a great addition to the record tally!





Two Magnificent Frigatebirds were part of a massive array of storm blown birds from Helene and Milton.



Every bird counts on a big year, and though common, this Ovenbird is always a treat to see.



Carol Yarnell kindly allowed me to view a vagrant Rufous Hummingbird on her property.

**NEWSLETTER SUBMISSIONS**

All members are welcome to send articles to be included in the newsletter (300 words max.) Photos are welcome. Please include location and identify people or birds in the photo. No heavily edited images please. Our editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length, spelling, grammar, or legal reasons. Please email articles or photos to [marionaudubonnews@outlook.com](mailto:marionaudubonnews@outlook.com)

**WHAT’S THIS BIRD**

Need help identifying a bird? Try out the free Merlin Bird ID app for your phone. (Our YouTube channel has a tutorial). Still stumped? Post it to the "What's this bird?" page on Facebook and you're sure to get a quick response! Click here:  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/whatsthisbird>  
If it's rare for our area, shoot us a message to let us know what you've found! How do you know if it's rare? (It will come up with an orange box when you report the sighting in eBird.)

**Wildlife photographers**

You already know there are many beautiful birds and other interesting creatures right here in Marion County, but many of our friends and neighbors have not yet noticed. There's now a new group where you can share any wildlife photos you've taken in Marion County. This group is intended to provide a window for residents to see the beauty in their own backyards and inspire them to go outside and see it for themselves. Join the page to add photos or just enjoy seeing what others share. Find it on Facebook- "Marion County Birds & Wildlife" and share with your friends. Adding one to two photos per post seems to work best. Feel free to post as often as you'd like.

