

One of the oldest conservation organizations in this Newsletter's region of interest is the Sanibel-Captiva Audubon Society. This group has been one of our most respected and generous non-profit organizations for over fifty years. We are pleased to publish, over the next few months, their interesting history for the first time, and in a serialized format. The group's contributions to the quality of human life, our environment, and wildlife conservation on the barrier islands of Sanibel and Captiva, as well as the mainland, are great and need to be recognized and appreciated by all of us.



1953-2007: Fifty-four Years of Sanibel-Captiva Audubon Society History

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Part One

AROUND 5,000 YEARS AGO, Sanibel Island was a sandbar destined to evolve into a unique system of wetlands and sand ridges, a special place that would attract much wildlife. There remains evidence of Calusa Indian habitation on Sanibel. Their shell middens are scattered on the island. One that is accessible today is located near the end of present day Wildlife Drive. Around 1900, many homesteaders on Sanibel and Captiva started draining the wetlands and leveling the ridges for agricultural uses. At the same time, in the Everglades and waters near Sanibel and Captiva, many, many wading birds were being slaughtered for their plumes, to decorate lady's hats. In part, to stop this decimation the National Audubon Society was founded in 1905, and first known as the National Association of Audubon. Meanwhile, after a major hurricane, Sanibel and Captiva were

seeing a decline in the numbers of resident farmers. This was accompanied by an increase in the number of vacationers from the North, some of whom were conservationists.

One remarkable, early winter visitor to the area was J. N. “Ding” Darling, a Pulitzer Prize winning editorial cartoonist from Iowa. As a nationally known conservationist, he was also instrumental in the creation of the present US Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Wildlife Federation, and he also designed the first Duck Stamp. He became a regular winter resident of Captiva in 1935. Locally, he worked to stop development of wetlands on Sanibel and Captiva in order to preserve bird habitat. In 1945, the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge came into being through his untiring ten-year efforts.

In the early 1950s, B. K. “Ben” Boyce, both a naturalist and a seasonal island visitor, recognized that Sanibel and Captiva had a population aroused to conservation by “Ding” Darling’s local influence. Thus in 1953, after organizing the Sanibel-Captiva Audubon Society chapter (SCA) he was elected its first president. During his four-year tenure, the chapter sponsored a summer bird count and two environmental reviews, “Vegetation of Sanibel” and “Ecology of a Shell Island.” About 20 years later, only months before the City of Sanibel officially incorporated on 16 December 1974, SCA became an official chapter of the Florida Audubon Society, on 3 September 1974.

Early SCA Program Chair Opal Combs established a pattern of activities and schedules that still operate in the chapter’s program today. To educate winter visitors and her neighbors, she planned six monthly Audubon meetings in the Sanibel Community House on Periwinkle Way. In some decades, as many as 15 weekly meetings were offered during the winter; today during January, February, and March, the chapter offers ten weekly Audubon meetings, and still in the Community House on Thursdays. A treasurer’s report indicates annual rental for the building in 1996 ran about \$1,200. Although some of the early programs gathered only a handful of attendees from the small, local population, the situation at the Community House is different today. The weekly program schedule is featured in the local newspapers and posted on community bulletin boards around the islands. Thus, a policeman is necessary to handle the traffic before and after the meetings because many programs attract over 300 residents and vacationers. However, each program still starts with the long-held tradition of the weekly bird report, which reviews bird sightings from both a bird leader and the audience.

At first, during the monthly meeting, a basket was passed for donations, with \$1 suggested as a minimum. Now a money-taker with a cash drawer discreetly blocks the entryway—looking for a \$4 donation. Also, over the years, to raise money at the meetings, the chapter has had raffles for bird art as well as sold merchandise, ranging from pamphlets on good birding spots or guides for beginning birders. Today SCA shirts and caps are good sellers. All funds are donated to environmental causes.

Providing a stimulating weekly program has kept the program chairs busy over the years. In the early sixties, Opal Combs, having no residential phone, had to contact by mail, both her film sources and her speakers. Some of the latter, she had to house herself overnight until the next ferry to the mainland. Other speakers, getting their cars stuck in the sand-track road back to the ferry, depended on Opal to help them find a tow truck. Still, she provided many years of SCA programming. One of her largest meetings, in 1960, featured a US Fish and Wildlife representative, explaining his agency's 22 objections to the proposed Sanibel Causeway. The causeway couldn't be stopped and it opened in 1963.

According to former SCA president, Charles LeBuff, during the 1960's Bob Sabatino, also a former SCA president sometimes brought to meetings his pet barn owl, "Hoot." Rescued from a water tower at the Sanibel Lighthouse as a chick, Hoot could hush the crowd with one fly-over, or two, inside the Community House. In the 1970's SCA President Mario Hutton offered a beloved year-end special program. His photo-verse, each December, was a blend of his own color slides of Sanibel accompanied by his own poetic verse. In 1988, local residents, at the last meeting of the season, showed their own slides to much acclaim.

For most of the 1990s David Meardon, a professional nature photographer, served as program chair, specializing in engaging incredible, fellow nature photographers, who showed slides of destinations, such as the Galapagos and Alaska, as well as of natural beauty, from butterflies, orchids, shells, tropical insects, and of course, birds. Some years, Sanibel winter residents and national bird authors, Don and Lillian Stokes present their latest pictures. Currently, Elaine Jacobson, serving as program chair, finds speakers with topics ranging from water and habitat management, eco-journalism, and environmental lobbying strategies, to advocacy for the Everglades or for wildlife, such as manatees, sea turtles, spoonbills, and such.

Under the initial influence of Opal Combs, SCA has always offered other educational programs, besides the evening Audubon programs. A favorite program of hers was a native plant tour, led by board members.

Opal and her husband Willis Combs, president of SCA, opened for tour their arboretum of 100 specimens of native trees and shrubs around Woodmere Preserve, their home at the end of West Gulf Drive. Once, to save their plantings, they had to stop bulldozers from extending West Gulf Drive, along the beachfront, on through to the Gulf Pines subdivision. Although their arboretum is now gone, the road still ends where they stopped it in 1956. SCA was also responsible for republishing island resident Dr. George Cooley's botanical work entitled "The Vegetation of Sanibel"; a publication still treasured today. For other outings, over many years the chapter conducted sell-out trips to Babcock Ranch, Shark Valley, Loxahatchee Refuge, Fakahatchee Strand, Corkscrew Swamp, Myakka River State Park, and the like. All educational programs and trips to inform the public were also fund-raisers for the chapter treasury, as were any funds acquired through estate bequests.

Besides raising money through weekly meetings and trips, Opal Combs, early on, offered some nature classes to the public for a small charge. In the 1960's, Program Chair Charles LeBuff, a naturalist who had caught and tagged many alligators and sea turtles, offered tours and nature programs that attracted a wide following. His many years living at the lighthouse and working at the refuge and starting the island's sea turtle research project made him a first rate draw. One of his oft-repeated topics was explaining the relationship between humans and alligators. In his book, *Sanybel Light*, he recounts a canoe tour, leading 30 visiting Auduboners on the "Sanibel River", where they discovered alligator remains from illegal poaching. In the 1970's, the first bird identification classes started, with various instructors — until Russ and Jane Francis took on the job and taught them for 15 years. In the 1990's, Bev and Clair Postmus led bird ID classes for another ten years with her early morning field hikes and his evening photographic walks for follow-up study sessions, narrated by her. Clair also offered, to Audubon, bird photography classes for several years, while Alice Anders offered shelling classes, and Bill Payne offered basic biology instruction.

These fund-raising activities, for the past 50 years, have allowed the chapter to steadily donate to educational or lobbying efforts on behalf of wildlife and environmental conservation. The treasury has risen and fallen over the years. An April 1981 treasurer's report indicates a balance of \$5,400, while by 1999, income had only reached near \$6,000. A 1992 treasurer's report lists \$2,900 collected from weekly donations for a season of lectures, plus \$500 from tuition collected in birding classes. Still today, to raise money to donate, the chapter offers weekly Audubon evenings,

weekly bird outings, bird ID classes, private bird guiding, merchandise sales, and the like. The profits from activities are donated most frequently to local environmental groups, such as to the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation — SCCF, the Center for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife — CROW, but Mote Marine Lab, Caretta Research, International Osprey Foundation, International Crane Foundation and others also received grants. Furthermore, donations are often made to Florida Audubon to pay for their lobbying efforts in the state capitol. Also, a scholarship for students or teachers in environmental education is presented from time to time.

At no charge, SCA also provides public education materials. In the 1960's, Opal Combs was well-known for her annual SCA exhibit at the Sanibel Shell Fair where she advocated against bulldozing too much of Sanibel for development. In 1970, President Bud Ryckman started educational programs at the refuge and the Sanibel School; in the 1980's, Barb Lensing started the Junior Environmental Committee at the Sanibel School, eventually creating a hardwood hammock there to celebrate the school's 30th anniversary. In the 1990's Bev Postmus also designed educational materials on conservation for the refuge as well as for both the Sanibel School and the Sanibel Library. The chapter has had a long relationship with the library, often buying for it Audubon videos, arranging natural history exhibits with the staff, and the like. SCA also distributes for kids, especially Sanibel grandkids, conservation coloring books. The public information efforts by SCA are an effort to increase awareness of local lifestyle choices, not easily understood otherwise. Our 12 miles of beach seem made only for human consumption until beach-users learned that turning out lights help sea turtles during nesting season; not running dogs and kids through flocks of birds help while they are resting during migration; not collecting live shells help to increase shell reproduction, and so on.

In 1988, SCA, in concert with an island-wide effort, asked local grocers to not promote marshmallows as alligator food and to label their shopping bags with the warning, "Don't Feed the Gators." Other public education materials have included posters to remind fishermen about how to properly discard their monofilament line, which, not readily decomposing, easily entangles water birds. In order to get speed limits reduced on Sanibel-Captiva Road, roadkill surveys were published; the original 1960 speed limit of 65 mph is reduced today to 35 mph. However, the long-standing request to lower bridge speeds in order to reduce bird deaths never occurred until 2003 when the old bridge became unsafe, forcing speed reductions until the new bridge is built.

Part Two

THE FIRST NEWSLETTER FROM THE SANIBEL-CAPTIVA Audubon Society, *The Pileated Woodpecker*, appeared in 1981. Alice Kylo, wrote, typed and mailed out 4 issues a year, December, January, February, and March; sometimes, she added a summer edition. In 1983, a copy of the newsletter was included in the time capsule buried in the new Sanibel City Hall. In 1991, the National Audubon Society recognized the newsletter, then under editor Hal Dunham, for merit. In 1992, the board spent about \$1,500, mailing 250 newsletters, four times a year, often with financial support from a local bank. From the beginning of the chapter, there has been confusion about who is a member of this chapter and who is a visitor, since so many of this chapter's participants belong to Audubon in their hometown up north but attend here in their winter home of just 3-4 months. Others only belong to National Audubon, not any local chapter. Thus, compiling the mailing list has never been a smooth task, although the mailing list was, at least, computerized in 1992 at SCCF. The first computerized edition of the newsletter, in 1993, greatly saved time and printing costs. Its editor, Bev Postmus sent a fall newsletter promoting the winter programs, a January letter summarizing the Christmas Bird count, and spring and summer editions, both about Florida environmental legislation. Jean Reuther, at the time of our 50th anniversary, edits the newsletter both in hardcopy and online.

The chapter went electronic in 1997 when Jerry Nickerson started the first chapter homepage, via the National Audubon website; local photos of a MacGillivray's Warbler, on the new website, attracted many viewers. Soon board member Bev Postmus helped fill this homepage, with her weekly bird sightings and answers to the most common and most complex birding questions on Sanibel. Today SCA Treasurer Chris Andrews keeps the page filled with current announcements and environmental concerns as well as bird sightings. In 1987, board member, Alvah Sanborn started maintaining, on paper, listings for the Rare Bird Hotline. Today any member can contribute online to Southwest Florida Birdline.

In 1960, SCA made its first Christmas Bird Count, although it had previously participated in a Ft Myers count. Today over 100 volunteers canvas both Sanibel and Captiva, for four hours, by foot, boat, bike, and car. However, originally, a few hardcore birders, with bag lunches, spent ten

hours in the field, bird spotting from a viewing tower in the Bailey Tract and other prime birding sites. They often estimated well over 40,000 birds, while today's numbers run around 15-20,000. Despite lower numbers, calculating all the birding data and sending it to National Audubon was always quite a project. Although the tallying was first done on a computer in 1992 at SCCF, at the turn of the century, member William "Jake" Jacobson computerized the bird lists and updated the tallying process. His improvements were so substantial that other chapters began using his system.

Since its founding, the chapter's mission has been both education about and advocacy of Florida ecosystems. Early program chair Opal Combs established that each spring, before the winter residents left, board members be selected to direct the focus of the chapter for four years. The number of board members has varied from a handful to 15-20. The term limit still exists, but most members remain in place until personal concerns prevent participation. At first, board members merely aided the president; soon tasks became assigned to board members. The first was program chair, but others evolved, such as conservation chair, education chair, membership chair, publicity chair, web site manager, and, of course, secretary and treasurer and vice-president. As the "Ding" Darling Refuge and SCCF grew, an employee of each also joined the board; likewise, they often have Audubon representatives for their work, as does CROW. Over the years, the SCA board has met in private homes, in the library, at SCCF, and, of course, at the Community House. Today, to save money, before each Thursday evening program at the Community House, board members must also set up and pack away all the chairs, a good workout with 2-300 seats.

Part Three

DURING THE PAST 50 YEARS, SCA presidents and board members have led the chapter to tackle many island conservation issues. One of the deepest commitments has been to the "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. In the 1960's the chapter actively pursued protection of 1900 acres of Sanibel wetlands that "Ding" Darling, himself, had not been able to secure. The effort required extensive lobbying of state and federal conservation agencies as well as governmental agencies. With the eventual acquisition of the land after the death of "Ding Darling," the chapter then tackled the re-naming of the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge in honor of

the long-standing conservation efforts of “Ding” Darling. Today the refuge has over 6000 acres, harboring over 200 bird species.

About ten years later, with the ever-increasing numbers of visitors to the new refuge education center, SCA agreed to provide a group of regular volunteers to help inform the public along Wildlife Drive. This group evolved to become the present “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society; in fact, the SCA president at the time, Bud Ryckman resigned in order to take over leadership of the Society. Many board members today are “Ding” volunteers. In the 1970’s, before the new education center with restrooms, SCA lobbied hard to prevent toilets from being constructed on Wildlife Drive, although portable toilets stand today on the Cross Dike. Later in the 1980’s, the chapter lobbied the refuge to regulate vegetation trimming for bird viewing; to maintain a code of ethics for bird photographers; and even to stop the tradition of sunset tailgate cocktail parties with the roseate spoonbills on Wildlife Drive.

SCA also lobbied on other Sanibel issues. In the 1960’s, presidents Charles LeBuff and Roy Bazire led the chapter to be part of a citizen group interested in island conservation; a National Audubon feasibility study aided their efforts. This group of concerned citizens initially wanted a nature center to educate the public, and today Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation is on Sanibel-Captiva Road, as originally intended. However, the construction of the bridge in 1963, rapid real estate development and critical water issues, all led SCCF into also seeking acquisitions of environmentally sensitive lands on Sanibel. Continuing the efforts of previous presidents, President Mario Hutton, in 1967-1975 oversaw much chapter coordination with SCCF in protecting mangrove islands and interior wetlands from development. These lands, no longer subject to development, helped Sanibel maintain its status as a sanctuary island. The SCCF and SCA relationship continues today since many Audubon members are also SCCF volunteers. In 2000, SCA President Jerry Johnson even donated, to SCCF, his 12-volume set of *Birds of North America*, as he left office.

Other presidents had other missions. In the 1960’s, President Bob Sabatino oversaw the establishment of the Audubon Vegetation Committee, which evolved eventually into the city’s present Vegetation Committee. This group consists of educated volunteers who assist homeowners and businesses with meeting their obligation of having on their grounds, at least 75% native plants. In 1993, under President Bob Kitchens, SCA helped host a National Audubon Society meeting in Fort Myers, by offering guided trips, such as canoeing in Tarpon Bay, tram-riding on Wildlife Drive, and walking through the trails of the SCCF.

Birds, of course, have always been a focus of SCA. In 1962, President Charles LeBuff and hard-working Auduboner Marshall Tabbachi took on a voluntary project of building over two dozen handsome 24-room purple martin houses. Purple martins were encouraged to populate the islands because of their appetite for mosquitoes. These were sold to islanders through the SCA and all proceeds after material costs went to the SCA. In the 1970's, three presidents were naturalists who promoted bird projects. Mark "Bird" Westall and George Campbell advocated, among many nature projects, erecting platforms for nesting ospreys, in face of their declining numbers; today ospreys thrive on Sanibel. Richard Beebe organized a project to band and protect nests of least terns, a summer visitor to Sanibel. In the 1980's, Presidents Bill Martin and Hugh Irwin both focused on teaching bird identification; many classes, hikes, and trips were offered to improve local birding skills. In addition, they helped raise money for a snow fence to protect terns and skimmers nesting on the causeway islands and for developing a spoil island in the Caloosahatchee, as a black skimmer and tern refuge. To reverse the declining numbers of barn owls on the island, Hugh also sponsored a SCCF project to put up nesting boxes around the island.

In the 1990's, board member Bev Postmus, an advocate for shorebirds, was instrumental in the development of the snowy plover nest patrol and making Bunche Beach on the nearby mainland dog free for nesting piping plovers. Two SCA presidents, Jim Whitehouse and Carol Herman, working with the Southwest Florida Audubon, had the chapter, after much research and discussion, list the best local birding sights, which were published in the "Great Florida Birding Trails" series. Another board campaigned for the Florida scrub jay to replace the mocking bird as the state bird, without success to date. In 2000, as Jerry Johnson resigned his presidency, he reminded the board that they had instituted, during his tenure, not bird guides, but a much needed budgeting process with a long term planning process, still in place today.

Many presidents have led the chapter to lobby for conservation beyond the shores of Sanibel and Captiva. As early as the 1960's, SCA President Willis Combs led a charge to stop a barge canal being dug across Florida; today the never completed project is a greenway. Decades of SCA presidents have rallied the chapter to petition, testify, and even protest the various projects to restore the Everglades, an eternal ecological problem since the canals were dug in Collier County, the locks were placed in the Caloosahatchee, and Lake Okeechobee was diked, many years ago. Many decades have also seen the board take positions on behalf of Corkscrew

Swamp, an Audubon sanctuary in nearby Collier County. SCA fought successfully to stop oil exploration there, but lost on a battle to halt communication towers nearby.

Sometimes, SCA lobbied on area marine issues. The chapter, along with many other conservation organizations, was successful in banning commercial net-fishing, banning oil drilling off the Florida coast near the Panhandle, and banning construction of a deep-water port in Cape Coral. However, success was not so clear in efforts to stop jet ski usage in the estuary and to stop development of wetlands bordering Estero Bay. SCA was also for enforcement of stricter regulation of the shrimping industry in order to protect sea turtles, and for lower boat speeds in order to protect manatee; both sea turtles and manatees have an uncertain future, currently.

Part Four

IN THE 1990s, **AS A VIGOROUS BOARD MEMBER** and president, Bob Slayton kept the chapter informed on legislation related to the environment. Unfazed by reading dense scientific articles and legal regulations, he studied intensely, as a watchdog for the environment. Any softening in the enforcement of federal or local regulations to maintain clean water, clean air, protected wetlands, endangered species, and the like, galvanized Bob to action. Although he did not hesitate to attend lengthy hearings in the state capital, he often used a mere letter for his lobbying efforts. Once he photocopied a *Wall Street Journal* article about the wrath of local residents in Naples over the degradation of a mangrove; he had the board mail a copy to each Lee County commissioner, just as a warning. Currently mangrove protection is adhered to in Lee County, but Bob would advise to attend every variance hearing — never trust justice to prevail without vigilance.

Current President Paul Andrews, nominated to the board by Bob Slayton, is also a conservation activist. Lee County is one of the fastest growing areas in the US — with, unfortunately, a high concentration of endangered species. Thus, Paul, along with his wife, SCA Treasurer Chris Andrews, serves on or monitors the work of responsible growth coalitions and area conservation federations as well as the Lee County Commission. Ever a government watchdog, he also monitors Sanibel City Hall and the planning commission. In the newsletter, before each weekly SCA meeting, and via an email alert, Paul consistently informs the membership, with much wit, about pressing lobbying concerns for environmental issues. He often

reminds us that Sanibel attracts wildlife, for the same reason that it attracts people; thus, conservationists must create the conditions for a balance.

Many members of this chapter have won recognition for their conservation efforts. In 1978, President Bud Ryckman received the Good Neighbor Award for his environmental work on behalf of children. Opal Combs, in 1979, was named Wildlife Conservationist of the Year. Several SCA members have been named Outstanding Citizen of the Year on Sanibel: Mark “Bird” Westall, Alice Kylo, Melina Eskew, and Bob Slayton. The first mayor of Sanibel and local SCA member, Porter Goss, served on the board of the National Audubon Society during the 1980’s; member Melina Eskew served on the board of the Florida Audubon Society for a time. In 1992 Bob Slayton was named Florida Audubon Chapter President of Year — and a tree is planted in his honor at city hall.

For the first 50 years, Sanibel-Captiva Audubon has helped keep Sanibel a natural area because it was instrumental in the founding of both the “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge and the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation. Furthermore, SCA had a winning position on reducing housing density at both Beachview and Clam Bayou on Sanibel; the chapter also stalled any development of Silver Key. However failure to stop development on sensitive lands occurred at what is now the Sanctuary on Wulfert Point, the tourist development at Shell Point Village Blvd. and MacGregor Blvd., and Florida Gulf Coast University. Also the chapter lost in its effort to stop beach renourishment projects along the islands’ Gulf coast. Thus, the work to educate and advocate for the fair management of growth, to both wildlife and humans, continues at Sanibel-Captiva Audubon. Global bio-diversity with a healthy habitat is a mandate.

Fifty Years of SCA Presidents

1953-57	B. K. “Ben” Boyce*, retired naturalist
1957-59	Mrs. Roy Wedekind*, owner of Gulfview Inn, which became the Mucky Duck
1959	Vince McVettie*, operated the Sanibel laundry
1960	Roy Bazire*, realtor and SCCF founder and Mrs. Spencer Ewing*
1961-64	Charles LeBuff, retired wildlife technician at “Ding” Darling
1961-65	Refuge, author, creator of Caretta Research and charter member of Sanibel City Council
1964	Bob Sabatino, active charter captain/fishing guide
1965-66	Willis Combs*, retired U.S. Department of

Agriculture employee
1967-75 Mario Hutton*, linguist and poet
1975 George Campbell*, international
wildlife naturalist/author
1976-77 Richard Beebe*, naturalist
1978 Bud Ryckman*, environmental educator
1979-80 Mark "Bird" Westall, interpretive naturalist/guide, member of
Sanibel City Council and former mayor
1981 Bud Ryckman*, environmental educator
1982 Bill Martin*
1984-86 Hugh Irwin*
1987-88 Bill Martin*
1989 Wanda Slayton
1991-95 Bob Slayton*, retired oncologist
1996-98 Jim Whitehouse
1998- Carol Herman
1999 Jerry Johnson*
2000---- Paul Andrews, retired counseling director

*Deceased