

June 30, 2016

To: Carol Rizkalla and Nancy Douglass, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Request for a Critical Wildlife Area Designation for the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, Sarasota County, with a year-round, 100 foot buffer

From: Ann Paul, Regional Coordinator, and Mark Rachal, Sanctuary Manager, Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries

**Ownership and Management Authority:** The Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands are owned by the State of Florida and managed by the National Audubon Society dba Audubon Florida, Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries (FCIS), through a letter of permission from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Bureau of Public Land Administration, dated April 16, 1999, signed by Daniel T. Crabb, Chief (see Exhibit 1). The letter gives the Audubon Society permission to post the islands, monitor the nesting birds, and to report violations to the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (now the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission).

Audubon continues to perform these responsibilities, with our partners in management of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony: Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology Classes, Carefree Learner, Sarasota County, Save Our Seabirds, and Sarasota Bay Watch.



**Location and Description:** The Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands are located in Sarasota Bay, Sarasota County, south of the Siesta Key Bridge and east of the Intracoastal Waterway, at approximately 27°17'36.88"N, 82°32'39.83"W. They consist of three small, mangrove-vegetated islands, situated in fairly deep water surrounded by seagrass meadows and protected from erosion caused by boat wake impacts by a breakwater installed by Sarasota County in fall 2007-winter 2008. The islands have provided important nesting habitat for many years, including thirteen species in 2015, making this a highly diverse waterbird colony (see Table 1, below).

*Map showing Sarasota Bay Watershed and relative locations of Sarasota Bay segments. From Sarasota Bay Estuary Program website, accessed 3/30/2016*

Exhibit 1.



Jeb Bush  
Governor

## Department of Environmental Protection

Marjory Stoneman Douglas Building  
3900 Commonwealth Boulevard  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-3000

David B. Struhs  
Secretary

April 16, 1999

Ms. Ann Schnapf  
National Audubon Society  
Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries  
410 Ware Boulevard, Suite 702  
Tampa, Florida 33619

RE: Posting of Three Islands in Roberts Bay, Sarasota County

Dear Ms. Schnapf:

Pursuant to your request of January 28, 1999, this letter shall grant the authority for the following activities on the three state-owned islands in Roberts Bay identified on the attached map:

1. Posting the islands with Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission signs; and
2. Organizing volunteers to monitor the nesting birds and report violations to the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

This letter in no way waives the authority and/or jurisdiction of any governmental entity. The authority to proceed with the requested activities is contingent upon the Florida Audubon Society agreeing to incur liability in case of injury related to the activities of its employees or any of its volunteers.

Please have this letter signed and return the original to Ms. Tracy Peters at the letterhead address. Should you have any question, please call Ms. Peters at (850) 488-2291.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniel T. Crabb".

Daniel T. Crabb, Chief  
Bureau of Public Land Administration

DTC/tp  
Attachments

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard J. Paul".  
\_\_\_\_\_  
NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY  
National

4-5-99  
\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

"Protect, Conserve and Manage Florida's Environment and Natural Resources"

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**Management activities:**

Management includes posting of the island by FCIS, assisted by the Sarasota Audubon Society, and removal of fishing tackle and debris each fall when the bird nesting activity is at its lowest, in cooperation with Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology Classes, the Carefree Learner, Sarasota County, Save Our Seabirds, and Sarasota Bay Watch. FCIS conducts annual surveys. Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology Classes, and the Carefree Learner, acting as local observers and “Colony Watchers”, visit the island monthly or more often and report incidents of disturbance or concerns to FCIS.

The breakwater located between the Intracoastal Waterway and the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands was installed to protect the islands by Sarasota County using Pollution Recovery Funds at an expense of approximately \$900,000 in the fall and winter of 2007-2008. Years of observations had made it clear that boat wakes were eroding the islands, reducing the mangrove bird nesting habitat. This habitat protection project was undertaken by the County in response to appeals from Audubon Florida, Sarasota Audubon Society, and other members of the public.



***Aerial photograph of the Roberts Bay Bird Islands taken in 1995, from the north, showing the use of the island by nesting birds. Photo: Nancy Douglass***



***U.S. Geological Survey aerial of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, January 26, 1995, showing proximity to the Intracoastal Waterway, before the installation of the breakwater that protects the islands from erosion.***





***Top: Jan 2008 aerial depicting the newly installed breakwater, proximity to the Intracoastal Waterway, and nesting by Great Egrets and Brown Pelicans. (Photo: Gary Raulerson)***

***Middle: Sarasota County installed "Caution Breakwater" signs between the breakwater and the Intracoastal Waterway to warn boaters. Photo: Ann Paul***



***Bottom: Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands breakwater, showing the calm water lagoon next to bird nesting habitat islands, Sept 2012. Photo: Ann Paul***





***Above and below: Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, with young-of-the-year spoonbills and pelicans on breakwater, May 16, 2016. Photos: Ann Paul***



**Surveys:** Audubon’s FCIS has conducted annual “peak-nesting season” surveys at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands every spring since 1997. These surveys are conducted by trained observers using binoculars from an out-board motorboat, generally at a distance of 50-100 feet from the islands’ shoreline, in order to accomplish a quality survey while causing no impacts to the nesting birds. The Annual Survey data (Table 1, below) numbers represent direct nest counts, supplemented for those species that nest below the foliage canopy where direct observation of the nests is not possible, with estimates of the number of nests/breeding pairs based on flight-line surveys. As a result of this survey information, the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands were included in Audubon Florida’s Important Bird Areas of Florida, as one of the 100 most important areas for birds in the state. Because of the diversity of species present, nesting or the rearing of dependent young occurs during every month of the year at this colony.



**Table 1. Roberts Bay Bird Colony – Audubon Florida Annual Surveys, 1997-2015**

Survey Date	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Species					4/4 & 6/1	5/16	5/18	5/5	5/3	5/17	5/10	6/1	6/8	5/26	5/23	6/12	5/24		5/18
Brown Pelican	168	276	239	241	187	284	224	86	301	276	93	245	257	196	147	155	178		140
Double-crested Cormorant	39	28	32	47	38	54	91	80	88	104	52	38	150	145	102	103	125		156
Anhinga	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0		1
Great Blue Heron	49	51	49	47	58	37	46	29	56	32	25	11	15	37	17	24	36		36
Great Egret	195	436	271	264	260	377	333	304	417	288	180	131	247	400	160	120	133		189
Snowy Egret	20	100	30	45	50	81	108	45	45	80	80	20	75	50	50	50	30		65
Little Blue Heron	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	0	8	16	7	5	25	10	3	20	3		15
Tricolored Heron	1+	2	3	+	8	6	10	10	15	15	4	2	3	2	1	3	1		2
Reddish Egret	?	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	2	1		1
Cattle Egret	10	111	13	25	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0		0
Green Heron	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0
Black-crowned Night-Heron	4	10	10	10	5	12	10	8	10	18	10	4	15	5	15	8	9		8
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0
Roseate Spoonbill	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	2	1	4	3	5		8
American Oystercatcher	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1		1
Total nests	492	1016	647	682	607	861	824	563	942	834	453	458	793	850	502	489	522		622

**Installation of signage:** Audubon FCIS, assisted by Sarasota Audubon Society leaders and other volunteers, have installed and maintained “No Trespassing” and “No Landing” signs along the shorelines of the Roberts Bay Bird Islands since receiving permission from the Bureau of Public Land Administration, Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection, in 1999. Sarasota County installed “Caution Breakwater” signs and two informational signs about the bird colony.



**Installation of “No Trespassing” sign, Jeanne Dubi, Sarasota Audubon president (left), Ann Paul, FCIS staff (middle), and Rick Greenspun, Sarasota Audubon volunteer (right). Photo: Bonnie Samuelsen**



*Rick Greenspun uses a pounder to install a post for a “No Trespassing” sign, assisted by Mark Rachal and Ann Paul. Photo: Lou Newman*



*Mark Rachal and Rick Greenspun display newly installed “No Landing” sign at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands. Photos: Lou Newman*



*Informational sign installed by Sarasota County. Photo: Ann Paul*

**Fishing line clean-ups:**

Every fall for the last ten years, Audubon staff have coordinated a fishing line clean-up activity in Sarasota Bay with conservation partners Sarasota Bay Watch and the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, in the fall when most of the birds are not nesting. One of the sites that is targeted for the removal of



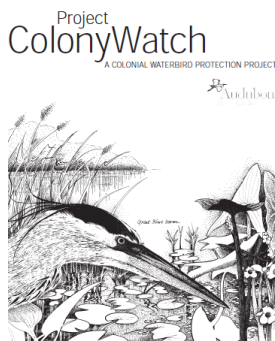
fishing line and other entangling trash that pose a hazard for wildlife is the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands. We receive assistance from the Sarasota High School Marine Biology classes every fall for this activity. During fall 2015, the decision was made not to remove fishing line from the north island because nesting birds were observed there on the day of the fishing line clean-up on October 10<sup>th</sup>.



In partnership with the Audubon Society and Sarasota Bay Watch, Judd McKean's honors marine biology students at Sarasota High School recently journeyed into the bay and rookery islands to perform an environmental cleanup. Back row, from left: Steve Watts and Randall Patterson. Front row, from left: Judd McKean, Ann Paul, Autumn Byrd, Dylan Zeus Quinn, Leah Palmer, Susan Gallegos, Erika DaSilva, Tori Blair, Jessica Johnson and Sterling Gadd. PHOTOS BY JENNIFER SHEA

### **Project Colony Watch partners:**

Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology classes and instructors, and the boat captains and crews of the Carefree Learner, a boat that provides field experience for Sarasota County Schools, provide regular input on issues of concern that have arisen at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands and regular reports on nesting observed. These relationships to monitor and participate in management at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands have been active for over twenty years.



Project Colony Watch, a program of Audubon's Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries, enlists volunteers who survey and learn about bird colonies in their neighborhoods and become actively involved in preventing impacts to nesting birds. These volunteers become the local "wardens", biologists, and advocates for their nesting colonies. Each volunteer makes a difference for the wildlife where they live, plus experiences the enjoyment of watching birds nest and raise their young.

### **Issue of concern:**

A significant management concern has been the close approach to the islands by boats and even incidences of boaters landing on the islands, in spite of the presence of "no trespassing" and "no landing" signs posted by Audubon. Over the years, Audubon has appealed to boaters, fishermen, nature



photographers, kayakers, and ecotour boat operators, to maintain a reasonable distance from the islands, to avoid disturbance to the nesting birds.

While many boaters respond appropriately to these requests, the mainland side of the islands, which is the side that most boaters approach on, exhibits a space about six feet above the water-line where birds do not nest. Bird nests on the breakwater side of the islands, which is very shallow and generally not traveled by boaters, are seen down to the water-line, as some birds select nest sites along the entire slope of the mangrove foliage. This suggests that the too-close presence of boaters traveling on the mainland side is creating a portion of the islands' trees where birds are not comfortable nesting, a non-nesting zone.

It would be appropriate to employ a buffer zone of about 100 feet around the islands to help boaters recognize the importance of keeping further away from the nesting birds. This will provide the added benefit of moving wakes further from the island, to diminish their erosive effects on the island.

***Proposed buffer area, 100 feet from shoreline and breakwater.***





***The breakwater and the north island of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, June 8, 2009. Note: nesting activity occurs down the entire slope of the mangroves to the water line. Photo: Mark Rachal***



***Courting Great Egrets and other nesting birds using the entire mangrove habitat on the breakwater side of this Roberts Bay Bird Colony island, June 8, 2009. Photo: Mark Rachal***



***Brown Pelican adults and chicks in their nests, protected from boaters by the breakwater, use the entire slope of the mangrove habitat available, June 8, 2009. Photo: Mark Rachal***



***Birds nesting on the breakwater side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony, using the entire mangrove habitat available, down to the waterline, June 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal***



***The mainland side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands shows a distinct “no-nesting” zone, May 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal***



***The mainland side of this Roberts Bay Bird Sanctuary island has no birds nesting along the slope of the mangrove foliage, May 24, 2015.  
Photo: Mark Rachal***



***Mainland side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands, showing the “no-nesting” zone, May 24, 2014.  
Photo: Mark Rachal***



***Mainland side of Roberts Bay Bird Colony north island, showing the “no-nesting” zone, April 5, 2016.  
Photo: Kathryn Young, Sarasota Audubon Society Board member***





***Roberts Bay south island, showing the “no nesting zone” on landward side, May 16, 2016. Photo: Ann Paul***



***Ecotour boat close to the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, May 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal***



***Ecotour boat on the mainland side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony's north-most island, June 8, 2009. Note: the birds are nesting all the way to the waterline on the island side facing the breakwater, which has little boat traffic. Photo: Mark Rachal***





***Ecotour boat, and zone of “no nesting” on the mainland side of the island, May 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal***

***Below: Ecotour boat travelling fast enough to produce a wake, coming, along the length of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, and going, 6-12-2012. Photos: Ann Paul***







*Boaters travelling closely to the mainland side of the Roberts Bird Colony Islands, June 8, 2009. Note the zone of “no nesting”. Photo: Mark Rachal*

*Jet skiers approaching the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands, May 16, 2016. Photo: Ann Paul*



*A boat approaches closely to the south (left) and middle (right) islands at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony, May 16, 2016. Photos: Ann Paul*



*A jet skier approaches very close to the middle island at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony, May 16, 2016. Photo: Ann Paul*

**Justification for year-round closure:**

Nesting season at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands begins with cormorants and Great Blue Herons initiating courtship in November. By January (see aerial photo of January 2008 above), Great Egrets are courting and incubating. Brown Pelicans typically begin nesting in March, through April and May, with care for their young lasting for another three months. Roseate Spoonbills are nesting by March. The small herons, including Reddish Egrets, are nesting by April and May. If severe storms do not kill

nestlings, young birds are still being attended by their parents in late September and early October, as we find them there during our annual fishing line clean-up activities. During fall 2015, the decision was made not to remove fishing line from the north island because nesting birds were observed there on the day of the annual fishing line clean-up conducted with conservation partner Sarasota Bay Watch and the Sarasota High School Marine Biology class students, October 10<sup>th</sup>. Because of the diversity of species present, nesting or the rearing of dependent young occurs during every month of the year at this colony.

The island is used as a daytime and over-night roost site year-round by hundreds of birds, including pelicans, cormorants, and herons.

**Table 2. Nesting season at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony. N = nesting and caring for dependent young.**

Species	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
DCCO	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N			N	N
BRPE			N	N	N	N	N	N	N			
GBHE	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N			N	N
GREG	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N			
Other herons				N	N	N	N	N	N	N		
ROSP			N	N	N	N	N					