# Audubon | FLORIDA Naturalist

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Baby Screech Owls. Photo: RJ Wiley

# Audubon Champions Flagler Salt Marsh Restoration - for Water, Wildlife, and Climate

Started just a few months ago, the Flagler County Wetland Restoration Project is restoring salt marsh habitat lost to dragline ditching for mosquito control, an outdated practice that did more harm than good. For almost two decades the St. Johns River Water Management District and cooperating partners have leveraged funds from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore more than 625 acres of dragline-impacted wetlands. Despite the success of previous restoration efforts, the Flagler project was almost derailed last year due to concern from some members of the public.

Early in the review of this project, Chris Farrell, Audubon's Northeast Florida Policy Associate, engaged with concerned residents by speaking at public meetings and following up with agency staff. Many residents were worried about potential changes to the landscape and the length of time needed for the system to recover. Restoration is achieved by grading back down to marsh elevations the sediment piled up during ditching and letting vegetation repopulate the site naturally. Although this process produces a temporary habitat flux, earlier projects show that marsh plants respond quickly once natural elevations are restored.

*"We are grateful for Chris's understanding of the project's benefits to Northeast Florida and for being an independent voice supporting the project," said St. Johns River Water Management District Executive Director Ann Shortelle.*

*"And as always, we appreciate Audubon Florida's science-based perspective and thoughtful engagement on many other water resource issues that impact birding and nature-based recreation."*

Reddish Egret. Photo: R. Munguía

So, is restoration of mosquito ditches worth it? The answer is definitively yes. Mosquito ditching actually harmed the function of these marshes. Restoration removes spoil piles that support invasive exotic vegetation and brings back tidally influenced wetland habitat. This improves water quality, provides critical habitat for wildlife, and – perhaps most important – allows the system to respond to rising sea levels by slowing and trapping sediment. In a promising sign of things to come, marsh plants are already sprouting on the first completed sections of the project.