

Sarasota County birds remain in peril. Let's stay focused on saving them.

| Opinion

Jeanne Dubi, Sara Reisinger, Stu Wilson and Kathryn Young Guest columnists
Sarasota Herald-Tribune
November 5, 2025

While we all celebrate the recovery of bird species such as bald eagles, merlins and sandhill cranes, the [Sarasota Audubon Society](#) found a recent article republished in the Herald-Tribune – and bearing the headline "[Birds bounce back](#)" – to be somewhat misleading.

The news is not so good for the vast majority of North American bird species. A [May 2025 article in Science](#) found that 75% of North American bird species studied were declining.

Meanwhile, the [2025 State of the Birds Report](#) revealed that U.S. bird populations are continuing to decline at alarming rates.

Major drivers of reductions in bird numbers are habitat loss from development and land conversion, outdoor cats, collisions with glass windows and tower structures, and pesticides.



Roseate spoonbill

The latter doesn't merely affect some birds directly – it also reduces their insect food source.

Declining numbers in Sarasota County

Here in Sarasota County, the expansion of land development and related disturbance has resulted in well-documented declines in birds and bird species.

Three inland examples are the Northern bobwhite (a ground-dwelling, chicken-like bird), the Eastern towhee (which resembles a large sparrow) and the red-headed woodpecker.

Each species could readily be found within the urban service boundary of Sarasota County as recently as 25 years ago – but they are not so prevalent today.

Red-headed woodpeckers, unlike their red-bellied woodpecker cousins, simply don't tolerate developed environments.

To see one today, you must take long hikes to the prairies of [Myakka River State Park](#) or [Carlton Reserve](#).

On our county beaches, Wilson's Plover was extirpated as a nesting shorebird two decades back.

Red headed woodpecker



The same fate is befalling its cousin, the snowy plover – and literally before our eyes.

Despite relentless efforts by the birds and Audubon beach nesting bird stewards, there hasn't been a successful snowy plover nest on Sarasota County's beaches in a decade.

Sarasota Audubon – along with our partner, the Big Waters Land Trust – has committed to raising more than \$5 million to create habitat on the county-owned Quad parcels just west of Celery Fields.

This habitat will provide an effective wildland buffer for species currently using the Celery Fields for breeding and wintering.

In contrast, the Raymond Road boardwalk in the southern area of the Celery Fields is threatened by development.

In fact, developers often knock on the doors of property owners and offer high prices for land based on hoped-for increases in density.

The Sarasota County Commission has [twice denied](#) increasing housing density on the Smith Farm property on Raymond Road.

If this land could be purchased for public use, with correct compensation to the owners, the property could be used for conservation.

It could also be used to complement the Celery Fields' flood control purposes – offering the owners of the Smith Farm a proud legacy rather than contributing to the decline of a beloved wild space.

Public, private partnerships are needed



Eastern towhee

Public-private partnerships between Sarasota County and private entities – such as landowners, Sarasota Audubon and the Big Waters Land Trust – are essential to creating and maintaining our conservation lands and habitats.

The [Celery Fields Regional Stormwater Facility](#) is a prime example of such

collaboration: its 440 acres serve a triple function by providing public safety (flood control), wildlife habitat (257 bird species alone) and passive recreational use (100,000 visitors annually).

Saving land and creating habitat for wildlife - while allowing passive public use - is crucial in stemming further bird declines in Sarasota County.

Yes, we should rejoice when bald eagles soar overhead and sandhill cranes stroll in our neighborhoods.

But we should not fall for the illusion that birds overall are "bouncing back."

Our birds are decidedly in peril.

If we want to stem the declines in bird populations in Sarasota County – and across our nation – we must save land and create habitat for wildlife.

This guest column was authored by Sarasota Audubon Society board members Jeanne Dubi, Sara Reisinger (president), Stu Wilson and Kathryn Young.

