

**Bay Times Journal
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Pecking Away at Our Rights**

With great dismay I watched the governmental abuse of power this summer during the "Shell Island Crackdown" by state park police, who ticketed innocent people with their family dogs or a beer. Now I find that it happened partly because the State of Florida has long been influenced by a small, vocal group working behind the scenes to restrict taxpayers' access to our recreational parks: the Audubon Society.

While I don't begrudge them their recreational pursuit of bird-watching, they come across as elitists when they try to dictate how all the rest of us enjoy the public lands we share. The local Audubon president recently wrote a condescending opinion letter (News Herald July 29, 2006) ordering boating families to take binoculars "instead of dogs and coolers" to Shell Island. But it's not just people's dogs and beverages they'd like banned, it's the people, too.

The article "DNR Park Plans Trashed" (News Herald, July 19, 1989) reported that the Audubon Society, led by Candis Harbison, successfully petitioned DEP (then DNR) to drop their plans for people-friendly boardwalks and restrooms on Shell Island, and asked DNR to "limit visitors" to Shell Island. Published minutes of a park meeting just two years ago show that Harbison, representing Audubon again, opposed cabins and parking areas for people at neighboring Camp Helen State Park.

The Audubon Society succeeded in pressuring the state of South Carolina to ban people from visiting three popular islands off the east coast just this year. Guess which is the only group still allowed to visit those islands in South Carolina? The Audubon Society, of course! In fact, to add insult to injury, money belonging to the taxpayers is paid to Audubon to patrol the islands as wardens, turning visitors away or threatening them with ticketing.

In 2003, a Wrightsville Beach, NC, project to save peoples' homes from the effects of erosion was held hostage by Audubon and their government friends until agreement was reached to set aside about 30 acres of prime beachfront property for bird studies. Funding for the project comes out of the homeowners' pockets (Wilmington Star-News April 2006). Audubon members function as wardens there, too, turning other beachgoers away and calling the cops on them if they protest.

Audubon of Bay County's 2006 goals are published on their web site. They say they want to preserve Shell Island for "bird and turtle nesting". The goals include promoting "passive use" of recreational areas. "Passive" means no motorized boats. How do you boaters like that?

Do you envision a future for Shell Island where only birdwatchers and kayakers are allowed, and the rest are ticketed and fined by Audubon Society wardens? If not, then say thanks for Commissioner George Gainer, who defeated Harbison in the recent election. He has consistently defended all the people of Bay County and our right to enjoy Shell Island. Our island belongs to all of the people, not to just an elite few.

Dave Westerman