

# SOUTHEAST

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

## Regional Director's Honor Awards 2023 - 2024







## OUR VISION

**“Together, we will connect lands and waters to sustain fish, wildlife and plants by being visionary leaders, bold innovators, and trusted partners, working with and for people.”**



# U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Southeast Regional Director's Honor Awards 2023 -2024



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# Volunteer Service Award

Volunteer Services  
Christi Green



Christi Green has demonstrated exemplary service and unwavering support for all programs at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Since beginning her volunteer journey in 2021, Christi has contributed more than 2,660 hours, a testament to her remarkable commitment to conservation. And yes—she first volunteered to work on a refuge in Florida during the summer—now that’s dedication!

Her contributions are as wide-ranging as they are impactful: from picking up litter and cleaning bathrooms to staffing the visitor center desk and welcoming work campers and interns. Her sunny personality and can-do spirit have made her a beloved member of the refuge team.

Christi’s love of tools and talent for building and fixing things have saved the Refuge countless dollars. Last summer, she took on the ambitious task of rehabilitating the pollinator garden—a major project made possible by her tenacity, resourcefulness, and positive energy.

When challenges arise, Christi steps up. She’s known for solving problems, tackling tough jobs, and always finding ways to make the Refuge a better place for both staff and visitors.

Many consider her the hardest-working person on the Refuge, and it’s easy to see why. Christi’s dedication, versatility, and impactful contributions make her a truly deserving recipient of the Conservation Partner Award for Volunteer Services.

# Volunteer Service Award

Volunteer Services  
Kay Homme



Kay Homme is truly a gem. For the past eight years, she has served as the resident volunteer at Southeast Louisiana National Wildlife Refuges, single-handedly keeping the Bayou Lacombe Visitor Center open during the peak tourist season from December to March. Her dedication has resulted in more than 3,200 volunteer hours and the warm welcome of over 45,000 visitors, each greeted with Kay’s signature smile.

But Kay’s contributions extend far beyond managing the Visitor Center. She takes on a wide array of essential front-desk responsibilities—answering phones, coordinating with contractors, sorting mail, and more. Her reliability, adaptability, and collaborative spirit make her an indispensable part of the refuge team.

To know kindness is to know Kay. Her positive energy, enthusiasm, and unwavering support lift the spirits of everyone around her. She creates a welcoming atmosphere not only for visitors but also for staff and fellow volunteers.

Kay Homme exemplifies the spirit of community, service, and conservation stewardship. Her tireless efforts have significantly enhanced the operations and public engagement of the Southeast Louisiana National Wildlife Refuges and inspired others to serve.

For her outstanding service, unmatched dedication, and exceptional impact, Kay is truly deserving of the Conservation Partner Award for Volunteer Services.



# Friends Group

## Friends of Louisiana Wildlife Refuges

William “Bill” Trimble, Andre Olagues, Chris Pease, Sue Wilder, Walt Burgoyne

The Friends of Louisiana Wildlife Refuges, Inc. are an indispensable partner to the Southeast Louisiana National Wildlife Refuges Complex, working tirelessly to promote the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service throughout the region. Their dedication has had a significant impact in FY 2024, supporting a variety of community-driven events, including a February Open House, Earth Day Tree Planting in April, Youth Fishing Rodeo in June, and co-sponsorship of Wild Things in October—the largest single-day wildlife refuge celebration. Through these efforts, they continue to connect people with nature and foster environmental stewardship.

The Friends collaborate with local partners such as Common Ground Relief, the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL), the Louisiana Master Naturalists of Greater New Orleans (LMNGNO), and the St. Tammany Parish School District. Together, they’ve brought national recognition to the innovative Glass Half Full project—an upcycling initiative that transforms pulverized glass into sand to combat marsh erosion around Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

To date, the project has repurposed over 75 tons of glass, placing it in refuge waters and planting it with marsh grasses to support coastal restoration. The Friends group has played a pivotal role in promoting this partnership and supporting volunteers during restoration activities. “Working with the Friends Group has shown me the true meaning of community and conservation,” shared one volunteer—reflecting the collaborative spirit that defines their work.

Featured in numerous national media outlets, the Glass Half Full initiative exemplifies the power of community-driven conservation. But their impact goes far beyond a single project.

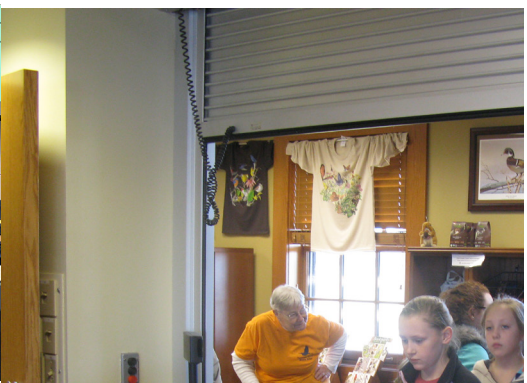
The Friends of Louisiana Wildlife Refuges, Inc. do it all—from event coordination and public outreach to hands-on restoration. Their work not only strengthens refuge operations but also inspires others to engage in conservation. They prove that with passion, partnership, and people power, we can make a real difference for wildlife and wild places.



# Friends Group

## Friends of Tennessee Wildlife Refuges

Hal Hassall, Ski Witzofsky, Cyndi Routledge, Sheri Pyle, Wendy Crawford, Kathy Veazey, Sherrye Hudson, Jaen Owens, Joyce Fischer, Rosemary Hehn



Over the past year, the Friends of Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge have played a vital role in sustaining the refuge’s visitor services and environmental education programs. Following the retirement of the career refuge ranger, the group launched a creative and highly successful fundraising campaign, raising over \$20,000 to fund a term ranger position. This position has been essential in delivering outreach and education to more than 5,000 people in 2024.

Thanks to the Friends Group’s support, the refuge has:

- Remained open six days a week
- Hosted 12 outreach events
- Delivered numerous educational field trips for local schoolchildren

Their efforts ensured continuity of programming and public engagement during a time of transition, preventing the closure of the visitor center and loss of critical community services.

One hundred percent of the funding for the term ranger came from the Friends Group and external partners, showcasing the power of community-driven conservation. Without their dedication, the refuge would have been forced to drastically reduce or eliminate its public-facing programs.

This partnership highlights the indispensable role Friends Groups play in supporting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s mission. Through their leadership, the Friends have preserved vital public services, strengthened community connections, and fostered a deeper appreciation for conservation.

Without their creative fundraising and unwavering support, the refuge would face the difficult reality of closing its visitor center and halting outreach and education programs.

Good friends truly are priceless.



# Conservation Partner Award

Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center  
Dr. Paul Johnson, Michal Buntin, Jesse Holifield, Thomas Tarpley



For over two decades, the Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC)—led by Dr. Paul Johnson and operated by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources—has been a national leader in freshwater mollusk conservation, redefining what’s possible in aquatic species recovery through science, innovation, and partnership.

Since 2010, AABC has cultured over 43 federally listed and petitioned species, reintroducing more than 282,000 individuals representing 23 listed species into historically occupied habitats. Their work spans the Mobile and Tennessee River Basins and reaches across 11 states, including Texas and Missouri. AABC’s strict adherence to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Propagation and Augmentation Policy sets a national standard for recovery programs.

AABC’s impact is comprehensive. They’ve published more than 75 peer-reviewed studies, contributed to recovery plans, Species Status Assessments (SSAs), and 5-year reviews, and trained the next generation of conservation scientists. Their efforts directly address habitat fragmentation and small population sizes—two of the greatest threats to freshwater mollusks—by restoring habitat connectivity and increasing population resilience.

In FY24, AABC documented the first natural reproduction of the endangered Alabama lamp mussel at a Partners for Fish and Wildlife project site. They have also led monitoring efforts funded by environmental settlements, discovering new species locations that will guide future conservation priorities.

AABC’s partnerships with the Tennessee Valley Authority, Alabama Power, and NAFO demonstrate how conservation can align with industry and community goals. Their leadership in the Alabama Strategic Habitat Unit (SHU) model has revolutionized watershed-scale conservation planning.

Through scientific excellence, innovation, and a deep commitment to collaboration, AABC has become an indispensable partner to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a national model for aquatic conservation.

# Conservation Partner Award

Federal Aid Coordinator’s Working Group  
Matthew Warriner, Amy Silvano



Matthew Warriner and Amy Silvano have significantly advanced grant and policy work within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through their leadership roles in the Federal Aid Coordinator’s Working Group (FACWG). As Chair and Southeast Region state representative, Matthew has elevated FACWG to national prominence. Amy, serving as backup state representative, has led multiple sub-teams and played a vital role in the group’s success.

Though often behind the scenes, grant and policy work is foundational to conservation delivery. Under Matthew and Amy’s leadership, FACWG has guided key policy discussions, including revisions to 50 CFR 80—the cornerstone regulation for the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) Program. They also developed best management practices (BMPs) for states, filling a critical gap where the Service could not directly provide such tools.

Their efforts have strengthened communication and collaboration between state agencies and the Service. Initiatives such as lands reconciliation, BMP development, and state grant manager surveys have generated valuable feedback, improved grant processes and reducing audit risks. These enhancements ensure that conservation funding is efficiently managed, and more resources are directed to on-the-ground impact.

Beyond process improvements, Matthew and Amy have fostered trust and strengthened partnerships with state agencies. Their work has shaped national grant policy, streamlined administrative procedures, and reinforced the Service’s mission through sound financial stewardship.

Together, they exemplify how collaborative leadership, and strategic partnerships can drive meaningful progress in conservation funding and policy—ensuring lasting results for wildlife, habitat, and the public.





# Conservation Partner Award

Florida Department of Transportation  
Jennifer Marshall, Katasha Cornwell, Denise Rach, Brent Setchell



The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) has developed and implemented the FDOT Conservation Plan for the Florida Panther—a landmark initiative under Section 7(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act. This proactive, landscape-scale plan advances Florida panther recovery while supporting the development of vital transportation infrastructure statewide.

The plan addresses major threats to the panther—habitat fragmentation, vehicle collisions, and limited range—by embedding conservation strategies directly into transportation planning. It builds on FDOT’s decades-long commitment to wildlife crossings, now enhanced with data-driven tools such as least-cost path analyses and telemetry to identify critical movement corridors. These innovations reduce wildlife-

vehicle collisions and support range expansion.

FDOT’s Efficient Transportation Decision Making (ETDM) process incorporates early environmental review, allowing for the integration of wildlife crossings and mitigation measures at the planning stage. The plan also streamlines Section 7(a) (2) consultations, reducing regulatory delays while delivering net conservation benefits.

Importantly, FDOT’s efforts go beyond regulatory requirements. The agency has retrofitted infrastructure to improve connectivity, collaborated with researchers, engaged in public outreach, and committed funding for land conservation to enhance panther movement and habitat linkages.

This plan has fundamentally reshaped collaboration between FDOT and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, setting a national precedent for how state DOTs can lead in conservation. Its framework is already being applied to other at-risk species, including tricolored bats and monarch butterflies.

By shifting from reactive to proactive conservation, FDOT demonstrates that infrastructure development and species recovery are not mutually exclusive. This strategic, scalable model aligns with the Service’s recovery goals and offers a replicable blueprint for future public-private conservation partnerships.

# Conservation Partner Award

Frank Mazzotti, Ph.D.

Dr. Frank Mazzotti, a leading university researcher at Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, conducts vital studies that inform the management of both native and non-native species. His deep understanding of the Refuge’s ecology has led to the development of innovative methods for monitoring Burmese pythons and rapid response protocols for large invasive reptiles—addressing one of the Refuge’s most pressing challenges.

Dr. Mazzotti exemplifies a model conservation partnership, contributing science-based solutions to restore critical habitats and support native wildlife. His research directly informs Refuge management strategies and aligns with regional and national priorities to control invasive species, thereby protecting at-risk and threatened species. His passive control techniques are efficient and require minimal staff effort, significantly expanding the Refuge’s capacity to manage non-native reptiles.

In addition to his research, Dr. Mazzotti trains university students to support field monitoring and data collection—resulting in substantial cost savings for the government and building a skilled conservation workforce. His work contributes to a larger monitoring network that supports Greater Everglades ecosystem conservation, including improved water management and natural resource sustainability.

Over decades of collaboration, Dr. Mazzotti has built invaluable datasets on wildlife populations, particularly alligators, deepening understanding of species distributions and ecological drivers. His research has established formal indicators of Everglades restoration success, providing critical benchmarks for long-term ecosystem recovery.

A passionate advocate for healthy habitats and native wildlife, Dr. Mazzotti’s contributions have had a profound impact on both the Refuge and the broader Everglades landscape. His work strengthens conservation efforts for current and future generations.





# Conservation Partner Award

Lykes Bros., Inc.



Lykes Bros. Inc. launched its Panther Conservation Program with the signing of the Lykes Conservation Bank Agreement, marking a major milestone in Florida panther recovery. Located in the critical dispersal zone north of the Caloosahatchee River, Lykes lands are essential to expanding the panther’s range into central Florida.

This program is the result of over a decade of collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and includes a Research Access Agreement with both the Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. It also features a robust outreach component, demonstrating that ranching and panther conservation can coexist.

The program protects key panther corridors while providing regulatory assurances to Lykes Bros. Inc. for future development. For the first time in decades, biologists now have access to these lands for health assessments and disease monitoring, including surveillance for Feline Leukomyelopathy (FLM).

Phase 1 of the conservation bank protects 6,859 acres, with a total of 28,975 acres planned across three phases. These lands lie within the Florida Wildlife Corridor and benefit a wide array of species beyond the panther. The program also promotes climate resilience by maintaining landscape connectivity that enables species to adapt to shifting habitats.

Importantly, Lykes Bros. Inc. has committed to long-term land management at no cost to the government. By leveraging a conservation banking model—funded through the sale of conservation credits—the project avoids an estimated \$250 million in public land acquisition costs.

This innovative approach required new thinking to demonstrate conservation value beyond existing state easements. It sets a precedent for how conservation banking can be tailored to diverse landownership types, offering a scalable solution for private landowner engagement. The Panther Conservation Program stands as a compelling example of how public-private partnerships can deliver meaningful, lasting conservation outcomes.



# Conservation Partner Award

Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida

Marcel Bozas, Alex Crow, Nicholas Gonzalez, Amy Castaneda, Dion Bert



On March 28, 2023, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida shared Indigenous Knowledge revealing that the Okeechobee gourd—a culturally significant vine—once thrived farther south in the Everglades than previously documented.

This insight led to a collaborative planting effort on May 10, 2024, when the Tribe, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, researcher Dr. Marc Minno, and botanist Richard Moyroud planted 40 Okeechobee gourd seedlings on two tree islands within the Miccosukee Reservation. An additional 60+ plants and seedlings were transferred to the Tribe’s nursery for propagation and future restoration.

Historically abundant in the pond apple forests south of Lake Okeechobee, the Okeechobee gourd has suffered severe habitat loss due to agricultural expansion and water management and now persists in only two small wild populations in Florida.

This project marks a significant step in implementing the species’ Recovery Plan. It integrates Indigenous Knowledge into federal conservation strategies and establishes a meaningful new partnership between the Florida Ecological Services Office and the Miccosukee Tribe.

By reintroducing the gourd into its historic range, the effort enhances ecosystem resilience, restores degraded tree islands, and improves the species’ ability to withstand stressors such as hurricanes and drought. It also reinforces collaboration among tribal, state, and local partners.

This initiative exemplifies how intergovernmental cooperation and the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in recovery actions can come together to protect and restore a rare and ecologically important species.





# Conservation Partner Award

Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute  
Dr. Anna George, Dr. Bernie Kuhajda, Stephanie Chance, Sarah Kate Bailey, Emily Culp, Helaina Gomez, Drew Hardy, Abbey Holsopple, Teresa Israel, Tigris Nevans, Dr. David Neely



From rescuing endangered fish during droughts to leading multi-million-dollar conservation initiatives, the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute (TNACI) has become a model for science-driven, community-connected conservation. Their work has directly advanced the recovery of species such as the laurel dace, Barrens topminnow, trispot darter, and slackwater darter.

The TNACI team blends time-tested field and propagation techniques with cutting-edge science to improve population assessments, develop breeding protocols, reconnect fragmented habitats, and tackle emerging threats like parasite infestations.

Their leadership in the \$11 million “Ridges to Rivers” Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)—matched by \$11.8 million in partner contributions—demonstrates their ability to scale conservation impact and engage private landowners in meaningful habitat restoration. TNACI’s proactive rescue of laurel dace during the 2024 drought, without federal or state funding, underscores their deep commitment to species recovery and public service.

Through strategic collaborations with Auburn University, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and others, TNACI has helped identify critical habitats, discover new populations, and develop solutions for complex conservation challenges. Their work has shaped recovery planning, habitat prioritization, and barrier removal to support full life-cycle conservation for at-risk species.

Beyond science, TNACI has elevated public awareness through the Tennessee Aquarium’s “Ridges to Rivers” exhibit and creative outreach—partnering with organizations like the Chattanooga Lookouts baseball team. These efforts reach over 750,000 visitors annually, fostering deeper connections between the public and the Southeast’s rich freshwater biodiversity.

When the Tennessee Aquarium opened in 1992, few could have imagined that a private nonprofit would go on to lead groundbreaking conservation efforts alongside private landowners—connecting lands and waters to safeguard at-risk and listed aquatic species.

# Conservation Partner Award

Reel Fishing Charities  
Tony Manganello, Tony Crowder



Reel Fishing Charities, a local nonprofit volunteer organization, has made a profound impact on visitor services and outreach at Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Dedicated to engaging disadvantaged youth, children with special needs, and elementary-aged students, the organization has become a trusted partner in delivering inclusive, hands-on fishing experiences.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, Reel Fishing Charities planned and hosted multiple “Family Fishing Days” and supported special events like the Refuge’s annual Everglades Day. These efforts have engaged over 400 visitors, significantly increasing participation in recreational fishing. The programs are offered free of charge, removing financial barriers and requiring minimal

staff support thanks to the group’s expertise and self-sufficiency.

This partnership led to the successful launch of a recurring “Family Fun Day” fishing program, enriching the Refuge’s recreational offerings and aligning with the goals of the Connected Communities Program. By creating positive outdoor experiences for youth from diverse backgrounds, Reel Fishing Charities fosters a lifelong appreciation for conservation and public lands.

Their contributions go beyond event planning. The organization provides all materials, runs events independently, and brings deep experience in working with varied audiences. This level of commitment has allowed the Refuge to expand its reach and impact without additional staffing or funding burdens.



The longstanding collaboration between the Refuge and Reel Fishing Charities exemplifies the power of community partnerships. Their shared mission—to connect people with nature through recreation and education—has strengthened the Refuge’s ability to serve the public and support conservation goals.

This partnership stands as a model for mission-aligned collaboration, demonstrating how trusted community organizations can enhance public engagement and deliver meaningful conservation outcomes.



# Conservation Partner Award

U.S. Forest Service  
Kisatchie National Forest Supervisor's Office, Calcasieu Ranger District, Caney Ranger District, Catahoula Ranger District, Kisatchie Ranger District, Winn Ranger District



The U.S. Forest Service – Kisatchie National Forest (USFS-KNF) Team is a leader in the conservation of federally listed and at-risk species. Their efforts have been instrumental in the recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW), Louisiana pine snake (LPS), Louisiana pearlshell mussel, and numerous pollinator species.

USFS-KNF manages the largest RCW population in Louisiana and has provided critical habitat support and funding for the reintroduction of over 200 Louisiana pine snakes in the past two years. Their strong partnerships with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Fort Johnson, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries have advanced species recovery across both public and private lands.

Through innovative engagement with private landowners and timber industry partners, the team has expanded conservation opportunities beyond federal boundaries. They have also supported mussel propagation efforts at the Natchitoches National Fish Hatchery and led habitat restoration projects benefiting pollinators and aquatic species.

USFS-KNF's forward-thinking forest management plan prioritizes climate resilience, native plant diversity, and long-term ecosystem sustainability. Their leadership in developing a programmatic Biological Assessment/ Biological Opinion (BA/BO) for forest-wide actions and LPS reintroduction has streamlined ESA Section 7 consultations, saving time and resources for both agencies.

Their commitment to public education, habitat restoration, and interagency collaboration reflects the highest standards of conservation stewardship. Their work directly supports regional and national priorities, including climate adaptation, species recovery, and community-driven conservation.

The USFS-KNF Team's extraordinary service, innovation, and partnership have made them an indispensable ally in achieving the Service's mission and a model for collaborative conservation across the Southeast.



# Conservation Partner & Employee Group Award

Regional Vision Champion  
Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area Planning Team  
Kathleen Burchett , Laura Housh, Jereme Phillips, Julie Morris, Tom Hocht, Catherine McCurdy, Stephanie Bruner, Justin Dewey, Deborah Burr, Kevin Cuniff, Theodore Darnell, Karli Eckel, Cindy Fury, Kevin Godsea, Anthony Grossman, Bernard Howard, Richard Kanaski, Michelle Krauser, Adam Malcomb, William Miller, Sine Murray, Thomas Reinert, Hannah Willis, Pamala Wingrove



The Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area (E2G CA) is a landscape-scale conservation initiative spanning more than 4 million acres in Southwest Florida. This visionary effort is a collaboration among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Florida, the Seminole and Miccosukee Nations, private landowners, NGOs, and the broader conservation community.

The E2G CA is designed to protect critical wildlife habitat while supporting a working landscape that promotes both ecological and economic resilience. It seeks to connect protected lands from Big Cypress National Preserve and Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge to the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area—forming a continuous wildlife

corridor essential for species movement and climate adaptation.

Guided by four overarching goals—habitat protection, science-driven conservation, inclusive land stewardship, and adaptive partnerships—the E2G CA uses the best available data to address ecological priorities. This science-based approach prevents habitat fragmentation and supports more than 100 federally and state-listed threatened and endangered species, including the Florida panther and 17 federal at-risk species. It also enhances water quality and quantity across key watersheds such as the Caloosahatchee, Peace, and Myakka Rivers.

The E2G CA supports wildlife-dependent recreation, Tribal cultural uses, and collaborative land management. It is grounded in the Southwest Florida Landscape Conservation Design, a science-based blueprint developed by the Center for Landscape Conservation Planning.

By uniting a diverse set of partners, the E2G CA is addressing some of the region's most pressing ecological challenges. Its focus on habitat connectivity, water resource protection, and inclusive decision-making demonstrates how landscape conservation can benefit both people and wildlife. Through innovative thinking and trusted collaboration, the E2G CA has become a model for equitable, community-driven conservation.



# Conservation Partner & Employee Award

## Working Forests for Wildlife Partnership

Rob Tawes, Heath Rauschenberger, David Gonzales, Bret Beasley, Shannon Holbrook, Meg Hedeem, Rebecca Harrison, David Tenny, Bryan Petit, Jimmy Bullock, Erica Richards



The Working Forests for Wildlife Partnership represents a transformative approach to private lands conservation. Through months of collaboration, trust-building, and innovative thinking, this partnership opened conservation opportunities across more than 44 million acres of private working forests—an unprecedented scale with national impact.

Originally focused on wide-ranging bat species, the effort quickly expanded to benefit monarch butterflies, bumblebees, alligator snapping turtles, and other at-risk species. While the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had a longstanding relationship with the National Alliance of Forest Owners (NAFO), this initiative pushed both organizations to reimagine how conservation can be achieved voluntarily—without regulation.

Led by the Southeast Region, the initiative reframed the Service's role from regulator to recovery partner, demonstrating that forest management and species conservation are compatible. It also redefined how the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act can be used nationwide to support conservation on working lands.

The partnership is already inspiring interest from other private landowners and industries, who now see the Service as a trusted, collaborative partner. It opens the door to long-term biological planning, conservation design, delivery, and monitoring on lands that were previously inaccessible to the agency.

Crucially, this initiative delivers high-impact conservation outcomes at little or no cost to the agency. It reduces barriers, advances species recovery, and elevates the Service's role in landscape-scale conservation.

The Working Forests for Wildlife Partnership stands as a national model for how the Service can engage private landowners in meaningful, lasting conservation—shifting the narrative from compliance to collaboration.

# Private Landowner of the Year Award

## Dr. Paul Gray



On March 5, 2024, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service accepted a seven-acre fee title donation in Hardee County, Florida—the first parcel acquired for the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area (E2G CA) and the establishment of the 571st unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. This milestone was made possible by Dr. Paul Gray.

Dr. Gray's generous donation marks a vital step toward building stronger conservation partnerships across this expansive four-million-acre landscape. By recognizing that both private and public contributions are essential to preserving wildlife habitat in Southwest Florida, Dr. Gray's gift not only benefits native plants and wildlife—it also enhances ecological integrity, water storage, and water quality.

The E2G CA aims to protect and restore critical habitats for more than 100 federally and state-listed species, including the Florida panther, Florida scrub-jay, and Audubon's crested caracara. Dr. Gray's commitment to conservation fosters a collaborative spirit that supports habitat protection, reduces fragmentation, and contributes to a vital wildlife corridor linking existing protected areas.

By donating land instead of selling it, Dr. Gray enabled the Service to achieve significant cost savings—funds that can now support broader conservation goals. His vision and dedication exemplify the power of innovation and collaboration in resource management, setting an inspiring example for future conservation partnerships.

Photo: Dustin Angel 2019



# Service Employee Team Award

## Division of Conservation and Classification Team

Chandler Eaglestone, Jo Emanuel, Brian Evans, Jessica Gilbert, Byron Hamilton, Andrew Henderson, Scott Hoffmann, Kaye London, Sarah McRae, Jean Olbert, Erin Rivenbark, Kristi Young, Nicole Rankin, Jon Wardell, Melissa Moore



Over the past two years, the Southeast Region Ecological Services Division of Conservation and Classification (DCC) has led the nation in delivering exceptional results. In FY23, the team published 35 rule-makings and findings covering 45 species, followed by 26 rule-makings for 37 species in FY24.

This highly motivated team embraces innovation, learns from challenges, and continuously improves its processes. Faced with a substantial listing workload—including approximately 34% of national 12-month findings through FY28 and 86% through FY27—the DCC team saw an opportunity to get proactive.

They collaborated with field offices and partners to explore strategies for precluding the need to list species, as well as advancing efforts to delist or downlist species due to recovery. Their efforts have resulted in:

- Four petition withdrawals
- Eleven “not warranted” findings
- More than 60 rule-makings and findings published in the past two fiscal years

The DCC team is committed to right-sizing decision-making. They’ve developed formative guidance on:

- Conducting Species Status Assessment (SSA) check-ins
- Aligning science outputs with SSA reports
- Drafting effective 4(d) rules

Their leadership has not only improved the region’s listing program but also inspired other regions to adopt similar approaches—delivering the right science to the right species at the right time.

Through their dedication, innovation, and strategic foresight, the DCC team has significantly strengthened the Service’s decision-making capabilities and made a lasting impact on at-risk species conservation.

# Service Employee Team Award

## Paint Rock River National Wildlife Refuge Team

Alice Lawrence, Beth Goldstein, Ricky Ingram, Drew Wirwa, Nick Wirwa, David Young, Susan Heisey, Taylor Pool, Leslie Hull-Ryde, Stacy Stevenson, Ryan Nunley



A dedicated team was instrumental in establishing Paint Rock River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Tennessee—the 570th unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System—officially created on September 27, 2023, through the generous donation of an 87-acre parcel by The Nature Conservancy. This contribution is especially significant, as no federal funds were required to establish the refuge.

The partnership among the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, The Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reflects a shared commitment to protecting one of the most biologically diverse ecoregions in the world. Their collaborative efforts will support the conservation of upland hardwood forests, strengthen connectivity between protected lands, and safeguard vital water resources within the Paint Rock River watershed.

This initiative is expected to benefit at least 15 federally listed species and numerous state-listed species, while also providing critical habitat for fish, wildlife, and native plants. Additionally, it expands opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation—including hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation—fostering community engagement and appreciation for the region’s natural resources.

In a remarkable display of teamwork, the group organized a national-level celebration event in just 10 days, showcasing their coordination, adaptability, and unified vision.

Through their innovation and collaboration, the team has laid a strong foundation for the refuge’s future, with the potential to expand to 25,120 acres. Their efforts embody the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—to conserve and manage America’s natural heritage for generations to come.



# Service Employee Team Award

Southeast Veterans Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Network Team  
Scott Lamount, LeeAnn Kelso, Jessica Fuenffinger, Carrie King, Stephen Ricks



In a groundbreaking effort, employees in the Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the agency's first peer-to-peer mentoring network dedicated to supporting veterans. What began as a grassroots initiative has grown into a 68-member network that meets quarterly to tackle administrative challenges, expand access to key programs, and foster a culture of collaboration and support.

Founding members showed exceptional dedication, extending their terms to ensure the network's long-term success. Their leadership created a vital support system for veteran employees—improving engagement, retention, and effectiveness across the agency. The network's success has been so impactful that its framework is now being adapted

by the National Park Service. This initiative directly supports the Regional Vision of valuing diversity and empowering employees. By addressing the unique needs of veterans, it has enhanced operational performance and contributed to broader agency goals around workforce engagement and mission delivery.

Its influence has extended beyond the Southeast Region, catalyzing the development of a national, Service-wide veteran support network. It sets a powerful precedent for how veteran-focused initiatives can drive cultural and operational transformation, advancing inclusivity and support agency-wide.

The veteran mentoring network is more than a support group—it is a model for peer-led innovation that transforms workplace culture. It highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique experiences of veterans in public service, and the power of employee-driven change to create lasting impact.

This initiative stands as a testament to the Service's commitment to its people and its mission—ensuring that those who have served our country are supported, empowered, and positioned to thrive.

# Service Employee Honor Award

At-Risk Species Conservation  
Michael P. Armstrong

For several years, Mike has provided outstanding leadership in the conservation and management of listed and at-risk bat species across much of the continental United States. His work spans Regions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, significantly advancing both scientific understanding and policy development in bat conservation.

He co-developed and teaches the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's acoustic bat survey course through the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC), equipping staff with essential field and analysis skills. Mike also led the acquisition and restoration of the Coach Cave/James Cave complex—home to over 200,000 gray bats and designated Indiana bat habitat—which will soon be transferred to Mammoth Cave National Park.

His leadership includes oversight of numerous research and management projects, from developing acoustic lures to improve capture rates, to advancing forest management strategies that benefit bats on public and private lands.

Mike has played a pivotal role in developing national guidance for evaluating project impacts on species such as the Indiana bat, northern long-eared bat, and tricolored bat. His work promotes science-based, consistent decision-making across regions, streamlining project reviews and allowing Service staff to focus on other conservation priorities without compromising environmental protection.

His efforts have improved collaboration with agency partners and project proponents, enhancing both the efficiency of consultation processes and the quality of conservation outcomes. The national guidance he helped shape is now widely used and reflects a forward-thinking approach to species recovery and regulatory effectiveness.

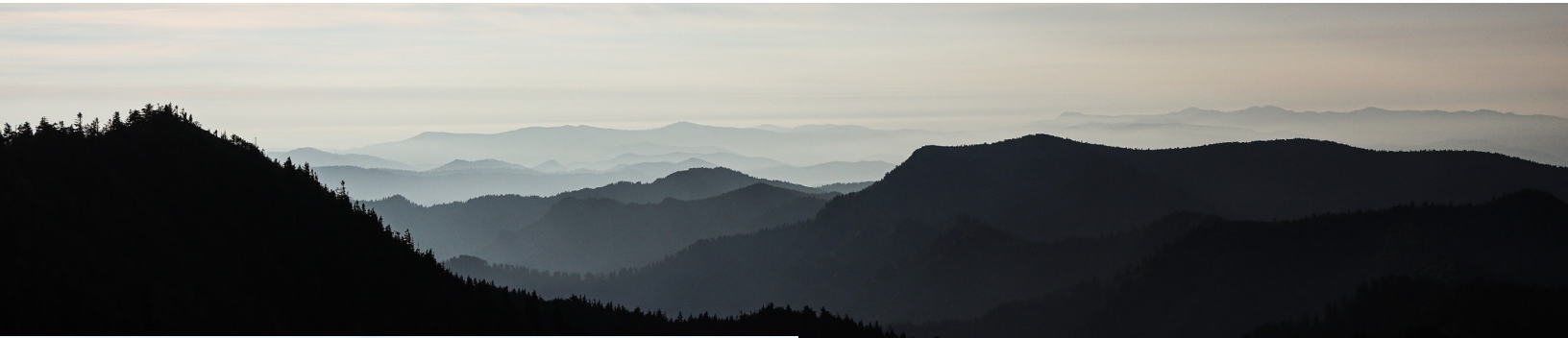
Mike's contributions exemplify how scientific expertise, strategic leadership, and cross-regional collaboration can drive meaningful progress in species conservation and operational efficiency across the Service.





# Service Employee Honor Award

At-Risk Species Conservation  
Susan Cameron



Sue Cameron, a biologist with the Asheville Field Office, has emerged as a leading force in high-elevation conservation across the Southern Appalachians. Her work centers on restoring red spruce forests and protecting two of the region’s rarest species—the endangered spruce-fir moss spider and the Carolina northern flying squirrel.

In 2023, Sue led the planting of 327 red spruce trees in a North Carolina state park—a major milestone in forest restoration. She convened a diverse coalition of partners, including state agencies, conservation nurseries, colleges, and hiking groups. On adjacent private lands, she developed strategies to release existing spruce, expanding habitat and bolstering climate resilience.

Sue’s leadership goes beyond restoration. She is spearheading the most comprehensive monitoring effort to date for the spruce-fir moss spider. In collaboration with researchers from Virginia Tech and Clemson University, she developed and implemented a long-term monitoring protocol, using each field outing to train and inspire future conservationists.

As a founding member and current chair of the Southern Appalachian Spruce Restoration Initiative’s Black Mountains team, Sue has helped shape a collaborative, landscape-scale approach that spans North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, engaging both public and private partners.

Her work directly supports the Service’s priorities in climate adaptation and community-driven conservation. The lands she stewards are identified as “highest priority” in the 2024 Southeastern Conservation Adaptation Strategy Blueprint.

Through her vision, scientific rigor, and unwavering dedication, Sue Cameron is restoring some of the Southeast’s most fragile ecosystems and securing a future for the imperiled species that depend on them. She exemplifies the power of partnerships, innovation, and science-based action.



# Service Employee Honor Award

People Exhibiting Excellence in Regional Service (PEERS)  
Shannon Taylor



Shannon Taylor has transformed the relationship between the Safety Officer and Project Leaders. Previously, safety inspections felt like a game of dodgeball — managers focused more on avoiding getting “dinged” than on improving safety. Shannon changed that by investing time and effort in building trust and fostering collaboration.

He has learned to speak the language of each field station, understanding their unique priorities and identifying shared goals. As a result, managers no longer rush through inspections. Instead, they work with Shannon and the Safety Team to explore practical, proactive solutions.



Thanks to Shannon’s leadership, safety inspections have become productive, solutions-oriented conversations that support both facility goals and the Service’s mission. Safety is job #1 for the Service, and Shannon has made it a visible, organization-wide priority. His work empowers field stations to achieve their objectives more safely — for both employees and the public. After all, nobody wants to be the reason the safety manual gets rewritten.





# Service Employee of the Year Honor Award

Administrative Professional of the Year  
Samantha Lask

Samantha Lask has demonstrated exceptional innovation in advancing Deepwater Horizon (DWH) fiscal management. She developed and enhanced an internal budget tool that enables project managers to efficiently track DWH project funding, ensuring alignment between funding levels and project milestones. The tool reconciles funding at both the Department of the Interior (DOI) and Bureau levels, offering a clear view of authorized funding, budgeted and actual expenditures, and indirect costs.

Her collaborative problem-solving was key to successfully integrating a project budget module within the existing Settlement Reporting Tool (SRT). She also created a standardized project budget planning template, providing training and guidance to Gulf Restoration Office (GRO) and DOI budget staff, reinforcing a culture of preparedness and maintaining audit-ready status across the team.

Samantha’s user-friendly budget tool allows project managers to easily assess their projects’ fiscal status, fostering informed planning with Trustee Implementation Groups (TIGs). By combining fiscal science with real-world feedback, she increased both productivity and efficiency in restoration budgeting.

Her contributions have transformed internal project management practices, improved transparency in budgeting, and ensured more strategic use of funds. Through her commitment to listening, adapting, and delivering practical solutions, Samantha has made a lasting impact on Gulf restoration efforts, conservation delivery, and the operational success of her team.



# Service Employee of the Year Honor Award

Biologist of the Year  
Jessica Radich

Jessica Radich consistently pushes beyond traditional boundaries to create meaningful opportunities for conservation. As a dedicated fish biologist at Warm Springs National Fish Hatchery, she has gone well beyond her core duties, leading innovative, multi-species conservation efforts that benefit a wide range of trust species across Georgia and Florida—all with unwavering enthusiasm and positive energy.

Her impact reaches far beyond fish. Jessica has successfully led intensive culture operations for gopher tortoises, gopher frogs, freshwater mussels, and their host fish species, and supports conservation actions for frosted flatwoods salamanders in collaboration with the neighboring Fish Technology Center. Her pioneering work has directly advanced the recovery of endangered species like the Ochlockonee and Suwannee moccasinshells through host fish trials and reintroduction initiatives.

Under her leadership, the hatchery has become a regional hub for multi-species conservation. She has built sustainable partnerships with local farmers to supply free food sources for tortoise programs and engaged thousands through hatchery tours, connecting the public to the stories of imperiled species.

Jessica has forged strong relationships with Service partners, NGOs, landowners, and volunteers, navigating scientific uncertainty with creativity and determination. Her work has improved mussel health protocols, supported climate resilience for gopher frogs, and provided refuge for displaced tortoises.

Her efforts have elevated the hatchery’s reputation and demonstrated how fish hatcheries can play a pivotal role in broader species recovery. By producing and reintroducing imperiled species in-house, Jessica delivers significant cost savings and conservation gains.

Through her passion, innovation, and commitment to cross-program collaboration, Jessica has become a driving force in at-risk species recovery—and a model for how hatcheries can support the full spectrum of the Service’s mission. Her work continues to inspire and deliver lasting impact across the Southeast Region and beyond.





# Service Employee of the Year Honor Award

Communicator of the Year  
Deke Tompkins



Deke Tompkins has played a pivotal role in advancing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's congressional engagement strategy—both in Washington, D.C., and across the Southeast Region. His leadership has empowered field staff to build meaningful relationships with Members of Congress and their staff, increasing the visibility and impact of the Service's work.

- In Fiscal Year 2024, the Southeast Region:
- Conducted 26 in-person meetings on Capitol Hill, including three with Members of Congress
  - Hosted 18 virtual briefings
  - Responded to 54 congressional inquiries
  - Engaged with 68 congressional offices

Deke also coordinated numerous field visits for congressional staff, spanning from the Florida Keys to the bayous of Louisiana and the mountains of Arkansas.

His work has been instrumental in navigating complex legislative issues, including energy easements, development projects, and environmental reviews. By effectively connecting programs such as Refuges, Ecological Services, and Migratory Birds to congressional stakeholders, Deke has helped ease tensions and foster mutual understanding on high-priority conservation issues.

Deke has also led staff training efforts, equipping teams with the tools to engage effectively with Congress and laying the foundation for long-term relationship-building. His efforts have improved congressional awareness of how funding supports on-the-ground conservation and the overall value of the Service's mission.

With his collaborative approach, deep programmatic knowledge, and strategic foresight, Deke has become a trusted advisor and connector. His work has strengthened the Service's credibility, enhanced legislative partnerships, and positioned the Southeast Region as a leader in congressional engagement.

Through his dedication, Deke has not only advanced the Service's priorities but also created lasting pathways for future collaboration and support.

# Service Employee of the Year Honor Award

Maintenance Professionals of the Year  
Great American Outdoors Act Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge Hub  
David Kellerson, Daniel Wright, Matthew Syme, Jesse Turner

The Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Hub successfully completed 26 infrastructure projects across Regions 4 and 8 during Fiscal Years 2023 and 2024, benefiting refuges including Tennessee, Red River, Grand Bay, Bayou Sauvage, Atchafalaya, White River, Cat Island, Wheeler, and Hopper Mountain NWRs.

These projects addressed critical storm damage and long-deferred maintenance needs, significantly enhancing habitat management capabilities through levee rehabilitation and water control structure replacements. Notably, at Wheeler NWR, two new 48-inch water control structures now allow over 120 acres of waterfowl habitat to be flooded by a natural spring—eliminating pumping costs and improving long-term sustainability.

Beyond habitat restoration, the Hub's work improved public access and safety through upgrades to roads, parking lots, boardwalks, viewing towers, and kiosks. These enhancements support outdoor recreation and ensure safer, more welcoming visitor experiences.

The Wheeler NWR Hub exemplified innovation and fiscal responsibility by deploying skilled Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) maintenance strike teams, achieving an estimated \$2 million in annual savings compared to contractor bids.

In addition to their infrastructure achievements, Hub members have actively supported storm and wildfire response efforts, demonstrating unwavering dedication, teamwork, and a strong spirit of public service. Their success proves that, with targeted GAOA funding and robust regional support, significant progress in reducing the deferred maintenance backlog is both possible and sustainable.





# Service Employee of the Year Honor Award

Federal Wildlife Officer of the Year - 2023

Jared Brierley

Senior Federal Wildlife Officer Jared Brierley exemplifies the commitment, professionalism, and resilience of the Division of Refuge Law Enforcement. Tasked with patrolling more than 500,000 acres across the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuge Complex—some of the most heavily visited refuges in the nation—Officer Brierley manages a relentless workload that includes migrant landings, endangered Key deer cases, search-and-rescue operations, and extensive boating and fishing violations.

He has led two long-term investigations into Key deer shootings, served as acting captain, mentored new officers as a field training officer, taught illegal fishing techniques at the Federal Wildlife Officer Basic Training Academy, and coordinated a joint operation with the Office of Law Enforcement. He has also volunteered for district and regional details and supported hurricane response operations.

Despite constant demands, Officer Brierley maintains professionalism and integrity, fostering positive relationships with the community, local law enforcement, businesses, and government partners. His outreach efforts have strengthened management of the endangered Key deer and enhanced the public's trust in the Service.

On July 30, 2022, Officer Brierley's skill and knowledge proved lifesaving when he rescued a young boy who had been lost at sea during a storm. Using his expertise in navigation, tide patterns, and backcountry waters, he located the child—exhausted and near death—after hours of unsuccessful searches by multiple agencies and aircraft.

Through his extraordinary service, leadership, and courage, Senior Federal Wildlife Officer Jared Brierley brings great credit to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and personifies the mission of the Division of Refuge Law Enforcement.



# Service Employee of the Year Honor Award

Federal Wildlife Officer of the Year - 2024

Bradley Poen



Corporal Bradley Poen exemplifies the highest standards of professionalism, dedication, and leadership within the Division of Refuge Law Enforcement. Over the past year, he has consistently gone above and beyond in service to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's mission, demonstrating exceptional courage, initiative, and integrity.

In 2024, Corporal Poen served in multiple capacities—Field Training Officer, Firearms Instructor, MOCC Instructor, Acting Captain, SORT Team Member, and mentor at the Federal Wildlife Officer Basic Training Academy. He strategically planned and led Operation Duck Blues, a highly successful, multi-agency enforcement operation that disrupted illegal activity and promoted public safety, earning commendation from the Chief's Office. He also developed and continues to manage a Zone 1 SharePoint platform

that streamlines administrative processes and improves efficiency for officers across the region.

Beyond his collateral duties, Corporal Poen maintained an extraordinary level of field activity, logging over 1,300 public contacts, 97 incidents, multiple complex investigations, and five search warrants while patrolling refuges in Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Missouri. He also deployed in support of wildfire and hurricane response operations, reflecting his unwavering commitment to public service.

Corporal Poen's quick action and deep knowledge of the White River NWR landscape directly saved the life of a missing hunter in October 2023, exemplifying the courage, skill, and dedication expected of a Federal Wildlife Officer. His professionalism, leadership,

and service to others have brought great credit to the Service and strengthened its reputation as a trusted, mission-driven agency.









*Cover Image: Sue Cameron*  
*Bald Eagle: Chris Quezada*  
*Red Cockaded Woodpecker: USFWS*  
*Okefenokee Aerial View: Larry Woodward*