

Newsletter of the Orleans Audubon Society.

A Chapter of the National Audubon Society.

Volume: XXXVIII Issue: 2

December/January 2020

OAS Zoom Programs

Bird Louisiana!

Presenter: **Joan Garvey**

Tuesday, December 8, 7:00 PM, Central Time

Louisiana currently boasts a count upwards of 470 species of birds. Of that number about 25% comprise rare migratory birds from the far north, west and tropical Americas. It is a state full of National Wildlife Refuges,

pinewoods, barrier islands and wetlands, all in the path of breeding, migratory and wintering birds. With our mild climate it is possible to bird here year-round.

Joan's presentation shows how, in our current situation of dealing with a pandemic, birding locally can still be very fulfilling. Travel may also be limited due to other factors, family obligations, work constraints or monetary limits. Though she has stayed overnight on her more distant trips, most of the birds depicted in this presentation were seen on day trips. She will also show us how to enjoy Louisiana's birds without even leaving home.

Joan Garvey is the OAS Membership Chair and has been birding since retiring after Katrina from private practice as a general dentist. Family obligations make it necessary to limit her travels to destinations within a day's drive, so she limits her trips to the state of Louisiana. She enjoys taking photographs for documentation purposes but also uses them as reference for her watercolor paintings.



Painted Bunting by Joan Garvey

Registration: To register for this program, send an email message with "Bird Louisiana" as the subject line to: OrleansAudubon@aol.com and include your full name in the body of the email. You will then receive email instructions.

Madagascar: A Place Like No Other

Presenters: Ken Harris and Joelle Finley

Tuesday, January 19, 7:00 PM, Central Time

The fourth largest island on Earth hosts 6 endemic families of birds with over 110 endemic bird species. Madagascar is one of the major zoogeographic regions of Earth. Ninety percent of its forest species and all of its native land mammals are unique, among them the many species of lemurs, a primate group now largely confined to Madagascar. Two-thirds of all chameleons occur on Madagascar along with 7 species of Baobab trees (Africa has only 1 species). 80% of the forest is gone from Madagascar due to a huge over-population problem and is sadly being replaced by Eucalyptus. It is one of the poorest nations in the world with no free education for children. Madagascar was once a colony of France who left behind their language and wonderful French Bread!



Registration: To register for this program, send an email message with “Madagascar” as the subject line to: OrleansAudubon@aol.com and include your full name in the body of the email. You will then receive email instructions.

Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec—photo by Joelle Finley

Remember OAS in Your Year-End Giving

Help us to conserve birds, other wildlife, and wild places by making a year-end contribution. Because OAS is a 100% volunteer organization, without any offices, it has almost no overhead expenses. This means that your donation will have a big impact for local conservation and environmental education.

Funds are especially needed in 2021 for the following projects and programs:

Native plants for birds initiative

Environmental education outreach

Conservation-related records requests: Funds are needed to cover fees for public records requests in the OAS campaign to increase fines and penalties for Whooping Crane shootings as a deterrent, and to investigate the legality of Louisiana State Parks P3 development projects such as the one proposed for Fontainebleau State Park

Matching funds to leverage grant money to rebuild the boardwalk at Marguerite Moffett Audubon Sanctuary in Terrebonne Parish

To donate, make the check payable to “Orleans Audubon Society” and mail it to: Mary Joe Krieger, OAS Treasurer, 3623 Nashville Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70125-4341, or visit <http://jjaudubon.net/> to donate using PayPal (credit cards accepted). Orleans Audubon Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, charitable organization, and as such, your gift may be tax deductible if you itemize.

Wendy Rihner Awarded Conservation Educator of the Year

On September 27, 2020, OAS Education Chair, Wendy Rihner was presented with the prestigious 2019 Conservation Educator of the Year in New Orleans. This was part of the 56th Annual Conservation Achievement Awards program, hosted by Louisiana Wildlife Federation and the awards were presented jointly with the National Wildlife Federation. The award ceremony was delayed until 2020 due to COVID-19. OAS leaders and members congratulate Wendy on receiving this well-deserved honor.

Louisiana Wildlife Federation Executive Director Rebecca Triche presented the award to Wendy in the shade of a live oak on the bank of Bayou St. John. Rebecca announced that Wendy was “awarded Conservation Educator of the Year 2019 for launching the OAS *Native Plants for Birds* education campaign. The program teaches individuals how to create backyard habitats for wildlife and Rihner made numerous presentations to hundreds of people in the New Orleans and Baton Rouge area.”

OAS President, Jennifer Coulson added, “Wendy’s 19 years of service on the OAS Board of Directors includes her chairing the Environmental Education, Publicity and Community Outreach committees. Her environmental education philosophy emphasizes how the individual can make a difference in conservation. Her boundless enthusiasm motivates people to become birders and engage in citizen science and conservation projects. Her community outreach focuses on inclusivity, and how we all need to work together to care for this planet.”



Wendy has long been interested in the difference individuals can make by creating backyard habitats for wildlife. When she learned that the 2019 Audubon Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, would focus on native plants for birds, she applied for a travel scholarship from National Audubon Society and attended the convention, serving as OAS’s delegate. The convention inspired Wendy to launch OAS’s *Native Plants for Birds* educational campaign.

Wendy’s *Native Plants for Birds* educational campaign targets the Greater New Orleans Area and in its initial year (2019), it included outreach programs focused on gardening for wildlife using native plants. Wendy kicked off the campaign on with an appearance on the Fox8 Morning show. She explained to the public how to prepare their gardens for migratory birds and brought showy plants as examples. This prompted a fantastic turnout of 80 participants for the native plants for birds workshop at the East Bank Regional Jefferson Parish Public Library in Metairie.

Multiple speaking engagements followed, including a “Plants for Birds” workshop for Rayne UMC and a program on plants and especially native trees which benefit birds for the Teen Outdoor Education and Service at the Louisiana Nature Center. Wendy also gave a “Native Plants for Birds” presentation at John Folse’s White Oak Plantation in Baton Rouge and a prairie restoration slide show for the Native Plant Initiative members. At the OAS’s and Crescent Bird Club’s fall banquet she presented “Gardeners in a Costa Rican Paradise: Skutch, Wilson, and Some Exemplary Austrians.” Wendy shared her thesis about several prominent pioneers of botanical gardening, and how their gardens became safe havens for neotropical birds. High school outreach included programs on native plants for birds at Metairie Academy and De La Salle High School in New Orleans.

A big advocate for Citizen Science, Wendy has organized and led citizen science events. For example, Wendy and Joan Garvey organized OAS’s first “Big Easy Sit” birding event on October 13th in the Wisner Tract of City Park. The OAS “Big Easy Sit” birding team won the 2019 Golden Bird Award, a Swarovski Optics sponsored national award. Wendy persuaded the OAS Board to designate the \$500.00 prize money to OAS educational programming. Wendy also organized and compiled the Northshore-Slidell Count Circle for the 120th Christmas Bird Count. The count, held on December 29, had 20 participants with 113 species of birds detected.

The world needs more conservation educators with Wendy Rihner’s level of passion and dedication. Her genuine enthusiasm for nature, the outdoors, bird conservation and wildlife gardening excites and motivates people. It is easy to follow her lead in making a difference for wildlife.

MRGO: The Road to Recovery

Written by the **MRGO Must Go Coalition**. Lead authors: John Lopez, PhD, Pontchartrain Conservancy; G. Paul Kemp, PhD, Paul Kemp & Associates; Amanda Moore, National Wildlife Federation.

Access the full report here: <https://mrgomustgo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MRGO-White-Paper-10-01-2020.pdf>

The infamous Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) negatively impacted over a million acres of coastal habitat. Remarkably, the relatively simple navigational closure of the channel is possibly the most beneficial restoration project to date in Louisiana, helping return salinity throughout the Pontchartrain Basin to pre-MRGO ranges. But the ecosystem restoration recommended by the federal government, the state government, conservation organizations, and local communities is far from done. In fact, no funding has been allocated to implement the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' (Corps) MRGO ecosystem restoration plan, despite Congressional calls for action following Hurricane Katrina.

Introduction.—When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, communities along the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet had their worst fears realized. Deadly surge caused numerous levee breaches, catastrophic flooding, and claimed the lives of hundreds of people in St. Bernard Parish, New Orleans East, and the Lower Ninth Ward. The MRGO, an ill-conceived navigation canal, was constructed in the early 1960s and subsequently destroyed and degraded vast landscapes of protective coastal wetlands. In addition to the environmental impacts, the channel failed to perform from an engineering standpoint, as banks eroded catastrophically and the maintenance costs greatly exceeded the economic benefits of the shipping channel. Despite calls for its closure in the years prior to Katrina, the channel remained open. Sadly, it took the environmental, economic and social destruction of the Greater New Orleans area for Congress to finally close the channel in 2009.

Today, 15 years post-Katrina and a decade post-closure, we are able to more fully understand the impacts of the channel on the ecosystem and how the navigational closure, a rock dam at Bayou la Loutre, is affecting coastal habitat. Through extensive research and monitoring, we have pieced together the ecosystem conditions before MRGO, how they changed during the channel opening, and how conditions have changed with closure. We've learned the MRGO negatively affected over one million acres of coastal habitat. **While not foreseen at the time of its deauthorization, the navigational closure of the MRGO has benefited our coastal ecosystems more than any other project implemented since Hurricane Katrina.** Evidence abounds – baldcypress trees can now survive on a protective land bridge where they could not have survived a decade ago. At the seaward end of the estuary, oysters have reestablished in their historic reef areas. Local community members in the Lower Ninth Ward are witnessing species like crawfish return to wetland areas where they haven't been seen since their childhoods. Ghost forests of oak trees are coming to life again on ridges in St. Bernard Parish.

This rebirth brings great hope for the future and underscores the opportunities that exist to restore our coastal ecosystems. Hydrologic restoration brought about by the closure provides a strong foundation for the remaining work needed to help restore tens of thousands of acres of wetlands in key areas that were degraded and destroyed by the MRGO.

It is, however, possible to turn the tragedy of the MRGO into a major ecosystem restoration and equity-building opportunity for communities. The MRGO Must Go Coalition has advocated for recovery of the MRGO ecosystem since 2006. While there has been some progress, there is still a long way to go to restore the ecosystem and help make surrounding communities safer. In the face of ongoing risks posed to communities from storms, we must advocate for restoration and recovery at a scale commensurate with these threats. In this advocacy, communities must be centered in the dialogue and key drivers in decision-making. Until the state and federal governments come to an agreement on financial responsibility and prioritize restoration and recovery, local communities will continue to bear the burden of the disastrous federal shipping channel.

The MRGO Legacy from Hurricane Katrina.—Hurricane Laura was the latest reminder of the peril facing communities along Louisiana’s weakened coast. To understand our future risks and vulnerabilities, we must look to our past. Those who experienced Hurricane Katrina cannot forget the devastation this storm brought to so many across our region. The connection between the MRGO and Hurricane Katrina are intertwined and complex, but there are some key points to remember. For more than 50 years, federal and state governments neglected the ecosystem along the MRGO. The channel destroyed tens of thousands of acres of protective wetlands and degraded hundreds of thousands more acres of coastal habitats. After decades of ecosystem decline, Hurricane Katrina’s eye passed directly over the MRGO. The Gulf Intra-coastal Waterway, the MRGO and the adjacent levees all converge and create a funnel-like effect on storm surge. Studies showed that higher surge and larger waves occurred because of the “MRGO Funnel.” Flood water was concentrated here and passed under the Paris Road Bridge through the MRGO at a high velocity, barreling toward the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal (IHNC).

The major failures of the system here were two-fold. Miles of earthen levee failed catastrophically along the MRGO near the funnel. These levees failed before they were overtopped, and their collapse resulted in a deluge of surge water flowing west that quickly overtopped the older and lower back levee. Once it crossed this levee, it flowed freely into all but a few homes and structures in the entirety of St. Bernard Parish.

Even worse were conditions along the IHNC. Surge overtopped the navigation canal’s floodwalls releasing an instant wall of water into the Lower Ninth Ward. Most homes were destroyed, and the greatest concentration of structural damage in the city occurred here. A study of mortality during Hurricane Katrina showed that the highest concentration of death was located at the breach of the flood wall into the Lower Ninth Ward. The combination of flood water level and fast-moving water were catastrophic for the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard neighborhoods.

[The federal authorization of the MRGO loomed over New Orleans and St. Bernard communities for far too long. Today, another federal project intertwined with the MRGO, the IHNC lock expansion, continues to loom over the Lower Ninth Ward as it has for decades. Reminiscent of the MRGO, the project remains authorized despite decades of pushback and legal battles from the community. It's time to learn from the MRGO and prioritize our limited federal infrastructure funding for scientifically-supported projects that will benefit communities.](#)

The Environmental Benefit of the MRGO Closures.—In 2009, after decades of decline, the Pontchartrain Basin took a huge step toward restoration as a result of the closure of the MRGO. The closures, the rock dam and the concrete surge barrier, have changed the “plumbing” of the nearby wetlands by reducing the flow of salty seawater into the basin. Reducing the unnatural, saltwater intrusion has brought historical salinity gradients back to over 1.2 million acres of coastal habitat. **This means that the region will be able to support a variety of historical species and habitats, such as baldcypress swamp forests and oyster reefs. These species and habitats also provide vital multiple lines of defense, or natural coastal buffers, that better protect vulnerable communities, such as the Lower 9th Ward and St. Bernard Parish, from storm surge and increase their long-term resilience.**

During eleven years of monitoring since the closure in 2009, Pontchartrain Conservancy studied the changes in suitability for both baldcypress habitat in the north end of the basin and for oysters in the south end of the basin. The results are undeniable.

Swamps: By lowering salinity and helping to stabilize salinity, the MRGO closures have made over 90% of the former swamp habitat again suitable to replant trees and restore swamps. These areas tend to be where swamp restoration could reduce the risk of flooding from storm surges. For example, the land bridge separating Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas is a “critical landscape feature” identified by the Corps because it reduces storm surge. Since the closure of the MRGO, the habitat has improved dramatically. PC and its many partners are aggressively doing swamp restoration here to strengthen this important coastal buffer. PC planted 36,000 trees. Last year, PC expanded their restoration efforts into the LaBranche Wetlands in front of the St. Charles Parish hurricane levee. Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL) planted 8,900 trees along the Maurepas land bridge. In the past year, they have begun planting adjacent to the MRGO in the Central Wetlands Unit. *The closure of the MRGO helped revive the fresh end of the Pontchartrain estuary, but what about the salty end?*

Oysters: While the MRGO was open, saltwater intrusion was so extreme that oysters were growing on dead cypress tree stumps and cypress knees in the Central Wetlands, a freshwater system prior to the MRGO. This unnatural growth of salt-loving oysters on freshwater trees is an indication of the extreme impact of the MRGO. However, this began to change with the closures in 2009. Since 2009, oysters are once again productive in the Biloxi Marsh as they were before the construction of the MRGO in the 1960s.

Clams: Most coastal residents are familiar with the quarter-sized, powder-white clam shells that we see along roadbeds and driveways in New Orleans. Most of these clams were dredged from Lake Pontchartrain. Dredging decimated this important organism, and so dredging was banned in 1990. However, the MRGO remained open allowing a salt layer to form on the bottom of the lake, creating a “dead zone” every summer and killing any new crop of clams for about one third of the area of the lake. The closure of the MRGO stopped the saltwater intrusion and the annual dead zone and death of *Rangia* clams. Clams have been rebounding in Lake Pontchartrain and are also expanding their range into Lake Borgne. The clams are remarkable for their potential to filter the lake’s water, which helps improve water quality for the entire ecosystem. Small clams are also a favorite food of the lake’s famous blue crabs and diving ducks like scaup.

Prioritizing Restoration & Recovery.—Today, we better understand the ecosystem recovery potential of the MRGO-impacted areas. Projects are in some stage of implementation on Bayou la Loutre Ridge, Golden Triangle, New Orleans East Landbridge, Maurepas Swamp, Lake Borgne Landbridge, and Biloxi Marsh. Thousands of acres of coastal habitat are on track for restoration. This is something to celebrate.

However, these projects are of significantly smaller scale than what conservation groups, the state, local communities and the Corps have recommended, and they are primarily funded with Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act or Deepwater Horizon funds. No funds have been requested by the Corps or allocated for construction of projects proposed in the Assistant Secretary of the Army’s 2012 recommendation to Congress in the MRGO Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study. Though the various plans for restoration align for billions of dollars’ worth of projects, ongoing cost-share issues have plagued restoration progress and remain unresolved. Agreement between the Corps and the state is not anticipated any time soon. Congress asked the Corps to address the impacts of the MRGO, but the Corps’ actions on ecosystem restoration have been minimal. Meanwhile, the state is moving forward with their own restoration efforts in the MRGO ecosystem area, but at a much smaller scale than what the state and Corps originally recommended. For example, the degraded New Orleans East Landbridge, which helps provide surge protection for more than 1.5 million people, has only seen small, piecemeal restoration. There is almost no movement on restoration of the 27,000 acres of severely degraded Central Wetlands Unit.

The positive impacts of the MRGO closure, including a restored and balanced hydrology for the entire Pontchartrain Basin, have provided a tremendous foundation upon which large-scale coastal restoration can and should advance with urgency. Implementing much needed restoration will honor the communities and lives lost and help in the ongoing and fair economic recovery of the region. Let’s take advantage of the opportunity that nature is giving us today to restore the MRGO ecosystem to benefit fish and wildlife habitat, local economies, and to protect communities still in recovery and at risk from future storms.

"Nectar Profusion" by Linda Barber Auld

TOPIC: Twelve native nectar plants, twelve native plant gardeners, twelve favorite picks and why.

There are so many native plants that can be planted to attract a variety of pollinators! I asked twelve of my friends and colleagues who are knowledgeable about growing native plants for their selection suggestions.

Alford, Mac H., Ph.D., - Professor and Curator of the Herbarium, School of Biological, Environmental, and Earth Sciences @ University of Southern Mississippi:

I have two favorites on this list (*Rudbeckia laciniata* and *Helianthus angustifolius*). I'm going to vote for....*Helianthus angustifolius* (narrowleaf sunflower)--I like it because it's messy and surprising! If you plant it tightly among other tall wildflowers (blazing stars, Joe Pye weeds, ironweed, hibiscus), it too will grow tall and pile all over the other plants, but in such a subtle way, since its leaves are so narrow and widely spaced out. Then, when it comes into flower, which is usually later than many other species, it really bursts onto the scene with its many sunflower heads. So, it can go from almost invisible to being the primary show in a short time. Best yet, it's quite tough once established and can even be pruned.

Allen, Charles - Allen Acres Bed & Breakfast - speaker, author of 'Louisiana Wildflower Guide':

Helianthus mollis; easy to grow, rhizomatous and thus spreads, leaves are blue green and thus attractive.

Barnes, Anne - LA Master Gardener, first Louisiana Certified Habitat Program garden in New Orleans area:

I admit it is hard to decide but I think I'll have to go with *Dracopis amplexicaulis*. It's a plant I've known and admired all my life. It filled the field next to my home when I was a child. As an adult I acquired it from a neighbor who acquired his from his mother. It's a most cheerful bloom, makes a great cut flowers over its long bloom period, attracts lots of pollinators, and then feeds the birds. And it repeats itself the next year with no work from me. It's even easy to pull the extras. A perfect plant in my opinion.

Fontenot, Bill -Ecological consultant, speaker, landscape planner, author 'Native Gardening in the South':

Echinacea purpurea...longevity of bloom season, soil/light adaptability, diversity of pollinators, modest re-seeder.

Mayronne, John - landscape architect:

Rudbeckia fulgida Goldstrum, (it can bloom twice some years) or *Helianthus mollis* as I think they bloom longer.

Miley, Betty - Maypop Hill Nursery- speaker, author of 'Putting Nature First on Your Southern Land':

Unfair! Like picking your favorite kid. Like, who doesn't love Echinacea? *Rudbeckia hirta* is indispensable. etc. I guess *Helianthus angustifolius*. It's too tall, can be floppy, but. It's so doggoned cheerful and tough and dependable.

Seidenberg, Charlotte - Naturalist, author of 'The New Orleans Garden: Gardening in the Gulf South'

Helianthus angustifolius is my favorite. Perennial profusion! It's starting to bloom now. Long bloom season and attracts tons of insects. It's a little invasive, but so what. Masses of the flowers make such a dramatic statement. Very easy to grow. I have the gold and mellow yellow. The contrast between the intense golden and the light yellow is beautiful. John Mayronne found one last year that was almost white. All 3 shades in one bed would be really gorgeous. I love *Dracopis amplexicaulis*, too, but it's an annual. I bought a plant at LNPS, put it in a wet spot in my prairie. We'll see if it comes up and blooms. Early spring profusion would be nice.

Tallamy, Doug - Professor University of Delaware, speaker, author of 'Bringing Nature Home':

I pick any of the *helianthus* species because that genus hosts so many specialist bees. They can only rear their young on the pollen of *Helianthus*.

Taylor, Emily - Dixielandscape Co. 1120 Erato St NOLA:

It's tough to pick a favorite native nectar plant when I'm not in the garden. They are all my favorite when I'm in the landscape and a butterfly lands on a bloom right in front of me. Echinacea is one of my favorite flowers to photograph. Bees will settle on the purple coneflower and take their sweet time extracting nectar from each individual floret. It's fascinating to watch.

Timmerman, Anna Elizabeth - Assistant Extension Agent- Horticulture LSU AgCenter- Greater NO Area

Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard, St. Charles, & Plaquemines Parishes, LA Landscape Horticulturalist,

Certified Nursery & Landscape Professional (CNLP) :

Helianthus angustifolius is one of the most cheerful wildflowers in my pollinator garden during the fall season. It blooms until frost, and in those years we do not get a freeze, it provides color and pollen all winter long in New Orleans. I'm sure it is a welcome source of pollen and nectar for insects during the cooler weather. The height of *H. angustifolius* makes it easy to work into existing flowerbeds, it makes a colorful, airy backdrop to any of the cool season annual flowers most gardeners would be familiar with. It returns reliably each fall and seeds are very easy to collect and share. I love sharing natives with others and encouraging them to be celebrated in our gardens. I have not observed any major pest or disease issues on this flower also, making it a good choice for beginners and native connoisseurs alike!

Vidrine, Malcolm - Speaker, author, 'The Cajun Prairie' (www.cajunprairiegarden.wordpress.com):

I like them all--great for pollinators. My favorite is *Rudbeckia subtomentosa*. It is:

1. lightly scented
2. blooms for 3 months--fantastic companion plants for *Liatris spicata* & *L. pycnostachya*
3. builds a fantastic root system and soil (biosequester of carbon) (anti-climate-changer)
4. can be cut to a desired height and still blooms
5. roots with ease from cuttings
6. seeds are super-viable
7. a long-lived perennial that blooms the first year from seed
8. fantastic food for pollinators
9. native to my area and thrives here and common in my yard.

Webb, Rick - Louisiana Growers- Speaker:

Sorry, don't do a favorite. Have grown and like 8 of those. Mixes are what we suggest.

Last but not least, **BugLady's personal pick** is Cutleaf coneflower, *Rudbeckia laciniata*. The large leaves are very attractive all year long then these tall stalks burst into bright buttery yellow flowers that bloom after most of the other coneflower species have finished. My plants grew as tall as I am! The flowers command your attention when you are strolling through your garden. They make me smile!



Perennial Coneflower
Rudbeckia fulgida



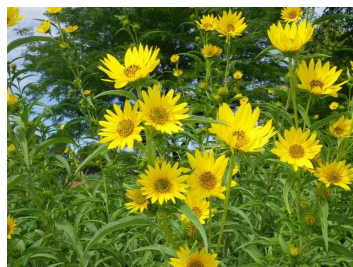
Black-eyed Susan
Rudbeckia hirta



Cut-leaf Coneflower
Rudbeckia laciniata



Swamp Sunflower
Helianthus angustifolius



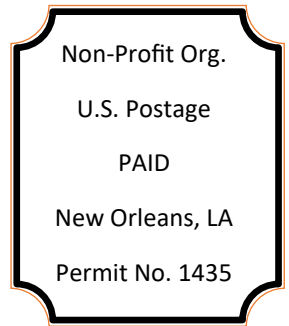
Maximilian Sunflower
Helianthus maximiliani



Ashy or Downy Sunflower
Helianthus mollis

The SE Louisiana Chapter of the
National Audubon Society

Orleans Audubon Society
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