To: Carol Rizkalla and Nancy Douglass, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Request for a Critical Wildlife Area Designation for the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, Sarasota County, with a year-round, 100 foot buffer

From: Ann Paul, Regional Coordinator, and Mark Rachal, Sanctuary Manager, Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries

Ownership and Management Authority: The Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands are owned by the State of Florida and managed by the National Audubon Society dba Audubon Florida, Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries (FCIS), through a letter of permission from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Bureau of Public Land Administration, dated April 16, 1999, signed by Daniel T. Crabb, Chief (see Exhibit 1). The letter gives the Audubon Society permission to post the islands, monitor the nesting birds, and to report violations to the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (now the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission).

Audubon continues to perform these responsibilities, with our partners in management of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony: Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology Classes, Carefree Learner, Sarasota County, Save Our Seabirds, and Sarasota Bay Watch.

Location and Description: The Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands are located in Sarasota Bay, Sarasota County, south of the Siesta Key Bridge and east of the Intracoastal Waterway, at approximately 27°17’36.88”N, 82°32’39.83”W. They consist of three small, mangrove-vegetated islands, situated in fairly deep water surrounded by seagrass meadows and protected from erosion caused by boat wake impacts by a breakwater installed by Sarasota County in fall 2007-winter 2008. The islands have provided important nesting habitat for many years, including thirteen species in 2015, making this a highly diverse waterbird colony (see Table 1, below).

Map showing Sarasota Bay Watershed and relative locations of Sarasota Bay segments. From Sarasota Bay Estuary Program website, accessed 3/30/2016
April 16, 1999

Ms. Ann Schnapf
National Audubon Society
Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries
410 Ware Boulevard, Suite 702
Tampa, Florida 33619

R.E: Posting of Three Islands in Roberts Bay, Sarasota County

Dear Ms. Schnapf:

Pursuant to your request of January 28, 1999, this letter shall grant the authority for the following activities on the three state-owned islands in Roberts Bay identified on the attached map:

1. Posting the islands with Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission signs; and
2. Organizing volunteers to monitor the nesting birds and report violations to the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

This letter in no way waives the authority and/or jurisdiction of any governmental entity. The authority to proceed with the requested activities is contingent upon the Florida Audubon Society agreeing to incur liability in case of injury related to the activities of its employees or any of its volunteers.

Please have this letter signed and return the original to Ms. Tracy Peters at the letterhead address. Should you have any question, please call Ms. Peters at (850) 488-2291.

Sincerely,

Daniel T. Crabb, Chief
Bureau of Public Land Administration

DTC/ip
Attachments

AUDUBON SOCIETY
National

P.D. 7-9-99

"Protect, Conserve and Manage Florida’s Environment and Natural Resources"

Printed on recycled paper.
Management activities:
Management includes posting of the island by FCIS, assisted by the Sarasota Audubon Society, and removal of fishing tackle and debris each fall when the bird nesting activity is at its lowest, in cooperation with Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology Classes, the Carefree Learner, Sarasota County, Save Our Seabirds, and Sarasota Bay Watch. FCIS conducts annual surveys. Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology Classes, and the Carefree Learner, acting as local observers and “Colony Watchers”, visit the island monthly or more often and report incidents of disturbance or concerns to FCIS.

The breakwater located between the Intracoastal Waterway and the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands was installed to protect the islands by Sarasota County using Pollution Recovery Funds at an expense of approximately $900,000 in the fall and winter of 2007-2008. Years of observations had made it clear that boat wakes were eroding the islands, reducing the mangrove bird nesting habitat. This habitat protection project was undertaken by the County in response to appeals from Audubon Florida, Sarasota Audubon Society, and other members of the public.

Aerial photograph of the Roberts Bay Bird Islands taken in 1995, from the north, showing the use of the island by nesting birds. Photo: Nancy Douglass

U.S. Geological Survey aerial of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, January 26, 1995, showing proximity to the Intracoastal Waterway, before the installation of the breakwater that protects the islands from erosion.
Top: Jan 2008 aerial depicting the newly installed breakwater, proximity to the Intracoastal Waterway, and nesting by Great Egrets and Brown Pelicans. (Photo: Gary Raulerson)

Middle: Sarasota County installed “Caution Breakwater” signs between the breakwater and the Intracoastal Waterway to warn boaters. Photo: Ann Paul

Bottom: Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands breakwater, showing the calm water lagoon next to bird nesting habitat islands, Sept 2012. Photo: Ann Paul
Surveys: Audubon’s FCIS has conducted annual “peak-nesting season” surveys at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands every spring since 1997. These surveys are conducted by trained observers using binoculars from an out-board motorboat, generally at a distance of 50-100 feet from the islands’ shoreline, in order to accomplish a quality survey while causing no impacts to the nesting birds. The Annual Survey data (Table 1, below) numbers represent direct nest counts, supplemented for those species that nest below the foliage canopy where direct observation of the nests is not possible, with estimates of the number of nests/breeding pairs based on flight-line surveys. As a result of this survey information, the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands were included in Audubon Florida’s Important Bird Areas of Florida, as one of the 100 most important areas for birds in the state. Because of the diversity of species present, nesting or the rearing of dependent young occurs during every month of the year at this colony.
### Table 1. Roberts Bay Bird Colony – Audubon Florida Annual Surveys, 1997-2015

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**Installation of signage:** Audubon FCIS, assisted by Sarasota Audubon Society leaders and other volunteers, have installed and maintained “No Trespassing” and “No Landing” signs along the shorelines of the Roberts Bay Bird Islands since receiving permission from the Bureau of Public Land Administration, Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection, in 1999. Sarasota County installed “Caution Breakwater” signs and two informational signs about the bird colony.

![Image of signs being installed by volunteers](Image)
Fishing line clean-ups:
Every fall for the last ten years, Audubon staff have coordinated a fishing line clean-up activity in Sarasota Bay with conservation partners Sarasota Bay Watch and the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, in the fall when most of the birds are not nesting. One of the sites that is targeted for the removal of
fishing line and other entangling trash that pose a hazard for wildlife is the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands. We receive assistance from the Sarasota High School Marine Biology classes every fall for this activity. During fall 2015, the decision was made not to remove fishing line from the north island because nesting birds were observed there on the day of the fishing line clean-up on October 10th.

Project Colony Watch partners:
Sarasota Audubon Society, Sarasota High School Marine Biology classes and instructors, and the boat captains and crews of the Carefree Learner, a boat that provides field experience for Sarasota County Schools, provide regular input on issues of concern that have arisen at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands and regular reports on nesting observed. These relationships to monitor and participate in management at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands have been active for over twenty years.

Project Colony Watch, a program of Audubon’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries, enlists volunteers who survey and learn about bird colonies in their neighborhoods and become actively involved in preventing impacts to nesting birds. These volunteers become the local “wardens”, biologists, and advocates for their nesting colonies. Each volunteer makes a difference for the wildlife where they live, plus experiences the enjoyment of watching birds nest and raise their young.

Issue of concern:
A significant management concern has been the close approach to the islands by boats and even incidences of boaters landing on the islands, in spite of the presence of “no trespassing” and “no landing” signs posted by Audubon. Over the years, Audubon has appealed to boaters, fishermen, nature
photographers, kayakers, and ecotour boat operators, to maintain a reasonable distance from the islands, to avoid disturbance to the nesting birds.

While many boaters respond appropriately to these requests, the mainland side of the islands, which is the side that most boaters approach on, exhibits a space about six feet above the water-line where birds do not nest. Bird nests on the breakwater side of the islands, which is very shallow and generally not traveled by boaters, are seen down to the water-line, as some birds select nest sites along the entire slope of the mangrove foliage. This suggests that the too-close presence of boaters traveling on the mainland side is creating a portion of the islands’ trees where birds are not comfortable nesting, a non-nesting zone.

It would be appropriate to employ a buffer zone of about 100 feet around the islands to help boaters recognize the importance of keeping further away from the nesting birds. This will provide the added benefit of moving wakes further from the island, to diminish their erosive effects on the island.

*Proposed buffer area, 100 feet from shoreline and breakwater.*
The breakwater and the north island of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, June 8, 2009. Note: nesting activity occurs down the entire slope of the mangroves to the water line. Photo: Mark Rachal

Courting Great Egrets and other nesting birds using the entire mangrove habitat on the breakwater side of this Roberts Bay Bird Colony island, June 8, 2009. Photo: Mark Rachal
Brown Pelican adults and chicks in their nests, protected from boaters by the breakwater, use the entire slope of the mangrove habitat available, June 8, 2009. Photo: Mark Rachal

Birds nesting on the breakwater side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony, using the entire mangrove habitat available, down to the waterline, June 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal

The mainland side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands shows a distinct “no-nesting” zone, May 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal
The mainland side of this Roberts Bay Bird Sanctuary island has no birds nesting along the slope of the mangrove foliage, May 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal

Mainland side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands, showing the “no-nesting” zone, May 24, 2014. Photo: Mark Rachal

Mainland side of Roberts Bay Bird Colony north island, showing the “no-nesting” zone, April 5, 2016. Photo: Kathryn Young, Sarasota Audubon Society Board member
Roberts Bay south island, showing the “no nesting zone” on landward side, May 16, 2016. Photo: Ann Paul

Ecotour boat close to the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, May 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal

Ecotour boat on the mainland side of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony’s north-most island, June 8, 2009. Note: the birds are nesting all the way to the waterline on the island side facing the breakwater, which has little boat traffic. Photo: Mark Rachal
Ecotour boat, and zone of “no nesting” on the mainland side of the island, May 24, 2015. Photo: Mark Rachal

Below: Ecotour boat travelling fast enough to produce a wake, coming, along the length of the Roberts Bay Bird Colony Islands, and going, 6-12-2012. Photos: Ann Paul
Boaters travelling closely to the mainland side of the Roberts Bird Colony Islands, June 8, 2009. Note the zone of “no nesting”. Photo: Mark Rachal

Jet skiers approaching the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands, May 16, 2016. Photo: Ann Paul

A boat approaches closely to the south (left) and middle (right) islands at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony, May 16, 2016. Photos: Ann Paul

A jet skier approaches very close to the middle island at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony, May 16, 2016. Photo: Ann Paul

Justification for year-round closure:
Nesting season at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony islands begins with cormorants and Great Blue Herons initiating courtship in November. By January (see aerial photo of January 2008 above), Great Egrets are courting and incubating. Brown Pelicans typically begin nesting in March, through April and May, with care for their young lasting for another three months. Roseate Spoonbills are nesting by March. The small herons, including Reddish Egrets, are nesting by April and May. If severe storms do not kill
nestlings, young birds are still being attended by their parents in late September and early October, as we find them there during our annual fishing line clean-up activities. During fall 2015, the decision was made not to remove fishing line from the north island because nesting birds were observed there on the day of the annual fishing line clean-up conducted with conservation partner Sarasota Bay Watch and the Sarasota High School Marine Biology class students, October 10th. Because of the diversity of species present, nesting or the rearing of dependent young occurs during every month of the year at this colony.

The island is used as a daytime and over-night roost site year-round by hundreds of birds, including pelicans, cormorants, and herons.

**Table 2. Nesting season at the Roberts Bay Bird Colony.** *N = nesting and caring for dependent young.*

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