**Suwannee River Partnership**

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**NEWS RELEASE**

**Lake City Wetlands Reduces Nitrogen and Attracts 86 Species of Birds**

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Sources: Suwannee River Water Management District and Jacqui Sulek, Audubon Florida, Chapter Conservation Manager

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LIVE OAK, Fla. --- In 2016, Ichetucknee Springshed Water Quality Improvement Project was completed and created the largest constructed treated wetlands of its kind in the Suwannee River Water Management District (District). The project was completed in partnership with the District, the City of Lake City, Columbia County and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Four years later, the project is well established, and the wastewater treatment facility is now sending better quality wastewater into the wetlands. Projects like the wastewater treatment facility are critical to the success of the Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs). BMAPs set the path to improving water quality and quantity in the Suwannee Valley region (and throughout Florida) and reducing nitrogen is one of the keys to meet its goals.

In the Lake City Wetlands project, about 1.58 million gallons of wastewater flows through the wetlands each day to recharge water into the Upper Floridan aquifer. The 120 acres of wetlands reduces nitrogen loads into the Ichetucknee River by an estimated 85 percent or 77,000 pounds annually.

An added benefit to the established wetlands is the rising bird population. At the beginning of the project, volunteers from Four Rivers Audubon and Alachua Audubon became involved to survey the habitat. They found 17 species of birds.

Since the completion of the wetlands, the amount of bird species has grown tremendously.

“On our most recent Christmas Bird Count, 86 species were documented in the area of the wetlands and adjacent to the facility,” said Jacqui Sulek, Audubon Florida Chapter Conservation Manager and Suwannee River Partnership Steering Committee Member.

To continue to support the bird population, last winter Audubon installed Purple Martin houses and Bluebird nesting boxes. They also encourage increased access to the areas to support the second most popular hobby in the United States, birdwatching. Currently permission is granted on a request-by-request basis to take groups of birdwatchers into the area.

“The success of the Lake City Wetlands is one more reminder of how nature can provide environmental services and how manmade wetlands like these can benefit birds and wildlife,” said Sulek.

The Suwannee River Partnership actively pursues projects like the Lake City Wetlands. By planning research-based solutions to protect our community’s water, the partnership can continue to work toward achieving the BMAPs and reduce nutrient loads into our water resource.

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*For almost twenty years, the Suwannee River Partnership has worked to address water quality and quantity issues in the Suwannee and Santa Fe River Basin. Comprised of a diverse group of individuals from federal, state, regional, and local governments, as well as farmers, residents, agricultural and environmentalist associations, the partnership meets quarterly to plan research-based solutions to protect our community’s water.*