

Audubon Society turns 50 as new Vero home opens

Posted: Sunday, April 26, 2015 7:32 am VeroNews.com

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY -- More than 300 people showed up to celebrate the grand opening of the Pelican Island Audubon Society's new Audubon House on Oslo Road, alongside the Oslo Riverfront Conservation Area, just east of US Highway 1.

"We broke ground two years ago but it took several re-generations to get here," said PIAS vice president Bob Bruce as he welcomed guests and dignitaries to the grand opening of the facility, which will be utilized as a welcome center with offices and classrooms.

Unable to secure land from the county, PIAS negotiated the purchase of the Oslo property from the University of Florida Foundation to maintain autonomy.

PIAS board president, Dr. Richard Baker was surprised at the ceremony when Bruce presented him with a Lifetime Achievement Award, only the second one ever given.

The first was bestowed on the late Maggy Bowman, a founder of this chapter and a major force behind the formation of the Environmental Learning Center.

An avid champion of the Oslo project, Baker is also a frequently consulted expert on conservation and the ecological nature of the area.

Although obviously pleased and honored by the tribute, he immediately turned the attention away from himself and onto the volunteers he calls Audubon Heroes.

"After 50 years of being homeless, we finally have a home," said Baker. "This opens up a place for the members of the community to get involved in environmental, economic and social issues."

Baker hopes that having a home base for education, training and classes will make the organization a more visible entity, which should assist in raising funds to conserve, protect and advocate for local wildlife and Indian River County waterways.

A series of after-school classes in the fall have been planned for students to brainstorm on ways to help improve the health of the lagoon.

"They're going to come up with solutions to save it," said Baker, optimistically. "We think they may have some better ideas than the adults."

After a symbolic ribbon cutting, the large crowd of well-wishers lined up for a slice of cake, celebrating the opening and the Society's golden anniversary.



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They also took advantage of Oslo Riverfront Conservation Area guided tours; independent trail walks; a short kayak trip with Mike and Kristen Beck, and assorted children's activities.

Many visitors were happy to escape the heat, viewing slide shows of PIAS' history, and photographs of native flora and fauna in the air-conditioned center.

The conservation area is a highly populated birding area with roughly 120 documented species including water birds, warblers, raptors, great horned owls and eagles.

“Children and others will now come through here on tours and they will learn about our native species, the plants we have added and why, and our mission,” said Renae Senn, Garden Club of IRC president.

The Garden Club of IRC had replanted native tropical plants after the construction in a layout designed by Robin Pelensky, and the club donated roughly \$35,000 to underwrite the beautification project.

“Through beautification, comes education,” added Senn.