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Audubon honors Crist



By Chris Van Ormer

Birders flocked Friday to Crystal River, where Gov. Charlie Crist was the keynote speaker at the 2008 Audubon Assembly banquet.

"Crystal River was chosen so members could enjoy the natural resources of the area," said Eric Draper, deputy director of Audubon of Florida. "There will be about 250 people at the banquet, and they will spend about two or three days in the area."

The assembly set up at the Plantation Golf Resort & Spa, where Audubon members from all over the state could socialize and set the state's conservation agenda. With a theme of "Saving Birds in a Changing Environment," the event offered workshops exploring the impact of human activities on Florida's birds and their habitats.

Birders also enjoyed a cruise on Crystal River, sponsored by Citrus County Audubon, and a program of digiscoped images of the county's birds by photographer Thomas Dunkerton, sponsored by Hernando Audubon Society. Part of the attraction of the resort is that 11 Great Florida Birding Trail areas can be found within a 10-mile radius of it, as well as opportunities to explore the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge and the Withlacoochee State Forest.

David Anderson, executive director of Audubon of Florida, presented Crist with the "Champion of the Everglades" Award for his leadership in encouraging the South Florida Water Management District to negotiate for the purchase of the United States Sugar Corporation. The negotiations have the potential to provide the "missing link" needed to provide for the cleaning, storing and moving of water through Everglades National Park to the Florida Bay.

"I'm grateful," Crist said in receiving the honor. "It touches me to receive such an award."

Crist said that although he was born in Altoona, Pa., he went to live in St. Petersburg when he was only 3 years old.

"The concern I have for the environment goes back to my childhood," he said, and told how he used to go

fishing with his father in Tampa Bay, which gave him an appreciation for the beauty of this state which he said was unparalleled.

He reminded the audience that an election is coming up.

“There’s an important amendment, Amendment 4, and I would encourage you to support it,” he said.

The amendment would provide a tax exemption on property dedicated in perpetuity for conservation purposes.

“What we are doing with the Everglades is truly historic,” he said. Crist said the Everglades was not just a national treasure, but an international treasure, and he was working to restore the flow.

He also said he was proud to be able to work on the project.

“I’m a blessed man and Florida is a blessed state,” he said.

Crist commended Florida’s Congressional delegation for working to include the continued implementation of the Modified Waters Deliveries system to National Everglades Park as part of the Continuing Resolution passed by Congress last month. He recognized Congressman Bill Young for his continued leadership in ensuring federal funding for the Everglades.

“I’ll never stop fighting for Florida,” Crist said. “God bless you and God bless Florida.”

Crystal River Mayor Ron Kitchen presented Crist with the key to the city.

“Use it any time,” Kitchen said.

Crist said that as a child he used to go to Crystal River and the Plantation Inn.

“They hold a special place in my heart,” he said.

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