

Cypress Chapter, Izaak Walton League of America

Annual Report – 2025



Overview

The year 2025 marked a period of exceptional momentum for the Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA). Through strong leadership, science-based conservation, and respectful collaboration with tribal, federal, state, and private partners, the Chapter advanced major restoration initiatives across the Greater Everglades while expanding public engagement and educational outreach.

Leadership & Governance

Following the passing of President Emeritus Pete Quasius, the Chapter navigated a thoughtful leadership transition. Marshall Jones was unanimously elected President, with Betty Osceola serving as Vice President and Tom Oates continuing as Treasurer/Secretary. Governance reforms—including by-laws updates and staggered Board terms—strengthened transparency, continuity, and fiscal oversight.

Conservation & Restoration Impact

The Chapter played an active role in Everglades restoration planning, hydrologic monitoring, and habitat management. Notable accomplishments included prescribed fire and wildlife monitoring at Eagle Haven Ranch, Tree Island research across Water Conservation Areas, lake restoration planning at Toho, Istokpoga, and Kissimmee, and sustained advocacy on mineral rights and land stewardship issues at the state and federal levels.

Deer Reintroduction Project

In partnership with the Miccosukee Tribe, Seminole Tribe, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, International Order of Teddy Roosevelt, and private landowners, Cypress IWLA advanced the Deer Reintroduction Project from planning to implementation. By year's end, 39 deer had been successfully relocated and were utilizing the Everglades landscape. Advanced GPS and satellite tracking technologies generated valuable ecological data, with peer-reviewed scientific publications anticipated. Despite operational challenges typical of large-scale wildlife efforts, the project demonstrated strong early success and broad collaborative support.

Pistol Pond Improvement Project

In partnership with the USFWS and FFWC, the Cypress Chapter continues to work toward making the pond accessible to the public for fishing and recreation.

Funding, Media & Public Engagement

The Chapter secured major funding successes, including a \$6.8 million FDACS award for Lake Kissimmee restoration, with Cypress IWLA serving as project administrator.

Fundraising and outreach generated \$16,500 in direct support for the Deer Reintroduction conservation initiative. Media engagement expanded through film screenings, documentary development, and a collaborative video with Cabela's and IOTR scheduled to air on the Discovery Channel.

Looking Ahead

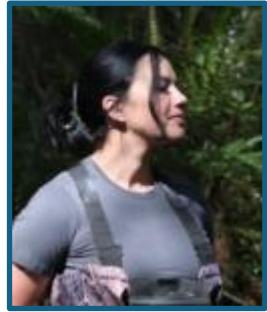
Entering 2026, Cypress IWLA is well positioned to expand restoration outcomes, strengthen youth and community programs, advance science-informed policy advocacy, and serve as a model for collaborative conservation grounded in both traditional knowledge and applied research.

In Memoriam: President Emeritus Pete Quasius



We mourn the passing of our esteemed President Emeritus, Pete Quasius, who passed away on October 2, 2025. [Angler Action Foundation](#) Pete's decades-long dedication to conservation, his mentorship of countless professionals and volunteers, and his leadership in the Cypress Chapter and across Florida's environmental community leave a lasting legacy. His emphasis on collaboration, access, and bridging diverse perspectives continue to guide our work.

BOARD MEMBERS

<p>President Marshall Jones</p> 	<p>Vice-President Betty Osceola</p> 
<p>Treasurer/Secretary Tom Oates</p> 	<p>Director and Projects Chair Brett Fitzgerald</p> 
<p>Director & Chair Shooting Sports Jesse Lee</p> 	<p>Director Diamond Bergeron</p> 
	<p>Director Heather Cleckler</p> 

1. Special Guest Presentation

Adam Gelber, Director of Everglades Restoration (Department of the Interior), joined an early 2025 Chapter meeting to provide an update on southern Everglades restoration initiatives. Discussion topics included conveyance improvements near the Tamiami Trail, flood control and elevation management near Osceola Camp, Tree Island health, and Indigenous perspectives. Director Gelber emphasized that long-term Tree Island health remains central to Everglades restoration success.

2. Leadership Transitions and Governance

- Marshall Jones was unanimously elected President.
- Betty Osceola was elected Vice President
- Tom Oates re-elected Treasurer/Secretary.
- By-laws were revised to include staggered three-year Board terms.
- Directors confirmed through 2028: Osceola, Jones, Bergeron, Cleckler, Oates, Fitzgerald, and Lee
- Jones resigned in December due to other duties preventing him from being fully engaged in chapter matters.

The Chapter reaffirmed its commitment to transparency, sound financial management, and IWLA governance standards.

3. Executive Director's Report – Mike Elfenbein

Advocacy and Partnerships

- **Extensive coordination of efforts** with tribal and federal partners on shared interests
- **Attended multiple Everglades Restoration Task Force and WRAC meetings.**
- **Represented the Chapter in Washington, D.C.**, advocating for mineral rights acquisition, opposition to wilderness designation in the Big Cypress Preserve, and inclusion in restoration planning.

- Participated in the **Everglades Legislative Field Trip**, County Coalition meetings, and National Conservation forums including the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation Banquet to strengthen partnerships.
- **Regular posts to social media** (Facebook and Instagram) of efforts. See this reel "[a week in conservation](#)" for highlights of just one week this past fall.
- **Facilitated donation of Moultrie Edge 2 trail cameras** to Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission.
- **Engagement extended to the DC Senate Stewardship Caucus** where bipartisan conservation principles were highlighted, and participation in the Tampa Theatre's *Voices of the Corridor* film series and an international wildlife delegation visit in Palm Beach County.
- **Tree Island Monitoring:** Field tours with DEP, FWC, and National Geographic highlighted restoration needs.
- **Everglades Outreach:** Participation in major public events International Big Mamma Day, and Bergeron Foundation Fundraiser.
- **L-28 WERP Construction:** Project nearing completion, with continued monitoring of material sourcing.
- **Lake Toho:** Aquaculture vegetation removal planning.
- **Lake Istokpoga:** Site visit and discussions with the Seminole Tribe regarding potential projects on the Brighton Reservation.
- **FWC Commission meetings** were regularly attended, and input was provided to numerous management decisions.
- **Eagle Haven Ranch:** Over 1,000 acres was treated with prescribed fire; scrub jay and eagle monitoring projects were expanded.



Major Projects

Deer Friends: The Everglades may never be what it once was, but we can help it thrive again. White-tailed deer once roamed across this entire landscape and we're embarking on an effort to restore their range, the wild places and the wildlife with a one-of-a-kind-project. This is our invitation to you to join us.

Deer Friends is an open invitation to our “dear friends” — people like you who care about wild Florida. Join us in supporting this one-of-a-kind restoration effort and become part of a living story of renewal.



From October through December, Cypress IWLA advanced the Deer Reintroduction Project from planning to execution. Capture and translocation efforts involved multiple private landowners, with the first translocation occurring November 8 at Garcia Farms. By year's end:

- 39 deer had been relocated under a permit valid through January 31
- Translocated deer were utilizing the broader Everglades landscape
- Approximately 80% of translocated does were pregnant

Operational challenges included bear interference with traps and two mortalities due to capture myopathy among the smallest does. These experiences informed adaptive improvements to field protocols.

Advanced monitoring technologies—including GPS and satellite-enabled ear tags—performed well. One GPS-collared buck traveled approximately 40 miles back toward its capture area, providing valuable movement data. Scientists anticipate peer-reviewed publications based on the project's findings, with quarterly data updates and an annual summary planned.

Pistol Pond Improvement Project: Youth and agency engagement events were successful; a new grant application was submitted for continued monitoring.



The Pistol Pond Improvement Project website was expanded and updated to highlight recent activities.

These included:

- An educational program showing fish monitoring conducted in April
- A second fish delivery from the National Fish Hatchery in Welaka To date, more than 150,000 fish—redear sunfish, bluegill, mosquitofish, sailfin molly, bluefin killifish, and Florida bass—have been stocked in Pistol Pond.

We also learned that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Aquatic Habitat Restoration & Conservation Section (AHCR) awarded funding for the Pistol Pond littoral zone enhancement grant application submitted by Mike Danaher (USFWS). This work is scheduled to occur during the 2026 dry season. We

are reaching out to the Homeowners Association in Ave Maria, and several churches in the Immokalee area for assistance in having residents donate their used “live” Christmas trees to improve the habitat of the pond for predator and prey species.

Research and Grants

- Submitted two FDEP proposals for lake restoration initiatives at Istokpoga and Kissimmee.
- Ongoing collaboration with Ducks Unlimited and the Florida Farm Bureau.
- Earned a \$6.8 million Agricultural Regional Projects Program award for from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services for a project entitled “Next-Gen Water Quality and Agricultural Systems: Monitoring, Mitigation and Restoration”.

Education and Media

- Participated in screenings, conferences, and media initiatives including the *River of Grass* documentary and International Order of Teddy Roosevelt conference in Naples.
- Developed youth conservation curriculum for Pistol Pond, field trips, engaged FGCU students and Miccosukee partners.

4. President’s Report – Marshall Jones

Hydrological and Ecological Conditions

- Monitored record drought conditions early in 2025; engaged SFWMD and tribal partners on water-sharing strategies for Water Conservation Areas.
- Later rainfall improved Lake Okeechobee water clarity and lowered surface levels—beneficial for the “River of Grass.”

Scientific Monitoring and Restoration

- Installed 12 wildlife cameras across six Tree Islands to track vegetation, hydrology, and fauna.

- Advocated natural management techniques (fire and native vegetation) over chemical herbicides.
- Continued involvement in National Academy of Sciences Everglades Review sessions.

Research Contribution

- Shared results from his 13-year soil and vegetation study (2025 publication), which spans from north of the Kissimmee to Florida Bay.

5. Treasurer's Report – Tom Oates

Financial Overview

- The chapter remains in sound fiscal condition with all accounts active and accessible.
- Transitioned from Wells Fargo to Fifth Third Bank for improved efficiency and oversight.
- Annual IRS Form 990 submitted.
- D&O Insurance renewed through August 2026.

Audit and Compliance

- Audit scheduled for early 2026 to maintain compliance with Chapter by-laws and Charity Navigator standards.
- Continued reconciliation of expenses related to prior administration and field activities.

6. Committees and Programs

Science & Outreach – Dr. Nora Demers



- Designated official Membership Dues Recipient (MDR).
- Reconciled member registration with IWLA National; over 100 active members.
- Organized science-based youth programs including cyanotyping at outreach events.
- Coordinated updates to the Annual Report, website, and Charity Navigator profiles.

Education & Endowment – Robert Soter

- Expanded Little Free Library network across Babcock Ranch (5 installations).
- Continuing outreach to non-college-bound youth for conservation scholarships.

Shooting Sports – Jesse Lee

- Participated in regional frog tournament (donations redirected to conservation).
- Contributed to deer habitat plantings and youth firearm safety education.

Events & Outreach

- **International Big Mamma Day (April):** Record attendance; collaborative event with Miccosukee Tribe featuring cyanotyping, fishing tournament, and invasive species removal.
- **Pistol Pond Youth Fishing Day (April):** Engaged 20+ youth participants.
- **Cypress IWLA Fun Day:** Scheduled for January 17, 2026 at Buffalo Tiger with educational and fundraising components.

7. National & State Representation

- Delegates to the 2025 IWLA National Convention (Green Bay, Wisconsin):
 - Delegate: Pam Pierce
 - Alternate: Marshall Jones
- Discussion continues on Florida hosting the mid-winter meeting in 2026.

8. Recognition and Awards

- Heather Cleckler was nominated by Mike Elfenbein for the Agricultural-Environmental Leadership Award (FDACS).
- Cypress IWLA Chapter was recognized by multiple agencies for contributions to fire management, restoration, and education.
- The Cypress IWLA board formally expressed appreciation to Executive Director Mike Elfenbein for his exceptional leadership and outreach.

9. Looking Forward to 2026

Key priorities for the coming year include:

- Continuation of the Deer Reintroduction Project and documentary filming.
- Continue partnership with USFWS for future opportunities to improve habitat for wildlife and access.
- Further advocacy for mineral rights acquisition and opposition to Big Cypress wilderness designation.
- Strengthen youth programs and scholarships.
- Continued collaboration with federal, state, and tribal partners to ensure restoration success.

A Model for the “Make America Beautiful Again” Commission from Cypress IWLA

Urgent Opportunities for Action

- Restore Traditional Access (ORV Trails) at Big Cypress National Preserve
- Reject Wilderness Overreach
- Expand and Improve Existing National Wildlife Refuge Recreational Opportunities
- WD Camp Tire Disposal / Big Cypress National Preserve
- Florida Panther Conservation
- Oil & Gas / Mineral Rights Reform
- Combat Invasive Species Expansion
- Protect Beach Mouse Habitat at Fort Matanzas

Meaningful Opportunities

- Strengthen relationships and foster meaningful collaboration with local and state sportsmen’s and conservation organizations, including ongoing support and pursuit of additional funding opportunities through the Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program.
- Advance efforts toward successful implementation of the planned deviation to the current Combined Operating Plan in WCA 3A.
- Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow recovery work.

Respectfully,

Marshall Jones – President

Betty Osceola – Vice President

Tom Oates – Treasurer/Secretary

Mike Elfenbein – Executive Director

Dr. Nora E. Demers – Director of Science & Outreach

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