

May 5, 2016

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

RE: Request for a Critical Wildlife Area Designation for the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands, Manatee County, with a year-round 75-100 foot buffer

Ownership and Management Authority:

The smallest island, Dit Island, is currently not on the tax roll for Manatee County, which means that it is owned by the State of Florida as part of the state's Sovereign Lands. The other island parcel numbers are as follows: PI#11313.0000/4 currently assessed to TIITF (State of Florida lands) and is described as the NE ¼ of SW ¼ Section 29 Township 34S Range 18E & PI#11317.0000/5 currently assessed to Carlton Arms of Bradenton and is described as Lot 2 U S Part waste. Audubon received a letter of permission to post the islands from the management of the Carlton Arms of Bradenton, and will pursue one for CWA designation.

Sanctuary management staff of Audubon Florida's Coastal Islands Sanctuaries (CIS) based in Tampa (410 South Ware Boulevard, Suite 702, Tampa, FL 33619; 813/623-6826) manages the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands.



Aerial of the location of the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands in the Braden River, north of the Highway 64 Bridge (Manatee Avenue in Bradenton), Section 29, Township 34 S, Range 18 E, Bradenton, FL

Location and Description: The Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands are located in the Braden River near its mouth where it empties into the Manatee River, Manatee County, east of the Braden River boat channel and north of the US Highway 41 Bridge in Bradenton, Florida, at approximately 27°29'56.09"N, 82°31'26.78"W. The colony consists of three small, mangrove-vegetated islands, situated in shallow water surrounded by seagrass meadows. The islands have provided important nesting habitat for many years, especially for Wood Storks, which are state and federally listed as a “threatened” species and Little Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, and Roseate Spoonbills, all state-listed “threatened” species. This a highly diverse waterbird colony (see Table 1, below).

Dot Island is the most western of the islands, found at 27°29'56.23"N, 82°31'31.38"W. Dot Island is a small mangrove island that exhibits an elongated shape, extending 30 m at its widest point and 65 m long. Dot Island currently hosts the majority of the nesting, including herons, Wood Storks, and Roseate Spoonbills. Photographers frequently come by boat to take pictures of the nesting birds on this island and it is a popular spot for professional tours to take clients every year. The photographers favor the south side of the island. We (CIS staff) know this because the “No Trespassing” signs that we install on this side are frequently pulled out by the photographers to allow for unobstructed picture-taking of the nesting birds. Signs posting the east and north sides are generally left undisturbed.

Dash Island, the largest of the three islands, is located in the middle at 27°29'55.87"N, 82°31'27.11"W. Dash Island is vegetated with mangroves and exhibits an irregular, elongated shape that is approximately 124 m long and 55 m at its widest point. Some small number of wading birds and Anhingas typically nest on Dash Island each spring, and many birds roost regularly on the island. In addition, birds collect nest material sticks and branches from Dash Island and carry these to construct their nests on Dit and Dot islands.

Dit Island is the eastern-most island, located at 27°29'57.84"N, 82°31'21.44"W. Dit Island is the smallest island, and measures only 17 m by 14 m in size. Despite its small size, the mangroves of Dit Island provide a favorite nest site for Anhingas, Great Blue Herons, and Black-crowned Night-Herons and in recent years, Roseate Spoonbills.



Wood Storks and other birds nesting on Dot Island, 2/21/13. Photo: Jim Gray

Management activities:

Surveys: Audubon Florida’s Coastal Island Sanctuaries staff have conducted annual “peak-nesting season” surveys every spring since 2002. These surveys are conducted by trained observers using binoculars from an out-board motorboat, generally at a distance of 100 feet from the islands’ shoreline, to accomplish a quality survey while causing no impacts to the nesting birds. The Annual Survey data (Table 1, above) numbers represent direct nest counts, supplemented estimates based on flight-line surveys for those species that nest below the foliage canopy where direct observation of the nests is not possible. As a result of this survey information, the Dot Dash Dit 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.

Table 1. Dot Dash Dit Bird Islands Colony Surveys, Annual Audubon Surveys, 2002-2015
Numbers represent Nesting Pairs

Survey Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Survey Date	3/3, 5/2	2/15, 4/21, 5/20	3/8, 5/27	3/16, 5/11	3/9, 4/28	5/4	5/16	5/24	5/14	4/5, 5/12	5/3	4/25	5/21	5/8
Species														
Double-crested Cormorant	7	7	20				4		32	10	3	11	18	23
Anhinga	31	20	40	6	5	5	10	28	33	33	42	24	23	13
Great Blue Heron	32	45	39	10	31	20	14	30	34	18	17	12	23	24
Great Egret	124	171	152	12	5	79	52	153	150	65	60	85	55	80
Snowy Egret	79	135	90			13	6	35	65	4	8	4	13	30
Little Blue Heron	5	9	6			1	3	10				1		0
Tricolored Heron	20	50	40	5			6	35		5	6	5	5	7
Cattle Egret	846	600	670	5		30	56	1920	90	2	91	30	24	60
Black-crowned Night-Heron	4	3	13			2	2	7	9	4	9	5	6	9
Green Heron								1			1			
White Ibis		15	10					20			1			
Glossy Ibis			3											
Roseate Spoonbill		1	10			9	13	25	50	12	16	22	18	24
Wood Stork	240	277	241	15		240	56	95	200	120	134	101	121	145
	1388	1333	1334	53	41	399	222	2360	663	273	388	300	298	415

Notes: In Spring 2005, Wood Storks began nesting on Dot, and abandoned young in the nests by May. In 2006, Wood Storks were observed gathering nest material, copulating, and performing other pair bond formation behaviors, but the colony was abandoned by the end of March.

Wood Stork Brood Productivity on Dot Island has consistently been high, for the years when storks nested, emphasizing the importance of this island for the state’s population:

2009: 1.8 chicks/nest 2011: 1.9 chicks/nest 2012: 1.8 chicks/nest
 2013: 1.8 chicks/nest 2014: 1.7 chicks/nest 2015: 1.9 chicks/nest



Wood Stork and Great Egrets nesting on Dot Island, which is posted with an Audubon “No Trespassing sign”, 5/3/12. Photo: Mark Rachal



Roseate Spoonbill adult photographed at the Dot Dash Dit Bird Islands, 2/21/13. Photo: Tammy Lyons

“No Trespassing” sign posted at the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands

Posting: Audubon CIS staff post the three islands of the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony with metal Audubon “No Trespassing” signs. The signs are attached to white PVC posts mounted at the outer shoreline of the islands.

Fishing Line Clean-up: Removal of fishing line is conducted during the fall when birds are not nesting on the islands. Audubon’s CIS staff organize this clean-up activity annually in coordination with conservation partners Tampa Bay Watch and Sarasota Bay Watch volunteers.



Issue of concern:

A significant management concern has been the close approach to the islands by boaters, fishermen, kayakers, and nature photographers. Over the years, CIS staff members have appealed to boaters, fishermen, nature photographers, and kayakers, to maintain a reasonable distance from the islands, to avoid disturbance to the nesting birds.

While many boaters respond appropriately to these requests, the south side of Dot Island that some boaters approach exhibits a space about six feet above the water-line where birds do not nest. Bird nests on the north side of the island, which is shallower and less traveled by boaters, occur 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 southern side is resulting in a portion of the islands' trees where birds are not comfortable nesting, creating a "no-nesting" zone. Please refer below to the photograph of a pontoon boat traveling near Dot Island and the May 03, 2012 photograph.

While as much as a 300' buffer is supported by the literature, Audubon Florida staff suggest it would be appropriate to employ a buffer zone of about 75-100 feet around the islands, based on bird response to official survey boats and to accommodate channel access, to help boaters recognize the importance of keeping further away from the nesting birds.

Designation of the bird colony islands as a "Critical Wildlife Area" would allow the posting and enforcement of a buffer area. Because a portion of the buffer area is close to the Braden River Channel, Audubon's CIS staff suggest that a 100-foot buffer from the islands' shorelines, and that a 75-foot buffer along the channel side, to the south of Dash Island, and between Dash Island and Dot Island where there is deeper water would be appropriate to accommodate boater access.

Suggested buffer area for Dot and Dash islands (orange) and Dit Island (yellow). The lines measure approximately 100 feet from the shores, except to the west of Dot Island, to the south of Dash Island, and between Dash and Dit islands, where the distance measured is 75 feet, to accommodate boat traffic in the Braden River Channel, along the shore north of the Highway 64 Bridge, and adjacent to the deeper water between Dash and Dit islands, respectively.



Kayaker at right approaches the colony too closely, prompting birds to stand up on their nests.



Traffic close to the island, as in the photo of the photographers in the pontoon boat below, causes the birds to avoid using all the nesting area available on Dot Island; note the “no nest” zone. Photos: Mark Rachal





May 03, 2012 Dot Dash colony photo of the south side of Dot Island shows that much of the lower mangrove fringe lacks nesting due to chronic disturbance.



May 03, 2012 Dot Dash colony survey photo shows the largely undisturbed north side of the island with birds nesting all the way down to the water line.

Justification for year-round closure

Audubon Florida suggests that year-round closure is appropriate because of the timing of bird-nesting extending through the period for the care of dependent young and the use of

the colony islands as a night-time over-night roost every month of the year but especially in the winter.

Nesting use:

Great Blue Herons begin to nest on Dot and Dit islands at the end of November. Wood Storks, Anhingas, and Double-crested Cormorants, in preparation for nesting on Dot Island, start to bring sticks to construct nests in January and February. Great Egrets and Roseate Spoonbills initiate nesting on Dot Island in March, followed by the small herons in April and May. Nesting efforts, including care of dependent young, continue through the summer until August and September, especially in years when no severe storm has halted nesting.

Table 2. Nesting season at the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands. N = nesting and caring for dependent young.

Species	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
DCCO	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N			N	N
ANHI	N	N	N	N	N	N	N					
GBHE	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N			N	N
GREG	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N				
Other herons				N	N	N	N	N	N			
ROSP			N	N	N	N	N					
WOST	N	N	N	N	N	N	N					

Over-night year-round roost site:

Volunteer Colony Watch observers, including Lori Roberts, board member of Manatee County Audubon Society, report that the islands serve as an important year-round over-night roost sites for hundreds of birds, with numbers peaking in the fall and winter. Over-night roosting birds include herons, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, and Wood Storks.

Table 3. Over-night roost activity at the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands. R = roost activity

Species	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
DCCO	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
ANHI	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
GBHE	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
GREG	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
Other herons	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
ROSP	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
WOST	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R

CWA Commitment:

If the Dot Dash Dit Bird Colony Islands are designated as a CWA by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, Audubon’s CIS will commit to post the CWA, manage the islands, and continue our annual monitoring during breeding season.