

## Polluted Lake Apopka seems poised for rebirth

*Anxious scientists have taken steps to prevent toxic residue from poisoning wildlife.*

The Orlando Sentinel

The celebrated attempt to restore Lake Apopka that backfired a dozen years ago haunts a new, more-cautious effort now to revive some of the most defiled water in the country.

By the end of next year, those overseeing the giant lake's restoration expect to flood the last of the long-fallow farms along the lake's north shore, transforming them into a vast marsh resembling the area's original, natural environment.

That cropland is still stained with notorious pesticides that in 1998 killed hundreds of pelicans, wading birds and raptors when the flooding was first tried.

But this time, anxious scientists have taken steps to prevent the toxic residue from poisoning a wetlands food chain that is expected to burst to life again once the field pumps are turned off.

The project's goal: end the dumping of foul farmland runoff into one of Florida's largest lakes in the hope that, after decades as a repulsive body of water, it

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will once again attract large numbers of sightseers, anglers, boaters and wildlife.

"We can imagine it being a very popular destination," said Robert Christianson, land-resources director for the St. Johns River Water Management District, which is responsible for the restoration.

The lake covers 50 square miles of Orange and Lake counties. For much of the past century, sewage plants, citrus processors and giant vegetable farms dumped their wastewater into what had long been treasured as a fishing paradise. That runoff was polluted with phosphorus and nitrogen

compounds, which fed a devastating growth of algae. The lake's waters thickened into a green slop that smothered aquatic grasses and lily pads while nurturing trash fish.

Scientists working on the lake's rebirth see no feasible way now to actively cleanse the lake's 53 billion gallons. But once runoff from the former farmland is cut off, the algae should sink and solidify within a few decades, restoration manager Dave Walker said.

The more immediate appeal of the project is what it would do to the 20,000 acres of former farmland on the north shore, turning it into a haven for birds.

When much of that land was flooded in the fall of 1998, it attracted more than 100,000 birds. Explanations for its popularity varied: The birds had ancestral memories of a healthy Lake Apopka. The huge lake was a visual bull's-eye for migrating flocks. The wetlands were the avian equivalent of a new roadside restaurant.

But after gorging on fish, at least a thousand birds died, their brains laced with lethal doses of agricultural pesticides.

Today, after postmortem experiments and a cautious resumption of the flooding, the birds are back.

Self-taught ornithologist Harry Robinson, of DeLand, documents Apopka's birds at least three days a week. His reports and a two-volume book, "The Birds of Zellwood," chronicle a total of 348 species.

The British-born Robinson likes to find unusual birds, usual birds in great numbers, or displays he calls "spectacles."

"You can't really explain very well how spectacular it is here,"



he said.

The water-management district plans to let others find out.

“Lake Apopka has the potential to become one of the premier bird-watching destinations in the country,” said Gian Basilli, a district assistant director.



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**Native lily pads and eelgrass are flourishing in Lake Apopka, located in Lake County.**



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**An abundance of birds can be found on former muck farmland along the shores of Lake Apopka.**