

LOST FOR A CENTURY

Finding the "mossy helmet" in Fakahatchee Strand

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It was a perfect January morning. The sky was clear the air was dry and a pleasant 74 degrees. I turned my vehicle off of Janes Scenic Drive onto the white gravel road of the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park's offices. There I met up with a few members of our group and stretched my muscles, sore after the long ride from Miami. We exchanged greetings and pleasantries and awaited the last member's arrival. Already my pulse was quickening in anticipation of the day's events with our seasoned, fun-loving field companions. A brief discussion of the day's strategy, a few laughs and last minute equipment checks and we were on our way.

We entered the swamp, our destination, the heart and arteries of Southwest Florida's Fakahatchee Strand. Our small company, of varied interests and backgrounds, was intent on exploring new areas to observe, document and photograph all of the rare flora and fauna, as well as digest the beauty of this wilderness. Although I thoroughly enjoy every moment I have in the Fakahatchee, I hope in some small way we are contributing to the vast body of knowledge of this magnificent cypress strand and continue to offer more reason to preserve this natural wonder. The trek is arduous, but this company was focused only on the rewards. Little did we know what treasure was waiting for us to discover!

The first slough we entered looked like it had potential. We split into smaller groups and headed south, interrupting the silence by communicating with an occasional shout of "hooty-hoo" or the calling out of a threatened or endangered orchid, bromeliad, or fern. An hour had passed and I was not impressed with the area. The slough became shallow and my quest was the deeper limestone troughs that have been dug by Mother Nature throughout the centuries. The slow flow of water has gradually eroded the limestone to form a kind of stream within

the strand. The predominant trees along the edges of these deeper areas are pond apple and pop ash. It is here that these trees become festooned with rare epiphytes. We altered our search pattern and intercepted a great looking slough. I broke south while the rest headed north.

Mike Owen, the Park's biologist, and his assistant, Karen Relish, teamed up on their northerly trek. Karen, while slogging, was intently recording the rare flora she encountered up in the tree branches, cypress knees, stumps and logs (fallen dead trees). Something different caught her eye so she called out to Mike for further examination. There on a seven-foot long prostrate log laden with moss was a group of small plants with their roots embedded in the abundant moss. Several plants were in bloom and after a cursory examination, Mike believed they were orchids, so they carefully removed a specimen for identification.

I returned to Janes Drive about 20 minutes ahead of Mike and Karen. When they emerged out of the water, they told me about their find and proceeded to remove the carefully wrapped plant out of a backpack. Upon seeing it, I immediately identified it as *Cranichis muscosa* and 1903 flashed in my mind like a blinking neon sign. But could this really be? I called out to Saul Friess, a member of our group, in the hope that he had his copy of *The Wild Orchids of Florida* by Paul Brown, which he usually carries with him.

Intent on confirming its identity I excitedly turned the pages to the index and then to the photo of the plant, I loudly exclaimed "touchdown", an expression this group uses when we discover something special or unusual. For me the moment was truly thrilling. I don't think my companions realized the enormity of the find but my zealous enthusiasm eventually caught on. Plans to return the next day for photographs were confirmed and I had a euphoric ride back to Miami.

The genus of *Cranichis* is comprised of approximately 30 species (Luer, 1972). *Cranichis muscosa* is a small terrestrial or semi-epiphytic orchid approximately 4 to 10 inches in height when in bloom. It has a peculiar basal rosette of leaves which are petiolate and green to light green in color. The spike has

several bracts as it ascends. The flowers are white with greenish speckles. I found it to be similar to *Platanthera nivea*. *Cranichis* is derived from the Greek words meaning, "having a helmet" and *muscosa* from the Latin word meaning "mossy" (Correll, 1950). These words clearly describe this little gem because the lip, which is uppermost, forms a cover over the column and our plants were found imbedded in abundant moss.

J.E. Layne first collected a specimen in May of 1903 in Lee County (Correll, 1950), which included the Fakahatchee at the time. In December that same year A.A. Eaton vouchered a specimen in Dade County (Correll, 1950). I have since learned that Eaton collected another specimen in 1905 in Dade County (Gann, Bradley, Woodmansee, 2002). In a personal communication, Dr. Carlyle Luer, the author of the landmark book *The Native Orchids of Florida* (1972) advised this writer that he had seen it once in Florida but there is no formal record of this sighting to my knowledge. The moss orchid's range extends from Mexico to the West Indies then down into Central and South America and is now re-confirmed that it also occurs in Florida.

This colony we saw was made up of 40 individual plants of which seven were in bloom. Three of these plants were growing on a cypress knee a few feet away. The best news is that Mike believes he has seen this plant at three other locations within the strand and we hope to investigate for confirmation in the next few weeks.

If you are ever in south Florida and orchids are your agenda I suggest a trip to the Fakahatchee. The Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park (FSPSP) is a unique swamp forest that is approximately twenty miles long and three to five miles wide. This 80,000-acre wilderness has a diverse plant and animal population. It has 44 species of orchids and numerous threatened or endangered ferns and bromeliads; many not found anywhere else in the United States. It is home to the Florida Panther, Everglades Mink, and Florida Black Bear. Late October through November is an excellent time to visit the strand. The temperature is cooler and you may see many epiphytic orchids in bloom. June through July we consider the best time to see the infamous *Dendrophylax lindenii*, ghost orchid, in

bloom. You may need to pack some mosquito repellent because they may be somewhat pesky during the summer. For information regarding ranger-led swamp walks contact the Park Manager, Greg Toppin, at (239) 695-4593 or see their website: www.floridastateparks.org/fakahatcheestrand/default.asp

If you are interested in being a member of the FSPSP Citizen Support Organization, the Friends of the Fakahatchee, contact them at:

www.FriendsofFakahatchee.org.

This is a worthwhile organization dedicated to support and educational activities specific to this Florida natural wonder.

Group members:

Mike Owen, FSPSP Biologist
Karen Relish, FSPSP Biologist's Assistant
Saul Friess, Professional Photographer
Robin Drake, Americorp Environmental Sciences Educator
Rick Janiec, Outdoor Enthusiast
Russell Clusman, Orchid Enthusiast

References:

Luer, C.A. 1972. *The Native Orchids of Florida*, New York: The New York Botanical Garden. 85p.
Correll, D.S. 1978. *Native Orchids of North America North of Mexico*, California: Stanford University Press. 179p.
Gann, G.D., Bradley, K.A., Woodmansee, S. W. 2002. *Rare Plants of South Florida: Their History, Conservation, and Restoration*, Florida: The Institute for Regional Conservation. 75p.

For a photo of *Cranichis muscosa*, see pages 64-65 in *Wild Orchids of Florida* by Paul Martin Brown.