



The Ghost Writer

FEBRUARY 2007

NEWSLETTER of the Friends of Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, Inc.

EVENTS

GUIDED SWAMP WALKS

1st & 3rd Tuesday

2nd, 3rd, & 4th Saturday

cost: \$35 (\$30 members)

reservations (239) 695-2440

GUIDED CANOE TRIPS

Sat: Feb 17, Mar 10, Apr 14

cost: \$45 (\$40 members)

reservations (239) 695-2440

Native American & Pioneer Festival

Sat/Sun February 17/18

Collier-Seminole State Park

volunteers needed!

phone Marya at (239) 695-2905

MSD FESTIVAL

February 20 - 24

Museum of the Everglades

phone (239) 695-0008

see article to the right about our
special Fakahatchee day

Panther Refuge Work Day

Saturday, February 24

phone (239) 353-8442 ext. 222

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

We are asking for names to be submitted as candidates for positions on the Board of Directors. There are six seats up for election this spring. You can nominate yourself or any member in good standing. See the Special Notice with this newsletter.

MANAGER'S MESSAGE

by Dennis Giardina



I would like to inform the Friends of Fakahatchee that I will begin working with the Big Cypress National Preserve Panther Capture Team on Tuesday February 6th. Team Leader Wildlife Biologist Deborah Jansen projects the capture season to run until March 9th and it is likely that I'll be slow to respond to E-mails and phone calls during this time period. I ask for your patience and understanding. It is important to me both personally and professionally to continue to participate in the hands-on recovery of the Florida panther and my collaboration is appreciated and reciprocated by Big Cypress Superintendent Karen Gustin and Fire and Aviation Manager John Nobles. They have made their aircraft, equipment, and personnel available to assist with prescribed fire on Fakahatchee. We are very fortunate to have these experienced and generous colleagues next door, willing to share their time and resources with us. I will write more about Florida panthers and prescribed burning next month.

The Park Service has converted the Park Ranger Position vacated by David Henley, into a **Park Service Specialist Position**. The new position comes with a little more money and a lot more responsibility. The position was advertised on 2/1/07 and will close on 2/14/07. I have had a lot of inquiries already. I have told everyone that I am looking for a biologist who can operate and repair heavy equipment, has auto mechanical and construction related skills, experienced with wild and prescribed fire and who is mature, organized and self-motivated. I have asked Park Biologist Mike Owen, CSO President John Elting, and CSO Vice-President Nelson Tilden to be on the panel that will interview candidates for this position.

A quick update on a few other issues: **Visitor Information Center:** still working on getting a contractor to accept the job and give a bid. **New Manager's Residence:** Tallahassee and Collier County have been wrangling over the set backs of non-existent lot boundaries. I have an appointment to go over the details with the permit reviewer. **Janes Scenic and Jones Grade Roads:** a contractor has made a bid on the maintenance contract. The Preserve still does not have a budget and the funds will have to come from Tallahassee. **Boardwalk:** District 4 Construction specialist Rick Warner will meet Nelson Tilden on 2/5 to assess the boardwalk support structure. Nelson agreed to contact local dock builders to estimate the cost to repair the boardwalk while we plan for its replacement and extension.

Remembering Marjory

The organizers of the 3rd Annual Marjory Stoneman Douglas Festival have invited Friends of Fakahatchee members to join them in Everglades City on **Thursday, February 22**, for **lunch** followed by a short film "Lady of the Glades" about MSD and a talk about her by **Capt. Franklin Adams** who knew her for many years in her later life. The second half of the afternoon is another short film "Everglades" and a presentation by biologist **Mike Owen** about orchids. During the intermission, dessert will be served. Cost is \$10 per person. For reservations, phone the Museum at (239) 695-0008.



Marjory Stoneman Douglas

by Marya Repko

Most people associate Marjory Stoneman Douglas with her book "Everglades: River of Grass", but did you know that she was an activist and campaigner in the social sphere before that? For example, in 1916 she went to Tallahassee with Mrs William Jennings Bryan to ask that women be allowed to vote and during her early journalism career she tried to improve the conditions for blacks in the Miami slums. A proud accomplishment was to stop the flogging of prison work gangs because of a poem she wrote.

Marjory was born in 1890 and raised by her mother, aunt, and grandmother in Massachusetts. Her father Frank Stoneman had left the family and settled in Florida where he started a newspaper, later to become the *Miami Herald*. Marjory graduated from Wellesley College and barely survived a disastrous marriage before joining her father at the edge of the Glades in 1915. She found her true occupation when she started writing, first as a columnist for the paper and later submitting short stories to popular magazines.

"River of Grass" was commissioned as part of the "Rivers of America" series by Rinehart & Co. The editor initially wanted her to write about the Miami River but they decided to expand the theme to include the slow-flowing body of water trickling down the center of southern Florida. The book was published in 1947 and has drawn attention to the Everglades ever since.

It is interesting to note that Frank Stoneman was opposed to Governor Broward's drainage scheme in 1906 and must have planted the idea that "water is the key" in Marjory's mind long before she took up the cause of the Glades. In 1968 (at age 78) she organized Friends of the Everglades to oppose the JetPort on the Trail. She continued speaking in public for several score years after that, although her sight was failing. One of her later appearances was at the first Seminole Festival at the Smallwood Store in Chokoloskee in 1991.

To read more about this amazing woman and her long life, see "Voice of the River; an Autobiography" which is packed with acute observations of a developing Florida and pithy words of personal advice.

The 3rd Annual Marjory Stoneman Douglas Festival, sponsored by the Museum of the Everglades and Collier County Public Library, takes place February 20-24 in Everglades City. See the notice on the front page about events of special interest to Friends of Fakahatchee.

The photo above is one of many historical pictures available from the Photographic Collection of the Florida State Archives at their website www.floridamemory.com.

BOARDWALK REPORT

by Nelson & Caryl Tilden

January was a month of growing numbers of visitors to the boardwalk, totaling nearly 7000. During February even more will arrive as the reputation of the Fakahatchee and the boardwalk spreads. It is common to hear visitors say, "*I had heard this was the best place in the area to see wildlife and beautiful plants, and it exceeded my expectations.*"

All during the month our two **American Bald Eagles** were seen on and around the nest, leading us to believe that eggs were being tended and that chicks would be forthcoming. Eagles and alligators are two big draws, especially for foreign visitors, of which we have many.

The most recent hatch of **immature alligators** was finally seen around mid-month. About a dozen to fifteen 10" to 12" alligator babies made their appearance. Up to now the large amount of Alligator Flag caused by the sunshine (thanks to Hurricane Wilma) has kept us from seeing the smallest ones.

We have also had regular visits by a family of **Florida banded water snakes**, which many visitors immediately assume to be "cottonmouths." Caryl and I use a spotting scope and have books and pictures handy to show them the difference. The addition of the spotting scope has been very useful and popular.

We now have a full complement of **interpretative signs** along the boardwalk. About half of the signs are brand new and are mounted with heavy-duty aluminum brackets which should improve their longevity. The rest of the signs have been cleaned and spruced up. Now that we have identified a permanent source of the signs, we can readily replace any that are damaged or disappear.

In the next month we will have a day or two of railing repairs going on and anyone wishing to volunteer should call me at 716-640-1336.

Swimming with Whale Sharks

by Dennis Giardina

“Fin!” I shouted from the bow. I could barely believe it myself as the members of Team Whale Shark rushed to the fore of the starboard gunnels to get their first look at the object of our expedition, the largest fish in the ocean. I had been scanning intently with binoculars the splashing of desperate schools of small fish corralled and pinned up against the surface by tuna, attacking them from below. The boat’s captain had been following flocks of common terns, which joined in on the massacre from above, across the open ocean, here and there until we made visual contact. As we neared the frothy, popping water, we watched the dorsal and caudal fins of the great shark slowly slice through the writhing, flapping mass of fish and feathers. Its white-spotted, brown head protruded from the surface with its mouth agape while the confused and panicked fish rushed inside it to escape the relentless pursuit of the hungry tuna below. One pump of the whale shark’s tail and maybe a hundred pounds of fish were trapped, pressed against its gill rakers and gulped down.

Whether distracted by or curious about our boat, the whale shark seemed to change course and swam right over to us. All of us stopped just to look during this first pass as the captain circled around to position our stern ahead of the path of the big fish. Donning our snorkeling gear, we slid off the dive platform and entered the bubbly fray, cameras and writing tablets in hand to collect the data that was our objective. We were supposed to swim slowly and quietly but our enthusiasm overruled as nine of us kicked and splashed full-tilt to intercept our subject. As the whale shark slowly descended away from us into the clear blue deep it dawned on me that I was floating in the middle of a feeding frenzy and there was a thousand feet of water between me and the ocean floor. I gazed over to my left and watched for a minute the tightly-balled school of fish trying in vain to avoid the diving terns and striking tuna. Plankton and fish scales twinkled in the late afternoon sunlight and I thought, Wow! we actually did it! We swam with a whale shark! “Damn!” I heard my friend Tim repeat over the excited voices of the other team members as I stroked back to the boat.

Over the course of the next three hours we were able to get in the water and pursue whale sharks 12 more times, with our cameras flashing and video rolling, we were like amphibious paparazzi. Later in the laboratory we determined, based on our photographs and video, that we encountered at least two different whale sharks that afternoon. We entered the data we collected on a global whale shark data base. There are several groups of scientists collecting data on whale sharks around the world and apparently whale sharks sometimes make ocean-wide treks for unknown reasons. Maybe one of our sharks will eventually turn up off the coast of New England or Thailand?

Whale sharks are still poorly-understood creatures. The Whale Shark Oceanic Research Center was created on the Island of Utila, Honduras, by Jim Engel who emigrated there from North Dakota with his family in the early 90’s. They started a dive business and when they started coming across whale sharks feeding off shore fairly predictably, their tours focused on taking people out to see and swim with them. When other island dive businesses began to crop up and follow suit, the Engels initiated a whale shark approach protocol to avoid disturbing them and petitioned the Honduran government to provide official protection for whale sharks in sovereign waters. As time passed their dive business turned into an impressive operation, including the Utila Lodge and the Bay Island College of Diving which has the only hyperbaric chamber in the region. The chamber has saved the lives of several scuba divers who descended to deep and ascended too fast and ended up with an extremely painful and life-threatening condition called decompression sickness or “the bends.”



On Friday evening, May 11th at 6:00 p.m., Mike Owen and I, Takako and Scott from the Panther Refuge, and Ian and Melinda from the Conservancy of SW Florida (Team Whale Shark minus Tim Andrus who will be peddling across Spain and Portugal) will talk about the natural history of whale sharks and present the anecdotes, photography, and video of our Utila whale shark adventure to the public. It will take place at the Rookery Bay Environmental Learning Center as part of the Amazing-Adventures Eco-Lecture Series. See you there ...

As part of the *Amazing Adventures* series, Fakahatchee member and photographer Connie Bransilver will talk about her conservation and humanitarian work in Madagascar on Friday, February 9. See www.RookeryBay.org.

You can report wildlife sightings to Park biologist Mike Owen by phoning (239) 695-2886.

MEMBERSHIP

We have a total of 259 paid-up members plus 12 in arrears from the 4th quarter of 2006.

Thanks to the 76 members who renewed promptly during this quarter. The remaining 30 will receive reminders by post with this newsletter.

Welcome to new members:

Bob Becker, Covington, GA
 Dwight Ericsson, Huntington, IN
 Mike Danosky & Denise Rousseau, ECity
 Bill & Betsy Roth, Boca Raton
 Hugh Thomas, Miami

The Annual Picnic will be on Sunday, March 11.
More details in the next newsletter.

FOUR STAKE PRAIRIE CAMP

FOF member Ray Carroll has kindly offered the use of his camp to hikers on Four Stake Prairie. There is a covered area to get out of the rain and a pitcher pump to replenish drinking water.

The camp is on the western edge of the prairie about 1.75 miles north of West Main (Gate 7). GPS coordinates are approximately UTM 17R 0455197, 2876102. This is private property; please do not abuse the generosity.



"ETERNAL EVERGLADES"

FOF Board member Rick Cruz is exhibiting his unique collection of photographs of threatened or endangered rare plant species at the **Big Cypress Oasis Visitors Center** on US-41. Many of his pictures were taken in Fakahatchee Strand.

There will be a "Meet the Artist" reception on **Sunday, February 11**, from 11:00am to 1:30pm. After that Rick and one of the Rangers will lead a swamp walk.

See his website: www.rickcruzphotography.com.

What Are We? Who Are We?

The **Friends of Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, Inc**, a 501(c)3 not-for-profit corporation, is the Citizen Support Organization of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, the largest cypress stand in the world and the deepest slough in the greater Everglades. Its 80,000 acres are bordered by I-75 (Alligator Alley), US-41, SR-29, Fakahatchee Bay, and Picayune State Forest.

The Ghost Writer newsletter is edited by Jenifer Adams-Mitchell and Marya Repko with contributions from members and friends. It is issued at least six times a year and has an average circulation over 300 copies. (c) 2007, FOF. All rights reserved. No part of this newsletter, including pictures, may be reproduced without permission.

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NEW ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

date _____

Please make check payable to "FOF" and send to: **FOF Membership, P.O.Box 35, Everglades City, FL, 34139**

Individual (\$20) Family (\$30) Business (\$50) Patron (\$100) Benefactor (\$500)

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MONTHS AT ALTERNATE ADDRESS:

JAN FEB MAR APR MAY JUN JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV DEC