



The Ghost Writer

MARCH 2015

NEWSLETTER of the Friends of Fakahatchee, "Home of the Ghost Orchid"

EVENTS

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED!!!
for dates & costs, see
www.orchidswamp.org
and select Tours & Events

GHOST RIDER TRAM TOUR
Tuesday at 10am

MOONLIGHT TRAM TOUR
all tickets sold out

TRAM TOUR & WET WALK
March 19/26

BIOLOGIST'S SWAMP WALK
March 7

BOARDWALK AFTER DARK
March 4

ISLAND CRUISE
March 21,
see article on page 7

ANNUAL PICNIC
Saturday, March 14
see President's Message, page 5

FOF BOARD MEETING
Sunday, March 15, 2:00 p.m.
Ranger Station, Copeland

ANNUAL MEETING & DINNER
Sunday, April 12

Cuban Connection
Saturday, April 18
see article in right column

Amazing Adventures
Friday, March 27
see article on page 7



Dennis & Mike speaking in the Museum of the Everglades at the MSD Festival and a photo taken by Dennis in Havana during one of their first visits.



The Cuban Connection Finding Florida's Lost Orchids

by Dennis Giardina

In the spring of 2006, I took a swamp buggy ride down Janes Scenic Drive with Park Biologist Mike Owen and former Friends of Fakahatchee President John Elting. On that morning we had with us the new Florida Parks Service District 4 Bureau Chiefs Valinda Subic and B.J. Givens. As we rolled along, looking at the craters and wash-outs, trying to come up with a plan to fix and maintain the road without a budget, I chatted with B.J. about some of the other interesting things going on at Fakahatchee

I mentioned to him that we had recently met with Matt Richards, a horticulturist from Atlanta Botanical Garden, and that I was looking forward to an official collaboration to experimentally restore populations of the Preserve's rare and extirpated orchid species.

When I told B.J. that the two species that we call the "lost orchids," *Epdendrum acunae* and *Bulbophyllum pachyrhachis* were no longer extant in the U.S. and that our plan was to get seeds from the geographically-closest, wild populations of these species that occur about 200 miles away in Western Cuba, he smiled and gave me a curious look. He said, "How are you going to do that?" I said, "I don't know but I will find a way."

On **Saturday, April 18**, the Friends of Fakahatchee will host a dinner program at Naples Botanical Garden entitled "The Cuban Connection: Finding Florida's Lost Orchids." The event begins at 5 p.m. with a tour of the Garden's orchid pavilion, followed by a Cuban-inspired buffet dinner and island drinks. Afterwards, Mike Owen and I will talk about our collaborative efforts to conserve Fakahatchee's native epiphytes and the progress that we have made to find and bring back the "lost orchids." Our very special guest speaker will be Dr. Rolando Pérez Márquez, our friend, colleague, and the Director of Science at Soroa Botanical Garden in Cuba.

The cost for the evening is \$50 per person and reservations are required. See our website www.orchidswamp.org and click on Events.

M.O.ZONE - Seen Around the Strand

On 1/7/15, at 11:30AM, Steven Bass, Park Ranger, Steve Houseknecht, Park Services Specialist, and James Basford, Volunteer, observed 2 Adult **Bald Eagles** flying over the Shop. On 1/9/15, at 2:30PM, Eric Bauer, visitor, observed an **American Bittern** in the east ditch between G7 and G12. On 1/10/15, early in the morning, Steven Bass observed a **Flamingo** flying south of US-41 west of Faka-Union Canal. On 1/18/15, at 4:30PM, Eric Bauer observed a dark morph **Short-tailed Hawk** circling 400 feet high to the south of Fakahatchee Headquarters.

On 1/24/15, in the morning, Dino Barone, Fearless Faka-Hacker, observed 3 **Virginia Opossums**, one walking on Janes Scenic Drive (JSD) and two on East Main. On 1/25/15, around noon, Becky Basford, Volunteer, observed 35 **Woodstorks** standing in the Marsh south of US-41. On 1/28/15, in the evening, Becky Basford and her guest had an amazing **Florida Panther** sighting just before G7/West Main. She reports it was walking along JSD. On 1/29/15, at 12:30pm, Cathleen, visitor, observed an **Everglades Snail Kite** perched in a tree east of SR-29.

On 2/2/15, in the late morning, Don Leonard, Volunteer, observed a **Florida Black Bear** go across JSD between Gates 8-9. On 2/8/15, at 9AM, Melissa Miano, Park Ranger, observed 25 **American White Pelicans** standing and swimming in the marsh north and south of US-41 about 2 miles west of SR-29. On 2/8/15, around 9:30AM, James Basford observed 2 **River Otters** playing in a ditch prior to G12/East Main.

On 2/11/15, at 12:44 PM, Becky Basford observed and photographed a **Little Metalmark Butterfly** feeding on an **Everglades Daisy** (*Heeninium pinnatifidum*) flower in Four Stakes Prairie. The wildflower is in the Aster family, native to Florida and is also called "Southeastern Sneezeweed". It has been documented blooming at Fakahatchee from November through May. The Little Metalmark Butterfly is found in Florida every month of the year (National Audubon Society *Field Guide to North American Butterflies*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994, page 519.). *See photo below.*

On 2/11/15, around 3PM, Renee Rau, Park Manager and Dee Leonard, Volunteer, observed a **Bobcat** walk cross JSD around G18. On 2/19/15, at 1:30PM, Debbie Kaprielian, Volunteer, observed an adult **Florida Panther** on East Main.

If you want to report sightings, contact Park biologist Mike Owen by phone at (239) 695-2886 or by email at FOF_90@hotmail.com



This Little Metalmark Butterfly on an Everglades Daisy, photographed on February 11 by Becky Basford, is about 3/4 of an inch wide (see *MOZone* above).



Visitors to the Boardwalk this season have enjoyed the excitement of a pair of Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) nesting within easy view. Thanks to Leo Reed for this photo with an owlet taken on February 7

BOARDWALK REPORT

by Linda Koreny

The water is dropping fast in the strand. The Bald Cypress trees are beginning to get their leaves. Spring is arriving and change is in the air. With the strand drying up, I enjoyed watching **White Tail Deer** at the edge of the Gator Pond. Another volunteer, Kathy Hatch, recently reported seeing 2 **Florida Black Water Snakes** soaking up the sun on a log. And a visitor saw 2 **Ring Necked Snakes** as well as a **Rat Snake**.

Bob, a visitor from Zanesville, Ohio, shared this: *I really liked walking the boardwalk and seeing the various habitats and animals. The **Bald Eagle** was something that very few people get to see. Also, the **Great-Horned Owl** was a thrill to see. Other wildlife seen were **Ibis, Woodstorks, Great Egrets** and butterflies. Coming off the Boardwalk we encountered an **Alligator** basking in the sun. We have a lot of photos of our trip to have for memories.*

Then a couple visiting from St Albans in Hertfordshire, England, just northwest of London, witnessed a very exciting experience. Brad Wigglesworth took the photos while his wife, Keri Jordan, wrote this narrative:

My husband and I were wandering back to our car after another enjoyable stroll along the Cypress Bend boardwalk when we heard an almighty splash in one of the ponds next to the entrance. As we peered through the tangle of bushes, we were met by the sight of a large alligator coolly floating on the surface of the water with the foot of a smaller gator clamped firmly between its jaws.

The big guy was at least 10ft and seemed to be making light work of subduing the squirming 4ft gator that was trying in vain to defend itself by scratching his oppressor's eyes with his free front foot. Another huge splash and the death roll of the large gator began to draw a larger crowd of onlookers, some of whom had decided to film the epic battle that was unfolding.

Perhaps he suddenly felt a bit camera shy as the perpetrator turned and moved slowly downstream, taking his unwilling companion with him. On reaching the bank, the raw power of the animals became even more apparent with a great deal of thrashing and more death rolls from the large gator. Once the waters had calmed, we noticed that his grip had moved to behind little gator's eyes. It was obvious he was in no rush to put his new plaything out of its misery but every few minutes or so, we heard another crunch of its skull, indicating that there was only one way that this battle was going to end.

We stood and watched for over 45 minutes until dusk had fallen and we were finding it difficult to see anymore. It felt a bit like when you're driving past a car crash – you know you don't really want to look but you just can't help yourself. We believe the bigger gator was feeling more territorial as opposed to hungry but once he'd clamped his jaws around his subordinate, there was no way he was letting go. We were reminded once again that nature isn't always nice but it is always amazing.

EXPLORING EAST RIVER

by Tod Dahlke

Well, folks, it's official – season is in full swing and things are busy down here in Fakahatchee South. As you approach from the West the first indication you'll see is the overflow parking at the Boardwalk. The cars and RVs can be seen across the street clustered around the ruins of Weaver's Station on a daily basis now. The old station was identical to Monroe Station and serviced weary travelers since the 1920's. There's a slice of the old Tamiami Trail in front of the ruins that extends about 100 yards or so East into the great grass prairie. This is a nice place to sit and take in a sunset – just so you know.



Now that Turner River access is closed because of the low water levels, the mighty East River is taking on the overflow of kayak outfitters and day trippers. The big shuttle vans carrying 10-15 people at a time are in and out throughout the day from 8am to 6pm. The best time to put in is 10am - 12noon and 2pm - 4pm. If you plan to take the family shore fishing or use the picnic area, I would avoid the launch entirely. I suspect this will be the case until mid-May so plan accordingly.

I'm seeing the **Chicken Turtles** sunning themselves in the first pond which means the water is still fresh enough. Soon they will run the gauntlet and cross US-41 to the canal. To the Vulture's delight not all of them will make it. I plan to bring a hydrometer with me from now on and will monitor salinity levels for reference. The **Tri-color Herons & Snowy Egrets** will be returning to build their nests soon which I always look forward to. This coincides with the great march of the **Blue Crab**. Soon there will be as many crabs in the water as there are birds in the trees. Lots to report on so stay tuned.



Visitor Brad Wigglesworth took these photos of alligators at the Boardwalk (see report in left column).

Fire, a natural part of our ecosystem

by Patrick Higgins

I just happened to be leading a combined tram tour and swamp walk on the 29th of January when the Park's Burn Specialist, Steve Houseknecht, and his team were setting Lee-Cypress Prairie ablaze. It was, of course, a prescribed burn, in this case of some 400 acres from the road to the margins of the swamp beyond. Trundling down Janes Scenic Drive on the Ghost-Rider, our passengers had a front row view of the burn crew decked out in their helmets and yellow Nomex jackets igniting the dry grasses and shrubs with their drip-torches. We traversed a smoldering landscape with flames lapping at hammocks in the distance. Hawks moved from perch to perch just ahead of the fire head watching for fleeing prey or perhaps some fresh barbeque. Later, wading in Six Pipe Slough we had the novel experience of snow in the Fakahatchee, as white ash rained down upon us.

South Florida is the lightning capital of the USA with an average of 25 lightning strikes per square mile and more thunderstorm days than anywhere else in the country. This, coupled with seasonal drying makes wildfire a natural component of our environment. As a consequence most of our ecosystems have evolved to be fire dependent.

The majority of lightning strikes are between June and September coinciding with the peak of our wet season, so the resulting fires tend to be lighter in touch and more localized. However wildfires from thunderstorms in late spring, when there's lots of accumulated dry fuel about, tend to be wider sweeping, more severe and can even alter the soil structure. But with the creation of roads and canals that act as firebreaks and fragmentation of the habitat, this cycle cannot take its natural course. So we have prescribed or controlled burns that attempt to mimic this otherwise natural phenomenon. The Fakahatchee has the largest prescribed burn program in Florida's State Park system.

Fire maintains the habitat by preventing succession. Without fire shrubs and trees would invade our marshes and wet prairies eventually drying them out. Fire releases and recycles nutrients locked up in plant tissue, keeps non-fire

adapted invasive plants in check, and alters the landscape spatially, creating clearings and opportunity so that burnt areas experience increases in native wildflowers, birds and other wildlife. In the case of prescribed burns they also protect Park neighbors and facilities by reducing potential fuel for wildfires.

I tramped across the charred landscape 2 weeks later and was greeted by fresh sweet green shoots of grass already 6 inches high being grazed upon by white-tailed deer. More remarkable were the thistles in flower everywhere, poised to create seeds to colonize new terrain. The burn also revealed some of the prairie's normally hidden structure like the recumbent trunks of saw palmettos, cap rock, or circles of cypress knees around old logged stumps, as well as a littering of white shells from the previous seasons' apple snails.

Of particular interest to me was how the prairie hammocks had fared. Many of the smaller islands of cabbage palm and saw palmetto appeared incinerated, although I knew within a few weeks the palmetto's blackened trunks would be sprouting new fronds. The hardwood hammocks however were largely untouched. Some are protected by shallow perimeter moats but it's the deep shade of their interiors that creates microclimates with higher humidity that seems to keep them safe. In most cases it was just the volatile wax myrtle around their margins that had burned.

There's no water in most of the borrow ditch paralleling lower Janes Scenic Drive right now, so the burnt prairie is easy to access. Try investigating it on foot before the grasses gets too high again and compare it with unburnt Copeland Prairie to the east. Personally I'm waiting for autumn when the muhly grass ought to be spectacular. It flowers best after a good burn.

Patrick Higgins is a National Association of Interpretation Certified Interpreter, Vice-President of the Friends of Fakahatchee and Project Manager for the development of the Boardwalk Master Interpretive Plan.



New grass on Lee-Cypress Prairie just two weeks after a prescribed burn. Photo by Patrick Higgins.

President's Message

by Francine Stevens

The first two months of the year have been extremely busy for the volunteers on both sides of the organization – the “administrative” and the “in the field” – a reminder that all the **FOF volunteers are essential** to maintain our mission to provide financial and volunteer support to the Park. It would be impossible to be as successful as we are without their dedication, determination, and generosity of their time and it would also be impossible to pursue our mission without the support of our members.

It is for this reason that I will start by announcing how pleased I am that the Board of Directors approved a **new picnic concept beginning on Saturday, March 14 – this annual gathering is now titled “MEMBERS & VOLUNTEERS APPRECIATION PICNIC” and is free for all FOF members, FOF volunteers, Park volunteers, and Park staff.** It will be held at 4 PM and the only requirement will be to **register no later than Wednesday, March 11**, so the Board can determine how many will attend. And, although no longer a requirement, for those of you who enjoyed bringing in a dish you are welcomed to do so as a complement to the BBQ'd food and beverages that the FOF will provide. All members will receive their invitations and instructions via our Mail Chimp notification system. I am looking forward to spending some leisure time with you!

You will recall the **visit last December of Florida State Park Director Donald Forgione.** As a result of the Resource Management leaders bringing to his attention the need for improvement on Janes Scenic Drive, the Park will received \$30,000 for this purpose.

On the subject of **special guests** at the Park, my father (who turned 85 on the February 23) participated in a tram ride lead by Patrick Higgins. My father wintered in Naples for 21 years until 2008 but had never been in the Fakahatchee; he was totally amazed by what he saw and learned and, as a retiree of the Canadian National Railroad, the history of the Park hit a special note. He asked me how the FOF manages to recruit professionals who could be well paid elsewhere. Professionals attracts more professionals and generosity breeds generosity!

Speaking of generosity and professionalism, in my pursuit to get **professional help for our Website and our Financial reporting** I'm happy to report the FOF is now the recipient of two grants, one of \$2,000 for “Technical Assistance-Consultant” for the FOF Website granted by Community Foundation of Collier County and another called the” Everyday Capacity Building Grant” sponsored by Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc. for the amount of \$4,080 to obtain the services of a Certified Public Accountant. I was very pleased that my very first grant applications were approved and – if I can do this, anyone can do this!

There is much more to read about how busy all the volunteers have been in the Park, so I will close my letter and let you move on to read about the important folks in this newsletter!



Francine and her 85-year-young father in the Fak during a tram ride while he was visiting her from Canada.

MEMBERS & VOLUNTEERS APPRECIATION PICNIC

Will you be there on March 14?

If you plan to attend, phone (239) 695-1023 or email fakaevent@yahoo.com by March 11 so we can plan the food. Please give your names and if you would like to contribute a side dish.



ELECTION SCHEDULE

Submissions for candidates to stand in the election of Board members have been received. The schedule and deadlines are as follows:



- 3/6/15 Deadline for receipt of bios
- 3/13/15 Ballots to be mailed or e-mailed to all members with copies of bios
- 4/1/15 Ballots must be postmarked by April 1
- 4/6/15 Tabulation of ballots and costs expended
- 4/ 8/14 Election results announced no later than April 10 to candidates & Board
- 4/12/15 New Board convenes, elects officers
- 4/12/15 New Board members & officers introduced at Annual Meeting

John Kaiser, Nominating Committee chair



From start to finish, the Everglades Ultras races on February 21 in the Fakahatchee were a huge success. Runners and workers were rewarded with burgers cooked by park manager Renee Rau and ranger Steven Bass. Organizer Bob Becker especially praised Dino Barone for spending so much time as a FAKA-hacker to prepare the way. Photos thanks to Jay Staton.

The Fruits of Our Labor

by Ray Carroll



Why would anyone go into the swamp and work with all those bugs and mud and snakes?

Well, that's a fair question and deserving of a thoughtful answer. As one who does so regularly, I can think of several reasons.

1. You get to hang out with some real nice people who don't think you're nuts for going into the woods to work with all those bugs.
2. You get into parts of the Park that are hard to get into otherwise, where there are strange and interesting things to see.
3. You give of a personal resource that is priceless – your time – and the Park gets credit for volunteer hours that translate into real dollars of state funding.

Any one of those reasons alone might be enough, but when you've been there and seen for yourself the ballet-dancer-like grace of Dino Barone, fine edged weapon in hand, whirling, twirling, slashing, and hacking Brazilian pepper, then you know. Getting to know Resource Management volunteer coordinator Dino Barone is worth it. Did you know he is a professional cutter? Just ask him.

Yes, occasionally there is a snake, but not very often. Granddad Ernie Carroll told me he made a deal with the snakes, "I don't bother them in the woods and they don't bother me in the saloons. So far, they kept the bargain." I'm trying to follow his lead.

This time of year the bugs aren't bad – no, really. And it's not too muddy either.

But from November through May my favorite reason to wander swamp tramways is treasure hunting. Not in the ground, aloft. *Citrus x paradisi* is what I'm talking, grapefruit. You see, other people were working in the woods long before me. As they rode the logging train to and from work they ate Duncan grapefruit (and oranges and guavas) spitting seeds along the way. Oranges usually don't grow true from seeds; maybe one in 25 is sweet enough to eat, the rest will take the enamel right off your teeth. But grapefruit grow true from seed and Duncans are the best. This is the original grapefruit, first planted in Florida near what is now Safety Harbor in 1823. Duncan grapefruit were grown at Deep Lake on the eastern border of the Fakahatchee Strand and it is probably from there the lumbermen got theirs. Duncans are seedy, sweet, and juicy. Lovely to behold their pale lemon peels sometimes showing a faint blush. To do one justice you peel it first (one long peel please). Then, using your pocket knife, carefully peel back and pull off the soft, spongy white mantle below, exposing the sectioned fruit pulp. Carefully push a finger into the middle just where the stem was attached, pull apart and separate in halves. Clean out the center first and the fruit sections will tend to open just where the seeds are in the middle. Peel back the bitter section coverings on each side, push off the seeds, and eat the pulp. IT IS DELICIOUS! You will not eat store-bought again.

There are other reasons to go work in the woods. You might find some of your own I don't know about. I hope to see you there ...

FOF member Ray Carroll has been exploring the Fak since he was a child at the family camp shared by his two grandfathers.

HACKING IN THE FAK

by Dino Barone



Fearless FAKA-hacker Paul Joslyn and UltraSports boss Bob Becker during a workday on February 7. Even the Kubota utility vehicle, driven here by Dave Pickering, is orange! Photos by Hacker-Supremo Dino Barone.



Fearless FAKA-hacker Roy Marti, brought his 3 favorite Valentines to the park for a volunteer work day on February 14. Cupid's arrows were temporarily replaced with loppers and machetes, while tangling with Hog Plums, Brazilian Peppers and the wily Smilax. This foursome, all working smoothly in unison, was pure poetry in motion. Awesome Job !! From left to right : Jolyn Marti, Roy Marti, Joan Cleary and Aunt Rose Deprekel



TALK IN NAPLES

Patrick Higgins, FOF's Vice President, gave a talk on the Fakahatchee's unique ecology & challenges to an audience of well over 200 residents and seasonal visitors at Naples South Regional Library on February 11. He developed the theme of how the Fak shares many plant species with the West Indies, justifying the Fakahatchee's sobriquet as the "northernmost island of the Caribbean".

For those who missed it, Patrick is presenting a shortened version on **Tuesday, March 10**, at the **Naples Preserve** at 10:00 a.m. The talk is free and open to the public. For info, call (239) 261-4290.

ISLAND CRUISE

The final cruise this spring to historic Fakahatchee Island will leave on **Saturday, March 21**, at exactly 2:30 p.m. from the National Park Boat Tours in Everglades City. Participants will enjoy a ride through the mysterious mangroves and may see cavorting dolphins. On arrival at the island, a naturalist will lead the group to the old cemetery on the shell mound, pointing out rare plants along the way. Cost is \$80 and reservations are required. See www.orchidswamp.org and click on Events.

"SW Florida Biologists Ignite"

As part of the **Amazing Adventures** series, five speakers, each limited to 10 minutes with no more than 20 slides, will talk on **Friday, March 27**, at Rookery Bay Environmental Learning Center in Naples. Included among them are Fak biologist Mike Owen and former manager Dennis Giardina. The evening starts at 5:30 p.m. with refreshments and the talks begins at 6:00 p.m. Cost is \$10 and reservations are required. For info, call (239) 530-5972.



EVERGLADES BIKE RIDES

The annual NPC Bike Rides, some with fat tires on Janes Scenic Drive, take place on **Sunday, April 12**, starting early in the morning.

To register see www.naplespathways.org. The event benefits FOF.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

We have 317 current memberships plus 29 in arrears from the 4th quarter to whom reminders have been sent.

Do not confuse membership with the Annual Fund!!!
Membership entitles you to vote for FOF directors.

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

- Dee & Dickson Brown, Naples
- Dragonfly Expeditions, Coral Gables
- Jeff Frontz & Cindy Decker, Columbus, OH
- Philip Haley, Naples
- Tom McBride & Nancy Morris, Naples
- Judy Morgan, Minneapolis, MN

THANKS!

Our newest Business Benefactor is **Dragonfly Expeditions** who have conducted tours in the Fak for many years.



Steve Koreny and Patrick Higgins putting up one of the first of the new signs paid for by generous donations to the Annual Fund.

What Are We? Who Are We?

The **Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc.**, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation Citizen Support Organization, provides financial and volunteer support to preserve the unique ecology and cultural heritage of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park and to educate the public about its importance. The Fakahatchee is the largest cypress strand in the world and the deepest slough in the greater Everglades. Its 80,000 acres are bordered by I-75 (Alligator Alley), US-41 (Tamiami Trail), SR-29, Fakahatchee Bay, and Picayune State Forest.

The Ghost Writer, named after the endangered Ghost Orchid which blooms in the Preserve, is edited by Marya Repko with contributions from members and friends. It is issued at least six times a year and has an average circulation of over 400 copies.

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NEW 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) Supporter (\$50) Patron (\$100) Benefactor (\$500)

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