



The Ghost Writer

Newsletter of the Friends of Fakahatchee

October 2016

Eye in sky helps with Fakahatchee projects

by *Steve Houseknecht,*
Park Manager

I would like to thank the FOF for their more than \$3,000 in financial support for our recent aerial survey of the park. With the use of a helicopter, park staff was able to get a bird's eye view of the park allowing us to get a better idea of the invasive/exotic plant infestation we have park wide.

There is potentially a multi-million dollar exotic plant removal project that is slated to start sometime this winter. This would be by far the largest attempt ever made to exterminate the invasive exotic plants that are outcompeting our natives in many areas.

Another objective of the survey was to get a better sense of illegal off-road vehicle use so we can identify problem areas for Law Enforcement.

In addition to accomplishing these objectives, the aerial survey was an opportunity for all of our park staff to see the park from above. It truly is a different perspective.

The flight also gave FOF vice president Patrick Higgins a chance to survey the old growth Cypress stand at Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk. Seeing the stand from above will help the FOF develop a plan to survey and catalog the entire old growth Cypress stand at the Boardwalk.

With the helicopter, we were able to gather a lot of information in a short amount of time. Without the financial support from the Friends, this would not have been possible.



FOF funding made a recent aerial Fakahatchee survey possible.

Houseknecht named Park Manager

Steve Houseknecht, who started his career with the Florida Park Service at Fakahatchee in June 2002 as a Park Ranger has been appointed Park Manager of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.

In 2005, he began managing the park's fire program and oversaw resource management activities.

In 2008, he was promoted up to Park Services Specialist, with continuing responsibility for resource management. Says Steve: "Over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to expand my knowledge, skills, and abilities in all aspects of the park's operation, preparing me for the this next chapter in my career. This truly is such a special place that I'm grateful to live, work, and raise my family in. I look forward to continuing my service to the park and the thousands of visitors who chose to explore our wonderful park each year.



Fall Fak adventures get good press coverage



The Friends of Fakahatchee are kicking off their fall season of adventures with help from feature newspaper articles in the Fort Myers News-Press and Florida Weekly. The articles announced schedules for five adventures: Moonlit Tram Tours, Ghost Rider Tram Tours, The Original Fakahatchee Swamp Walk, Combination Swamp Walk and Tram Tour and Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk Tours.

"Thanks to members who responded to our appeal, we are now fully staffed for the season," said FOF vice president Patrick Higgins. "We're

looking forward to sharing the wonders of the Fakahatchee with our guests and raising funds to support the park."

For a full schedule of events and reservations, click on the link below.

[Fakahatchee adventure reservations](#)

Miami hiker spots panther on second Fak visit

Second time was a charm for a Miami hiker who did what few visitors to the Fakahatchee manage to do — spot a Florida panther.

Ta-Shana Taylor, a lecturer at the University of Miami, spotted the endangered cat while resting on the porch of the Fakahatchee Hilton late last month. She was scouting the preserve in preparation for a group hike early in October by Outdoor Afro, a non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring black connections to nature.

Taylor says she was relaxing on the swing of the Fakahatchee Hilton when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. It was an uncollared Florida panther.



Ta-Shana Taylor of Miami got this footage of a Florida Panther on her second visit to the Fakahatchee. Go to <https://youtu.be/oXkMvqImZUc> to play.



“I don’t know if she was trying to get to the trails past the Hilton or seek shelter from the rain on the porch like I was doing,” Taylor recalls. “She was 25 to 30 feet from me and I was able to get a photo and a quick video I later posted on You Tube. She was around for about three to five minutes.”

Taylor was trained as an Outdoor Afro leader at Yosemite National Park this past April. She notes that the Miami group’s October walk will coincide with a 40 mile hike in Maryland along the route of the Underground Railroad. “Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is perfect for our Miami group because it gives us a peek at what it was like for slaves to cross the swamps of Florida on the way to freedom in the Bahamas and Caribbean.”

Look for photos of the hike next week at www.orchidswamp.org.

President's report by Francine Stevens

As soon as the FOF guided tours were promoted for the coming season the FOF line started to ring. Thanks to Jinny Ball who is on her third year volunteering for tour ticket sales, folks who were determined to be on the moonlit tram tour were able to get Jinny's assistance pronto. Jinny tells me October and November is almost sold out so if you want to be on the moonlit tram tours you better use the reservations link in this newsletter sooner rather than later. We are off to a good start and again this would not be possible without all the volunteers who are demonstrating great commitment to be available for an amazing 72 FOF guided tours we have scheduled!

Naples Daily News writer Lance Shearer wrote a wonderful three part series on the Everglades in September. It is a good primer on the hydrology, history, and politics of the Everglades region. Any description of the Everglades should include the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, and this one does, with a detailed run-down on its "20-mile ribbon" of state jurisdiction.

Shearer does an admirable job of showing how the various parcels of public land throughout South Florida were acquired, with sometimes unexpected results. Today both the railroads and the old grown cypress are gone from the Fakahatchee, but the slough and 85,000 acres of conservation land remain, and the neighboring Picayune parcel is slowly removing evidence of shady real estate dealings of the past

Shearer's final article gives a menu of ways for visitors to get "up close and personal" with the natural surroundings, spotlighting the Fakahatchee's swamp walks and Big Cypress Bend boardwalk. Click on the links below to read the articles.

The Everglades: Past is known; future up in the air and down in the water

<http://nplsne.ws/2c14btO>

The Everglades: Crazy quilt in the wilderness

<http://nplsne.ws/2bVnJw2>

The Everglades: A multitude of ways to get wild

<http://nplsne.ws/2c1YJfz>

We are making arrangements for the Welcome Back dinner held on Saturday, December 17. This is always a great time to catch up with our returning snowbird members. This year we also hope to meet many of the new members who have signed up in recent months—many inspired by Patrick Higgins presentation on the Fak at local venues. Look for a special email bulletin with complete dinner reservation information.

At the October 16th Board meeting, the Board will be considering an amendment to the FOF By-laws to address procedures governing resignations by Board Members. Send your questions and comments to: FOF_90@hotmail.com

Thanks again for your varied contributions to the Friends of Fakahatchee.



Patrick Higgins, FOF's VP, scrambling up the fallen old growth cypress tree with a tape measure in tow. Photo: Gabriele Mattivi. At right is the same tree a month earlier with its lattice of strangler fig. Photo: Patrick Higgins.

A tree falls...

by **Patrick Higgins**

Sometime around the 23rd of September there was probably a slow groan as the roots of one of our old-growth cypress trees began to pull out of the water-laden soil by the Boardwalk's alligator hole. This would have been followed by pops as individual roots let go their hold and perhaps the scatter of roosting birds, and then a tremendous crash as tons of tree succumbed to gravity. But nobody heard it, not even in the Indian Village, because it was in the dead of a stormy night. A couple of guard trees guided its fall so the main trunk narrowly missed the Boardwalk. Its crown was captured by some neighboring trees so its top didn't quite make it all the way down.

By the time I arrived, Steve Bass and our new ranger Mike Duey had already cleared the debris from the boardwalk, but there was still a lingering cedar-like scent of fresh cut cypress. They had noted a lot of minute jingle bell orchids along its leafy branches as they sawed them away, and only a month before I had photographed this very same giant for a talk, because of its interesting network of strangler fig. Now it lay prostrate.

I returned with a tape measure to see just how big it was. Luckily I was able to enlist the assistance of two passing European visitors; Angelo and Gabriele Mattivi who kindly held the end of my tape measure and supplied the photograph of me scrambling up the trunk, as well as some much needed encouragement as I got higher. It measured 55 feet to the base of the crown and 75 feet to the very top. Despite it being probably a 500 year- old tree, this height seemed about right. If you live in a hurricane belt for 500 years, you are bound to get a haircut every half century and end up flat topped like this one. In less wind prone parts of the country they can top 120 feet. – *continued next page*

– a tree falls continued

Estimating its girth was a little harder. This measurement is normally given as diameter at breast height, abbreviated as DBH. In the U.S. this is taken at 4 ½ feet above the ground. Not having any calipers I decided to go for circumference using my tape measure and then work backwards with some high school geometry.

I jumped off the stump four feet down into the swamp with a very loud splash. This immediately caused a bit of excitement for the now small group of other onlookers and was sufficient to deter a six foot gator on the opposite side of the boardwalk who probably thought the noise was from a much bigger alligator and sped off, leaving me to try and feel around in the water under the tree.

Not being able to pass my tape under at that point I measured a half circle at a diagonal around the tree, multiplied that by 2 to arrive at an approximate circumference of 16 ft and then divided that by pi once back on terra firma to arrive at a diameter of about five feet. I say about, because my circumference was distorted by the presence of the strangler fig. A truer girth was probably about 4½ feet. Anyways, all in a day's work!

By the way this is not necessarily the end of the saga because the tree is not dead. Some of its roots still have a hold in the peat. Adventitious epicormic shoots may eventually create vertical clones along the old cypress tree's now recumbent bole. In the meantime the newly opened gap in the canopy will create light and opportunity for other plants that may have been waiting their moment in the shade. Fungi and insects will begin their attack, but cypress is the wood eternal, and the trunk, even if it does succumb to death, will likely still be there a hundred years from now.

The Friends of Fakahatchee welcome 15 new members

Some made the decision to join after attending one of Patrick Higgins' recent presentations on the Fakahatchee.

Susan Minamyer of Naples joined at the Patron level. Joining as supporters were Helene DeNeergaard of Naples and Deborah LaFogg Docherty of Boynton Beach.

New Family and Individual members included: Jerry and Sharon Clippinger of Gulf Stream, FL; Paul Croteau of Enfield, CT; Stephanie Driscoll of Naples; James P. Ghecas of Naples; David Grinnell of Pinellas Park, FL; George Lovelace of Melbourne Beach, FL; Carson and Laurie McEachern of Naples; Margaret Phillips, of Ipswich, MA; Robert and Amy Shevlin of Naples; Martin and Cassandra Strasmore of Naples; John Taylor of Naples, and Tom P. Watts of Naples.

Become a Friend of the Fakahatchee