



New President's Message

By Patrick Higgins



When I first entered the Royal Military Academy in 1967 I was presented with a little red book – but not the teachings of Chairman Mao that were so prevalent at the then height of the cultural revolution. On my red book's cover, under the silver embossed Sandhurst crest, was the title *Serve to Lead*, a principle I firmly believe in. It is a privilege therefore to be elected to serve you, the Friends of Fakahatchee's members, as your new President. It's been almost 2 months since I assumed the role and I am fortunate to be able to announce two significant happenings, but these of course didn't come about overnight, but are the result of almost a year in each case of work by your entire board and lots of planning.

Firstly on May 8th the Florida legislature passed SB 2500 sponsored by State Senator Kathleen Passidomo and Representative Bob Rommel which provides \$1.3 million of additional money for Phase 2 of our Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk Expansion Project. This is on top of the funding already in place for the Phase 1 construction that is in permitting at the moment. Just to recap, Phase 1 is the construction of the new gated parking area, a bridge across the canal and a new boardwalk across the salt marsh linking up to a crushed rock path around the southern rim of Green Heron Lake that leads to the original boardwalk site.

The new Phase 2 appropriation is to construct the badly needed restrooms in the new parking area and to build the park's first ever Interpretive Pavilion on the far side of the canal. The additional funding also covers the exhibits in the center and interpretive signage for the expanded site. The Bill reached the Governor's desk on May 31st always with the possibility of a line item veto, but fortunately the Governor recognized the importance of this relatively small and long overdue expenditure to the future of the park and Collier County. Our project wasn't among the 100s that were on his 2017 veto list.

So unless there's a last minute hitch, Phase 2 funding is through. It now appears Phase 1 and 2 will be able to be built together. There are still challenges to permitting, but we can at last foresee the current haphazard parking with families dashing across Highway 41 and unsightly porta-potties being a thing of the past, and having a stunning visitor center as a hub for new park activities. Major hurricane damage to the State Park infrastructure this season withstanding, we are hopeful that Phase 1 construction can start by the end of year and that Phase 2 will just follow on.

The second equally important announcement is that your board has appointed Francine Stevens as FOF's first Executive Director. This is a huge step in the evolution of our organization and will provide the continuity and managerial support to pursue many new funding opportunities, one of which we will be announcing in the near future. Initially this paid position will be on a part time basis. Francine and I have collaborated very closely over the past 4 years when she served so successfully as our President and I look forward to continuing to do so. I'm sure you will want to join me in congratulating her.

Sincerely,

Patrick Higgins, President, Friends of Fakahatchee

News from the Strand Opening up the range

by Dino Barone



Faka-hacker Howard Lubel and Park Ranger Mike Duey with some of their recovered barbed wire on Dan House Prairie.

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Led by our intrepid ranger extraordinaire Mike Duey – and closely supervised by our very own Fakahatchee phlebotomists (*Aedes taeniorhynchus*), AKA mosquitos – fearless FAKA-hackers Howard Lubel and I journeyed out into Dan House Prairie on Saturday and Sunday, May 27 & 28, 2017. Armed with bolt cutters, insect repellent, and good leather gloves, our acute focus was beginning to remove the miles of remnant barbed wire fencing.

Saturday, we were endeavoring to figure the most efficient way to remove then store the barbed wire. The thought was to cut the wire into 4-5 foot long strips, then put these into the back of the Chevy pickup truck. While working with the barbed wire, Mike noticed the wire still had a circular memory, even after decades of living in the sun baked prairie, enduring fires, storms and other associated weather Southwest Florida enjoys.

So on Sunday, we approached the removal process a bit differently. We focused on a single strand of wire removal. While Howard and I cut the fence post staples, then the in-between preformed wire spacer attachment, Mike was utilizing the natural memory of the barbed wire and began to hand coil, in about a 24" diameter coil, an approximate length of 300 feet of wire.



It wasn't always easy cutting the barbed wire. Perhaps this high wire was set to stop roving giraffes!

As the temperatures in the prairie reached into the low 90s, we declared victory each day around noon. Cognizant of the temperatures we were working in, we factored hydration breaks seamlessly into our work day.

We cleared 0.44 mile of 4-strand barbed wire fencing. Collectively we removed 1.76 linear miles of barbed wire from Dan House Prairie! And we now have game plan to continue with this barbed wire removal project.

A Giant Airplant Oasis

by Patrick Higgins



The great thing about being a naturalist is you can do it anywhere. I had to run some errands under the noon day sun in downtown Naples the other day. I parked in the lot behind 3rd Street South's Old Naples Pub and Tommy Bahamas restaurant, when I noticed a Giant Airplant (*Tillandsia utriculata*) growing vigorously over my head.

This is the very same species that has been so devastated by the Mexican bromeliad weevil in the Fakahatchee, and is the subject our rescue and restoration program. It was growing on a myrtle oak (*Quercus myrtifolia*). The 2 ¼ acre parking lot has 4 rows of these salt-resistant, contorted trees surrounded by a sea of tarmac, only 400 yards from the Gulf.

With my interest piqued, I collected my notebook, a pen and a broad-brimmed hat and began a survey of the parking lot trees in the 95° heat. The trees had highly pruned open canopies, as evidenced by the abundance of ball moss festooning them. Their trunks had neat rows of small holes from the frequent attention of yellow-bellied sapsuckers.

Forty-five minutes later, after much peering upwards, viewing each tree from several angles and being asked once if I had lost my cat, to my amazement I recorded 32 Giant Airplants on a total of 44 myrtle oaks!

Sixteen were about to bloom or just gone to seed, four were juveniles, nine were healthy adults but hadn't yet pushed up their spike, and three were dead. Perhaps this oasis could serve as seed bank for our restoration program. It would be interesting to get a ladder and see if the three dead ones had expired naturally or succumbed to the evil weevil.

Photo of two healthy urban Giant Airplants by Patrick Higgins.

How dry was our dry season?

by Patrick Higgins



The shriveled remains of a 4-foot alligator in the saltmarsh south of the Tamiami Trail in April, 2017 is a testament of how tough the season has been for wildlife.

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As we approach the official beginning of our wet season on June 1st, it's interesting to think about just how dry our dry season was. We know it was very dry with our sloughs looking more like the floors of northern pine forests than those of swamps. For much of the season we contended with the acrid smell of distant, or sometimes not so distant brushfires. By

mid-April, more than two and a half times as much Florida acreage had burnt than for an entire average year. Lots of our temperate plant species like red maple had hang-dog, almost panting leaves. Even waxy tropicals like myrsine had more pronounced leaf curls to reduce airflow and water loss, and the grasses of our marl prairies were caked with dried, khaki periphyton.

I took advantage of conditions to explore the park's saltmarsh south of the Tamiami Trail a few weeks ago. The water there had been reduced to just the occasional puddle. I tried crunching across its surface, but even with the drought found myself sinking through the crust unless I hopped from tussock to tussock or stuck to the mats of sea purslane, whose little purple, star-shaped flowers were being busily attended by hosts of white peacock butterflies at the time. Their succulent salty leaves are rich in vitamin C and decidedly snackable.



You could almost walk across the gators in the dried up lake behind the Fakahatchee Hilton.

The obvious measure of our dry season is rainfall. At the beginning of May, South Florida of Water Management District's southwest coastal sector where we are, had only received some 5.5 inches all season. That is a mere 45% of our 30-year average, and at the time of writing (May 25th), my rain gauge showed we had added only another 3.5 inches. For the past ten years we seem to have been getting drier. Although both 2016 and 2010 and were exceptions with very high rains, for the past decade SW Florida has been averaging 2.33 inches less than the 30-year average.

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How dry was our dry season, continued...



The low water made catching this sailfin catfish easier.

But rainfall doesn't tell the whole story. It's the sum of how much a natural system gains and loses from precipitation and evapotranspiration. That's why the park meticulously records the readings from the evaporation pan by the ranger station each morning. There's a complex formula beyond my math skills for calculating the rate of evaporation, but it involves how saturated the air is already, wind speed, air and water temperatures and surface area. To this we have to add one more element which is plant transpiration.

Only 2-3% of the water taken in by a plant's root system is typically used in photosynthesis and cell growth. The rest is lost into the atmosphere through transpiration. Driven by the tension or pulling force of evaporation, water is being continuously lost from the leaf surfaces of actively growing plants. So, paradoxically when the swamp's canopy is absent, despite exposure to the Sun's full glare, water loss is typically lower for the same temperature than when the canopy is out and the water shaded.

Many plants have special leaf adaptations to improve this very high ratio of water loss, such as pubescence or fine hairs. These thicken the leaf surface's normally thin motionless layer of boundary air, slowing down the diffusion of water vapor from the plant's pores into the atmosphere. Others have a waxy coating to reflect light and reduce heat evaporation, or have reduced leaf surface area like our cypress trees, taken to the extreme in our pond cypresses. Others may drop their leaves altogether in the dry season or utilize a combination of a number of these strategies.

Some plants have even evolved alternate carbon fixation pathways to reduce evapotranspiration, such as with the water-conserving CAM mode of photosynthesis, in which the stomata of many blue-grey plant's like Spanish moss remain closed by day and only open at night to collect carbon dioxide, which they are able to store as malic acid and then reconvert for use in daylight.

This past winter was the second warmest on record for Florida and was unusually windy. So when we consider how dry the season was, it's not as simple as just rainfall. When we combine lower than normal rainfall, higher than normal temperatures and a higher frequency of windy days, we can appreciate why we've been so dry and how even a ½ inch downpour sometimes only allowed us to run in place. Fortunately the summer rain pattern seems to be building up on time.

Fakahatchee To Tighten Up On Park Entrance Fee Collections



Welding students Hannah Ryzenman, Mike Brown, Ryan Rhymer and their Instructor John Mazzarella from the Lorenzo Walker Technical College in Naples donated their labor to build 3 new secure iron rangers with 6 insert boxes.

These will be placed by park personnel at various strategic locations to increase park entrance fee collection. FOF donated \$1500 to the project for materials and new high security locks.

Online gallery features Fakahatchee Wildlife Wonders



Photographers Marc Graf and Christine Sonvilla set up a photo-trapping project in Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park two and a half years ago.

Our Facebook reporter, Dee Leonard, reports that several images have been added to the photographers' Fakahatchee gallery at <http://grafmarc.at/fakahatchee/>. Check out the fresh images of black bear, possum, panther and many more in the new gallery.

For more wonders of nature, follow us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/orchidswamp/>



“Gators close, with no barriers!”

“On the gravel path leading up to the boardwalk, you are walking alongside a muddy swamp and the gators are right there, no barriers. This could be dangerous, very dangerous. But we took a chance, snapped some photos with the gators and continued onto the boardwalk. The boardwalk is very nice and winds you through

the preserve. Along the walk, there are plaques signifying what you might be seeing in the preserve. At the end of the boardwalk there is a bench to sit on while you observe the wildlife. We saw a few more gators at the end of this trail and many birds along the way.”

— Visitor, Indianapolis, IN

Membership News

As we enter summer, the Friends of Fakahatchee are 352 members strong.

2017-2018 Board Members

President – Patrick Higgins
Vice-President – John Kaiser
Secretary – Ken Shapiro
Treasurer – Scott Geltemeyer
Jinny Ball
Ted DeGroot
Chris Gair
Donald Leonard
Howard Lubel
Tom Maish
Gayle Norton
Glen Stawell
Stacey Wolfe

Committee Chairs

Boardwalk Vision – Tom Maish
By-Laws – Ken Shapiro
Communication/PR – Bruce Bunch
Events/Member Dinners/Volunteer Picnic – Francine Stevens
Finance/Treasurer – Scott Geltemeyer
Fundraising – Chris Gair
Membership – Jinny Ball
Nominating – Ted DeGroot
Tours/Education/Interpretation – Gayle Norton

Thanks to our lifetime and business members!

Lifetime Preservers

Bruce & Janet Bunch

Lifetime Individual Members

Rita Bleasdale
Warner Blow
Elsie Caldwell
Peter Haffenreffer
Don Harmon
Patty Huff
James Nici
Wendy Becker Payton
Ken Shapiro
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Lifetime Family Members

Tom & Judy Maish
Noel Nation
Van & June Saylor
Glen & Laura Stacell

Business Patrons

North American Canoe Tours
(Ivey House B&B)

Shurr Adventures

Become a Friend of the Fakahatchee

Visit <http://orchidswamp.org/support/memberships/>

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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.

The Ghost Writer, named after the endangered Ghost Orchid which blooms in the Preserve, is currently edited by Next Steps Collective, LLC, which also manages the Orchidswamp.org website. Contributions to Ghost Writer that relate directly to the business and purpose of the Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc. are welcome. Please write news@orchidswamp.org, subject line: Ghostwriter.

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