



The Ghost Writer

Newsletter of the Friends of Fakahatchee

The Ghost Writer – April 2018

President's Message

by Patrick Higgins

Way back in what seems the mists of time – but was actually only December 6th of last year – FOF along with a number of commercial operators responded to a formal *Call for Business Plans* issued by the Department of Environmental Protection for the establishment and management of concession operations in the Fakahatchee. A month earlier all the interested parties had been invited to the park office for a briefing on the opportunity by folks from Tallahassee.



There are some 17 different commercial operators currently using our largely ungated park. Their activities range from boardwalk tours, to guided hikes, swamp walks, bike tours and kayak trips. Some pay entrance fees, some additionally make voluntary donations to the park's upkeep via FOF, but some do neither. Although the DEP doesn't actually use that term, what they were in effect looking for was a Master Concessionaire for the park to help coordinate all these entities.

However, the wheels of state turn very slowly, so while waiting for the bids to be analyzed, I have happily passed the months wading our swamp until there was no more water, then treading the wind-ruffled grasses of our prairies. Oh, and interpreting for our visitors along the way.

During this interlude Francine Stevens and I also conducted a search for a local attorney to advise us on setting up the concession operation if we were successful, especially on the subcontracting side. In the end it was a case of mutual selection. We were fortunate to be able to retain Mark Slack, a partner with Woods, Weidenmiller, Michetti & Rudnick, one of Naples' biggest hitting law firms. Mark is very familiar with the byways of the Fakahatchee and graciously offered to advise us on a pro bono basis.

The main benefits of FOF becoming the park's Master Concessionaire would be that we could:

- Provide additional services to the public which would not otherwise be available.
- Provide a mechanism to help park staff regulate the park's use through a permitting system.
- Act as 'Air traffic Controller' in conjunction with Park Management for all commercial operators using the park which would help avoid congestion, such as at the East River.
- Provide a unified portal in the form of a virtual storefront to promote all activities being offered in the park.
- Capture more gate receipts for the Park Service.
- Secure a future FOF funding stream – this will be particularly important when the voluntary donation box at the boardwalk (FOF iron ranger) is phased out as it becomes a standard gated fee area.
- Reinvest the concession revenue back into the park instead of the profits being retained by a third party.
- Be in a position for FOF to invest in capital improvements and continue our current high level of financial support.
- Focus additional effort on educational activities and organizing special events, both for fundraising and to increase public visitation and appreciation.
- Share our expert knowledge with subcontractors, coaching them to raise interpretive standards through offering courses to them locally like the Florida Master Naturalist Program.

If the Park Manager determines a capacity limit for any particular park resource, the number of permits or frequency of that activity may have to be restricted, but this will be done in a fair and equitable way. I'm sure you have many questions, but it would not be appropriate to go into the commercial or proposed permitting arrangements here. Let me however assure the existing commercial operators that it is our intention to work with, and not compete against them.

On the subject of the new Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk parking area, the creation of proper restrooms, a bridge across the canal, our park's first ever interpretive pavilion, a new boardwalk connecting the new parking area to the old site, and re-landscaping and severing of the current entrance is finally proceeding. It's all now funded and is just going through the final stages of permitting, with construction contracts expected to be signed in September.

To put the icing on the cake, we have finally been advised that FOF has been successful in our Concession bid. Now the real work begins – to implement it. We want to phase it in for the up-coming season starting in November. So between that, keeping the boardwalk project on schedule, and delivering a separate Wayfinding project financed by Collier County's Tourist Development Council, your Board is going to be pretty busy this summer.

By the way, the Wayfinding project involves installing a new gateway information kiosk at the base of Janes Scenic Drive this autumn. It will feature an all new park map detailing the trail network, distances etc. The project also includes installing four trailhead kiosks at West Main, East Main, East River and the NE corner of the park. They are all in production at the moment. We are also adding the finishing touches to our new Chickee rain shelter/outdoor classroom at the Boardwalk that was funded through the generosity of the Naples Garden Club. Its custom benches are being installed at the end of this month. It's proving a busy 20th anniversary year for FOF, and it's not even half way through!

Executive Director's Message

by Francine Stevens



Our life-sustaining – and dynamic – planet atmosphere at time plays havoc with our tour schedule. This year featured big storms and big fire.

Although I have my feet firmly on the ground, I am currently fascinated by a ten part National Geographic Channel series titled “[One Strange Rock](#),” narrated by eight astronauts, including Peggy Whitson of Iowa, whose 665 days in space is the record for any American.

One does not need to have a scientific background to understand that the planet is not an inert object – ours is a living planet. As matter of fact, “One Strange Rock” reinforces my conviction that devoting time to the preservation of the natural resources of the Fakahatchee is the least we can do in return for a planet that sustains life!

Back on planet Earth, the Fakahatchee tour season was off to a very slow start in Nov and Dec 2017. Since Fall tour seasons have historically done well, it seems reasonable to conclude that the snowbirds were preoccupied with their Irma recovery. Fortunately, January, February and March tours were 98% sold out. However, Swamp Walks had to be cancelled in mid-March due to very low water level. And then came the fires.

The Picayune Forest fire grew to over 10,500 acres and jumped into the Fakahatchee forcing intermittent closure of US 41 and route 29. Access to the Park was jeopardized, however no tours were cancelled because of the fire.

I want to extend a special thank you to the impressive tours program volunteers: Patrick Higgins, Glen Stacell, John Kaiser, Dee Leonard, Gayle Norton, Andrew Tyler, Sam Peters, Tom DeFosses, Tom Maish, Jim Winger, Ted DeGroot, Don Leonard and David Boesche. The tours program would not be possible without their commitment. Additional thanks goes to Public Relations Chair Bruce Bunch, who pushed the press releases of all tours to the media.

Everglades Ultras and Fakahatchee make the list!

by Bob Becker, Everglades Ultras Race Director

A new book, “[Fifty Places to Run Before You Die](#),” includes only one race in Florida – our Everglades Ultras, number 19 on the list! The book is the latest addition to author Chris Santella’s many published books in the series, “*Fifty Places to ... Before You Die*.”

Although there are some slight inaccuracies and a few out-of-context quotes, overall the story is quite complimentary about the Park and the race, and should certainly give a positive boost of awareness to both. It's great fun to see our race included with the many elite and interesting races around the world that the author included. I do regret that not nearly enough trail-clearing credit was given to the Fearless Fakahackers and a little too much to “race volunteers.” *Sorry about that, Dino!*

News from the Strand

Cigar Orchid Restoration Project Explodes In Color *By Howard Lubel*



Bloom of cigar orchid. Photo ©Rich Leighton.

Finding a cigar orchid (*Cyrtopodium punctatum*) in flower is a stunning visual experience. Firstly a mature plant can be enormous, reaching two feet or more in diameter with pseudobulbs measuring 15 to 20 inches in length. Secondly, the flowers are a vivid splash of yellow and brown that can number from 50 to in excess of 200 on a single plant at the same time.

Unfortunately, due to logging, poaching and other causes, these iconic orchids have become difficult to find in the Fakahatchee. It has been estimated that at one point as few as 25 naturally occurring plants remained in the park's 85,000 acres. Now with a little help from their friends, this dismal count is changing in the orchid's favor.

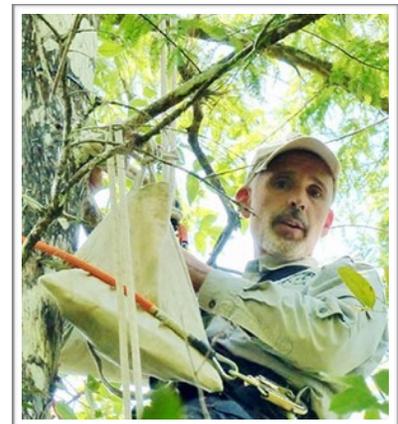
The cigar orchid restoration project in Fakahatchee was conceived in December 2006, when Matt Richards from Atlanta Botanical Garden (ABG) contacted then park manager and FOF board member, Dennis Giardina, about a collaborative effort to re-populate the park with these exquisite plants. Dennis and Park Biologist, Mike Owen, eagerly agreed. The project was about to begin.

Assessments of the remaining native plants were conducted by Mike and Dennis in a search for seed donors. A suitable donor, DG 19, was finally located and in 2009, a seed pod was collected and sent to Matt at ABG. Over the years other donor plants in Fakahatchee as well as a closely related plant in the Big Cypress were located. Unfortunately, one of our fellow human beings has since poached the Big Cypress donor. Seed pods were sent to ABG, seedlings became juvenile plants, were measured and documented and finally returned to Fakahatchee as pioneers in a grand experiment.

Between 2011 and 2015, approximately 200 juvenile cigar orchids were out-planted yearly in various remote locations in the park by dedicated researchers and volunteers. The plants were attached to cypress, pop ash and pond apple trees at various heights ranging from 4 feet to 20 feet.

Watching Dennis Giardina (photo at left), climb a 30 foot tall cypress tree using ropes and a harness to attach a 6-inch plant to a sunlit home is to view parental love at its best.

Approximately 1000 juvenile cigar orchids have now been re-introduced to the Fakahatchee through this collaborative effort. The plants are monitored annually, although not all sites may be assessed each year due to time limitations and the remoteness of the out-planting locations. This year's assessment began on April 16 under the supervision of Matt Richards and Mike Owen. Also lending support, expertise and sweat were Nick Ewy from Naples Botanical Garden and folks from Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens. Researchers from Florida International University also collect and maintain data on each plant.



Jay Staton, along with FOF members Dennis Giardina and Karen Relish, slogged through the swamp, stepped over cottonmouths and carried ladders for untold distances to document the success of the project. The FOF Highlifter was used to transport folks to remote locations allowing for more time for monitoring the plants. While 2017 was a tough year for all plants in the Fakahatchee due to the effects of Hurricane Irma, it appears that we have presently an approximate 40% survival rate. Another 400 cigar orchids in the Fakahatchee would be a true success story.

So, what was the reward for spending 12 hours a day in the swamp, carrying ladders and collecting data nonstop while side stepping alligator poop? Well, some of us got to see three of our wild, native cigars in full flower. The largest of these was DG 19 with 172 flowers. Some of us got to see number 35, an out-planted cigar approximately 7 years old, with 50 flowers. Some of us got to see a ghost orchid two days away from flowering, an extremely early bloomer. All of us got to see the Fakahatchee, a remote, wild and truly beautiful place.

Fearless FakaHacker Report

by Dino Barone

Ah, Spring Time in the Fakahatchee! While our northern friends continue to deal with their never ending winter, we have been enjoying temperatures in the mid to upper 80s. With very low relative humidity and no significant rainfall, the water in the park is rapidly evaporating. Most of our tram ditches are dry, allowing them to green up. Wading birds, owls and even the small mammal populations are thriving on remaining gatorholes that are still holding small fish populations.

In some of the gatorholes the resident lone gator is hoping to remain in its homestead, else they have to begin a search for new water, which will already be home to at least one other displaced gator. Evaporating bodies of water contain various sizes of gators, and at the beginning of mating season, some of the larger bull gators take exception to many of the new homesteaders. So begins the demonstration of social hierarchy among these reptiles. To me one of the coolest sounds in the swamp is the male gator's bellow. The larger the gator, the deeper the bellow. With any luck, two, three or even more gators will begin to bellow. *Ah, the swamp symphony has begun.* Sit back and enjoy the music.

Spring is also a time for rebirth. Never is this more evident than after a fire, whether it is a prescribed burn or a wildfire. Watching the resources recover as quickly as they do is beautiful. The park successfully did a prescribed burn in the west prairie at the end of January. Here we are 3 months later, with beautiful new green growth. The southwest section of the park endured a wildfire in early March. Four weeks after we explored the area; again, the recovery was spectacular.

This April the Park has been putting the final touches on the various trails for the fourth Fakahatchee Grind bike event which was held Sunday, April 22. In my humble biased opinion, the trails look AWESOME!

The Fakahatchee Grind has three events, one of which was a 44-mile backcountry ride all contained within the Fakahatchee. These riders encountered a wide range of terrain, from Janes Scenic Drive, the manicured west main tram, the dry prairies, cap rock in the uplands – and for the added bonus of a unique experience, mud tram was part of the route.

Around mid-morning one of our resident gators just wanted to peacefully bask on one of our trams while the trees and birds created nice harmonic sounds, only to have some of the early riders zoom past him. A few minutes later, the next handful of riders were rapidly approaching. Then Mr. Gator decided to oh, let's say exercise his rested voice, and began to loudly heckle the riders. This caused the riders to stop and dismount for the moment, and listen to the gator's pontification. When he was done, they passed the gator without incident, then got back on their bikes to continue their journey. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Gator grew tired of this disturbance upon his tranquil tram and slide back down into the quiet warm water to continue his nap.

Early afternoon we had a local rainstorm which brought some welcome relief from the heat. The events began at 8 AM, and by 4 PM all the riders from the three events had made it safely back to the start/finish line and had departed. From a volunteer's perspective all the participants that I had the opportunity to interact with were fun. I am looking forward to their next event in the Fakahatchee.

To Karlos, AI, all the participants of the Fakahatchee Grind, and to those who also helped with trail clearing over the last two months – Thank you! Everyone on the Fakahatchee staff and volunteers who rallied to make this go so smoothly, y'all are Rock Stars!

Summer weather is here, yet your FAKA-hackers will still be out and about most weekends working on projects in progress, or any new undertakings. If you happen to have some extra time and energies that you would like to volunteer please contact Ranger Extraordinaire Mike Duey at michael.duey@dep.state.fl.us or call 239-695-4593. We welcome all the summer time help.

Have a super duper Fakahatchee Awesome summer.

DINO, Fearless Fakahacker



*Proof positive how quickly nature recovers from a prescribed burn.
Photo by Dino Barone.*

You too can Volunteer at the Fakahatchee!
<http://orchidswamp.org/support/how-to-volunteer/>.

Seen in the Strand

A walk along the Big Cypress Boardwalk – March 2018

By Andrew Tyler

Whether you're a regular seasonal visitor to Southwest Florida or a year-round resident, being here in 2018 one cannot fail to be struck by the changes in our floral landscape wrought by Hurricane Irma in September 2017. While many of the impacts on personal and community properties have been cleaned up, the effects on trees and their branches will be with us for a long time to come.

Examples abound in Naples. The inventory of the City Arborist shows that about 9% of all trees on City property had to be removed after the storm. A second example is the Naples Botanical Garden in East Naples. The devastation among the trees and plantings was cleaned up in fairly short order thanks to the Garden's dedicated professionals, visiting arboreal specialists, and volunteers. What emerged was a landscape now lacking the extensive canopy shade that existed prior to Irma. Many of the perennial plantings, which had been strategically positioned to take advantage of each plant's preferences for sun and shade now found themselves in a far sunnier spot, and most did not fare well.

With these thoughts in mind, the last Friday in March presented an opportunity for me to visit the Big Cypress Boardwalk. Visitors are thinning out and the perennial spring changes to our flora are underway. I had not been on the boardwalk often this season, so it was a good opportunity to observe what's different this year.

You are likely well aware that some of the Friends of the Fakahatchee worked diligently to clear and repair the boardwalk and trail in the second half of September. The evidence of their hard work can only be fully appreciated when one compares what we see today with the scene immediately afterwards, [documented in this report by Patrick Higgins](#). The new Chickee immediately adjacent to the start of the Boardwalk is a great addition. I noticed it being enjoyed by at least two parties of visitors during my visit.

Gazing into the sky, as with the Naples Botanical Garden, the loss of canopy cover is quite striking. While many of the big trees have survived the onslaught, a lot of branches must have been lost to allow through the amount of light we see today. The impacts of increased illumination on the vegetation below remain to be seen.

A 'silver lining' from the visitor's perspective, however, is that it's now much easier to see what's going on in the lower-to-mid-levels of the vegetation. Whereas in the past one would hear a lot of scurrying around and bird activity, being able to identify their sources depended largely on luck and perhaps some knowledge of bird song. Today it's much easier to see even the smaller birds scurrying around, and the views of the epiphytic plants are far superior.

We're at the end of the usual Bromeliad blooming season, but there were numerous cardinal air plant (*Tillandsia fasciculata*) examples along the boardwalk still in full bloom. Raising one's eyes from the ground, the epiphytes that enjoy the 10-20 ft off the ground zone are also thriving. Many of the needle-leaf epiphytes are showing that reddish tinge that goes with the time of year.



Blue skies and newly emergent spring growth above the Big Cypress



Red bellied woodpecker, much easier to see with less vegetation, inspect a pre-Irma dead tree, with newly-emerged Cypress needles in the background.

continued >>>



A collection of epiphytic bromeliads enjoying life in the upper canopy at Big Cypress Boardwalk.

There are two epiphytic Dingy Star orchids that live close to the far end of the boardwalk; one has red leaves and the other has green. Both were flowering on the day of my visit, and it is interesting to note that they are blooming somewhat later than the examples of the same species we observe on the weekly swamp walks 3 or 4 miles to the north. Why this might be is mere speculation, but they are thriving. One hopes that they continue to do so during the summer, since they will surely receive far more summer solar radiation now than a year ago.

At ground level I noticed a lot of ferns thriving in the areas currently lacking standing water. There have always been ferns here, of course,

but whether they're more noticeable because they enjoy the changed circumstances, or merely appear so because it is so much brighter remains to be seen.



Two dingy star orchids (*Epidendrum amphistomum*), Green-leaved (left) and Red-leaved, in full bloom just off the boardwalk.

Reaching the platform by the alligator hole, I noticed the local large alligator in mid-pool, just finishing lunch. My guess is it was a turtle, judging from the delicious 'crunching sounds' coming from the mouth end, but it declined to surface again for a photo opportunity.

A single blue heron was the only wading bird present and patience was rewarded, for the bird succeeded in catching a tasty fish for lunch. I'm always astonished at the seemingly impossible size of fish these birds manage to swallow. There seems to be a certain amount of stunning the fish (or killing it) by 'slapping it around' beforehand, presumably so that it doesn't wriggle so much on the way down. This bird was kind enough to demonstrate, then pose dramatically for photo opportunities before finally downing the fish.

Continued >>>



Blue heron enjoying a fresh fish lunch at the alligator hole.



A family of Florida banded water snakes appeared to be in residence, and their relatively small sizes suggest that these are perhaps one year olds. I did not get an accurate count of their number; there was a lot of coming and going around their favorite log. I would estimate six animals visible during my stay.

A juvenile water snake enjoying a swim in the alligator hole. Fortunately the snake was a sufficient distance from the heron to avoid being a lunch target!

A striking difference this year is the color of the water in the alligator hole. The water is very obviously green. Presumably this is a result of increased light levels at the water's surface allowing enhanced photosynthesis among both algae and small plants. Not my area of expertise, but the coloration seemed restricted to the water itself, as opposed to small clumps of duckweed, for example. This leads me to assume we're looking at the results of enhanced algal growth.

Algal growth could have positive or negative consequences for life around the pond, or both, or none at all! Most Floridians are aware of 'red tide' at the beaches. Red tide is caused by marine algae [Karenia brevis](#), that under certain conditions undergo rapid growth, a process also known as 'blooming'.

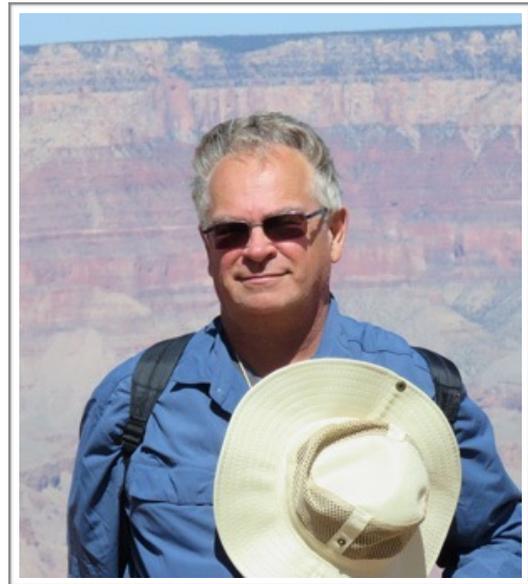
Less well-known is the fact that freshwater algal blooms pose more of a human health threat. Some, but not all, species of freshwater algae can release chemicals that are highly toxic to most animals, including humans. These events can happen anywhere in North America. For example, Toledo, Ohio had to shut down its civic water supply in 2014 as a result of [toxic algal blooms on Lake Erie](#).

These algal blooms are usually caused by abundance of nutrients and sunshine. In Florida, Lake Okeechobee annually suffers this problem to varying degrees, because of nutrients present in the lake's waters as a consequence of local agricultural practices.

If the bloom uses up certain nutrients, it can cause the algae to die. Although algal blooms oxygenate water as a bi-product of photosynthesis, mass decomposition can lead to oxygen depletion and fish-kill. Blooms can also shade the aquatic plants growing beneath the surface and reduce their growth opportunities. It's clearly very complicated, but it will be interesting to keep eyes on the alligator hole to see if there are any noticeable longer-term consequences to this mini-ecosystem.

I highly recommend taking some time to check out the Boardwalk of our favorite State Park before the mosquitoes hatch. I'd love to hear about your own observations.

Andrew Tyler was elected to the FOF Board of Directors this spring.



Membership News

Thank you Craig Britton

By Francine Stevens

I had a long chat with long-time member Craig Britton, owner of the cabin on East Main trail affectionately called the "Fakahatchee Hilton." I want to again thank Craig for letting the FOF bring small groups to the cabin's site, as this has been a good source of private tour donations. And I remind everyone who ventures to the cabin to be respectful of Craig's property and leave only foot prints behind.



Annual Members Meeting Dinner



Park Manager Steve Houseknecht talked about the impact of fires in the Fakahatchee.



FOF Executive Director Francine Stevens, engaging speaker Conservancy of Southwest Florida Naturalist Tonya Zadrozny, and Horatio, the Red Tail Hawk.

President Patrick Higgins briefed the members about the election results at the Annual Members Meeting. He also outlined the busy FOF summer season ahead.

The Board of Directors elected the following as officers:

President – Patrick Higgins
Vice President – Glen Stacell
Treasurer – Scott Geltemeyer
Secretary – Ken Shapiro

The Board also welcomes new members Andrew Tyler and Paul Joslyn, and salutes Tom Maish and Don Leonard for their additional term on the Board. For a complete listing of our Board members and committees, visit our website: <http://orchidswamp.org/about-fof/board-and-committees/>.

Thank you to all FOF members who took the time to respond to the voting Ballot sent via e-mail in March.

All Annual Meeting photos by Bruce Bunch.

**Members make a difference.
Thanks to our lifetime and business members!**

Lifetime Preservers

Bruce & Janet Bunch

Lifetime Individual Members

Karen Berkley
Rita Bleasdale
Warner Blow
Elsie Caldwell
Peter Haffenreffer
Don Harmon
Susan Hauze
Patty Huff
James Nici
Wendy Becker Payton
Ken Shapiro
Carol Vartanian

Lifetime Family Members

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

Business Patrons

North American Canoe Tours
(Ivey House B&B)
Shurr Adventures

Business Benefactor

Everglades Day Safari

Bald Eagles nesting off the side of the Boardwalk



The Bald Eagles were the stars during my visit to the boardwalk, but there were also plenty of other critters to see including other raptors, Ibis, snakes and gators. It is worth a stop if driving across Tamiami Trail.

Doug-in-SF, San Francisco, California

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Our mailing address is:

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PO Box 35, Everglades City, FL 34139



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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