



The Ghost Writer

JANUARY 2012

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

EVENTS

GUIDED SWAMP WALKS

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Saturday

Cost: \$70 (\$50 for members)

Reservations Required.

Phone (239) 695-1023

or email islandgirlm@msn.com

VOLUNTEER WORK DAYS

2nd Saturday, 3rd Tuesday

Saturday, January 14

Tuesday, January 17

See article on page 6

BOARD MEETING

Sunday, Jan 15, 10:00 a.m.

Ranger Station, Copeland

For info, phone (305) 588-9886

EVERGLADES ULTRAS

Saturday, Jan 21, from 6:00 a.m.

50m, 50k, 25k marathons

See www.Evergladesultras.com

COASTAL CRUISE

Saturday, Jan 21, from 3:00 p.m.

Boat Trip to Fakahatchee Island

For info, phone (239) 695-2905

PLAN AHEAD

Feb 11: Everglades Paddle-In

Feb 11/12: Bluegrass Fest

Feb 25: Coastal Cruise

Feb 26: Everglades Bike Ride

March 10: Coastal Cruise

March 25: Members' Picnic

March 25: Coastal Cruise

April 15: Annual Dinner

For info, phone (239) 695-2905 or see www.orchidswamp.org where you can make reservations and download the calendar of events.

M.O.ZONE - Seen Around the Strand

On 12/7/11, around 4:30PM, John Kalafarski, volunteer, observed a **Southern Bald Eagle** fly northwest over Strand Swamp near Gate 17. On 12/9/11, around 10AM, Mike Owen observed approximately 700 **Tree Swallows** flying west northwest then to east over Park Headquarters area. On 12/9/11, in the early evening, Steve Houseknecht, Park Services Specialist, observed a **Bobcat** on JSD near Gate 17 area.

On 12/10/11, during a Swamp Walk, Mike Owen observed a dead ~18 inch long **Two-toed Amphiuma**, a type of salamander in the ditch. On 12/12/11, in the afternoon, Renee Rau, Park Manager, observed a very sluggish ~ 20 inch long **Two-toed Amphiuma** on the East Main Tram.

On 12/12/11, Linda and Steve Koreny, volunteers, around 9:30AM observed a **Roseate Spoonbill** flying to West over canal on US-41 about a mile West of the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk and on 12/22/11 around 3:30PM observed 4 **Roseate Spoonbills** on the south side of US-41 between the boardwalk and US-41/SR-29.

On 12/14/11, starting at around 10:53AM to 11:29AM, during the Fakahatchee Christmas Bird Count (CBC) Mike Owen, Tom and Richard Trotta, and Jeff Compton, CBC volunteers, observed two **Florida Panthers** just past the big curve near the end of the JSD walking on and off the drive.

On 12/20/11 around 900AM west of the boardwalk, Karen Relish observed a **Southern Bald Eagle** adult flying from the South to East along US-41 East Bound lane with fish in its talons which it seemed to drop so it could fly above and out of the way of traffic.

On 12/20/11, Pat Weber, volunteer, while on JSD from 12:40PM to 2:35PM, observed 5 **American Crows**, ~70 **Tree Swallows** flying NE to SW over the drive, a **Great Egret**, a 3.5 foot long **Yellow Rat Snake**, 2 live **Landlubbers**, a **Florida Chicken Turtle** on a log with a 7" carapace, and a **Belted Kingfisher**.

If you want to report sightings, contact Park biologist Mike Owen or his assistant Karen Relish by phone at (239) 695-2886.



This is the new 20-foot bench on the Boardwalk. See the report about the platform reconstruction and more photos on pages 3-4.

Visit www.orchidswamp.org for events, newsletters, colored tram map, history, and more.

A Rare Fakahatchee Inhabitant

by Dennis Giardina

The Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park is home to many interesting plants and animals. Some, like the ghost orchid and the Florida panther, are almost emblematic of the rich biodiversity of the cypress swamp forest and the uplands of the northern three quarters of the Preserve. Others aren't as well known, like the dollar orchid and the American crocodile of the mangrove swamp forests and backwaters of the southern quarter of the Preserve where freshwater gradually becomes more brackish as it flows into the 10,000 Islands and the Gulf of Mexico. In and around Fakahatchee Bay exists an almost other-worldly aquatic denizen of the Fakahatchee, the smalltooth sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*).

Smalltooth sawfish are elasmobranches, part of the shark, skate and ray family and they are one of eight species that inhabit tropical and subtropical areas of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Sawfish resemble sharks but the bottom of the front half of their body is flat with the gills and mouth located underneath them like rays. They are all characterized by a long, saw-like appendage or rostrum that is enervated with sensors and studded with sharp teeth that they use in various ways to slash and catch the fish and invertebrates they eat. Smalltooth sawfish are "euryhaline" or able to tolerate a wide range of water salinities, including fresh water. Many species of sawfish swim far up rivers into lakes and are sometimes cut off from regress to the sea. There is a resident population of smalltooth sawfish in Lake Nicaragua.

Around the Vernal Equinox, big female sawfish answer an ancient call and swim up rivers, including perhaps the East and Fakahatchee Rivers, and give birth to between 15 and 20 pups. The pups are about two feet long at birth and are born with a temporary sheath, surrounding the rostrum. The juvenile sawfish stay in the rivers and backwaters for a couple of years until they reach a length of five to six feet. Then, they start making their way out into open water where they can eventually grow to over twenty feet long.

Smalltooth sawfish are a relatively long-lived but slow-growing species that were once common in the shallow waters around the entire coast of Florida but now are mostly encountered from the Indian River Lagoon on the Atlantic Coast to Charlotte Harbor on the Gulf Coast. Smalltooth sawfish are listed endangered species and around the world, nearly all sawfish species are declining due to overfishing and the destruction of coastal habitats. Sawfish populations in Florida waters plummeted, during the 20th Century. They were an especially vulnerable "bycatch," of gill nets set for commercial fish species. Ensnared sawfish that weren't killed often had the rostrum cut off their head and were tossed back into the water.

Over the past few years I've had a chance to work with a group of FWC researchers led by Dr. Gregg Poulakis, studying smalltooth sawfish reproduction in the Caloosahatchee, Peace and Myakka Rivers. Their research is already starting to provide a better understanding of the habits and habitat needs of juvenile sawfish.

For more information about smalltooth sawfish in Florida, including where to report a sighting, go to website <http://myfwc.com/research/saltwater/fish/sawfish>.



Historical photos courtesy of Florida State Archives, Photographic Collection (www.floridamemory.com).



Dennis Giardina is the Everglades Region Biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and was formerly the Park Manager of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve

BOARDWALK NEWS

Observation Platform Replacement – Final Report

by Nelson A. Tilden, photos by Dick Hughes

In late November it was determined that the observation platform was no longer safe. Ranger Jeff Kneisley met with District 4 Construction Manager Hank Woodmancy and me to make that determination and to start the planning process. Mr. Woodmancy provided drawings for the new structure, including stronger beams and additional pilings. Ranger Jeff worked on a materials list and estimated the costs of the project.

Both Park rangers and volunteers were involved in tearing down the old structure – which was done in two days. Only six pilings remained usable and three had to be entirely replaced. Over the next few days five new pilings were installed using old-fashioned posthole diggers. This involved working in water about 3' deep and then digging holes about 4 to 5 feet into the muck. Ranger Steven Bass did the important, but unthinkable, work of diving under the water (in an alligator hole!) to cut large roots which kept the pilings from going down far enough. Ranger Steve Houseknecht did a lot of the post-hole digging. Both rangers were invaluable in the process of putting in new pilings, including transporting many loads of crushed rock the entire length of the boardwalk. Volunteer Steve Koreny assisted in the carrying of materials, as did volunteer Glen Stacell and ranger Jeff Kneisley.

Three volunteers were present each day of the three week project. The team, which has been maintaining the boardwalk since Hurricane Wilma in 2005, consists of Dick Hughes, Bud Scott and myself. Dick was the leader of the project and made sure everything was "square and level." We called him the "Precision man." It was fun and challenging for us to be involved in an ambitious project of this magnitude.

Following the completion of the pilings, the new platform was built on three very large beams made of four layers of 2 X 10's sandwiched together and measuring about 30 feet long. These were built entirely with us standing in the water because they would have been too heavy to lift otherwise. Following the beams were the stringers and railing posts, then the decking boards.

Decking the platform was done in two days. Railings were then installed using a new feature – vertical balusters. The final process was to build two new benches, one nine feet long, the other twenty feet long. The entire project was completed to meet State and ADA specifications.

In addition to the platform, we demolished and rebuilt about 20' of boardwalk leading to the platform because that portion was also in poor condition.

The whole project was completed at 4:00 p.m. on December 21, 2011, and there were visitors on the platform as soon as we could get our tools and scrap wood picked up.

I want to thank the volunteers and Park rangers that played important roles in getting this platform back open for our visitors. Park Manager Renee Rau deserves many thanks for making the project a priority, when so many other things were demanding ranger time.

Visitors have been very complimentary about the new platform. We were happy to have it open by Christmas and are glad to have it available for our high tourist season which is about to start.



December 13, 2011



December 14, 2011



December 16, 2011

MORE photos on the next page ...

BOARDWALK NEWS

We received the following email on December 22 from Renee Rau, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve manager:

ENDLESS THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO HELPED WITH THE BOARDWALK!

I can't get over the quality of work and the quick turnaround time. Each and every one of you went above and beyond to make this happen and it looks amazing. This is certainly the best Christmas present we could give our visitors!!! The boardwalk is packed once again and you can all take credit for this major accomplishment.

I am so lucky and grateful to work with the best CSO, volunteers and staff there is!

Renée M. Rau



December 16, 2011



December 20, 2011



FIRST VISITORS, December 21, 2011

DECEMBER REPORT

The most exciting news of December is the completion of the observation platform at the end of the Boardwalk. What a big accomplishment in a short amount of time!

Boardwalk volunteers Dick Hughes, Bud Scott and Nelson Tilden put in 4 solid weeks of 9-4 work days to get the project completed in time for the holiday season. Park rangers and other volunteers pitched in to estimate and order materials, haul lumber and limestone, wade waist deep in the water, dig and line post holes and help get the project underway according to the specs of the Park Service. It required hard physical labor, a willingness to get very dirty, and the courage to work in an alligator hole with the two local 'residents' closely observing!

Thanks to park manager Renee Rau; rangers Jeff Kneisley, Steven Bass, and Steve Houseknecht; and volunteers Steve Koreny and Glen Stacell. Thanks also to Kathy Hatch and Linda Korney for providing interpretation, and Edite Highes for keeping the boardwalk swept and looking nice all the time. People come to the boardwalk from all over the world, especially during the winter season, and we appreciate everyone who contributes to their experience in any way.

The result of all this effort is a sturdy new platform worthy of the crowds that will gather during the busy winter season. Two benches, one 20 feet long, the other 9 feet, are the welcomed resting place for as many as 600 visitors a day who make the full 1.2 mile walk from their cars out and back again. The new platform and new 20 foot boardwalk section approaching it are just the beginning of what needs to happen on the boardwalk. We are very grateful for the support of the State Park and the Friends of the Fakahatchee and all the visitors who make contributions in the donation box.

We have had two panther sightings on the boardwalk during the month. One sighting by a photographer was too brief to get a picture. The eagles appear to be on eggs with hatching estimated to be in mid January. The ospreys have been seen around the nest as well as the red shouldered hawks at the nest just beyond the twin bald cypresses. Our mother alligator and 10 babies continue to be a real attraction. Clearly we have a lot to see. Come and be a part of it.

Caryl Tilden, Boardwalk naturalist



READY FOR VISITORS, December 21, 2011.

Nelson & Caryl Tilden, Bud Scott, Edite & Dick Hughes, and Ranger Jeff Kneisley, photo by Tom Maish.

President's Message

As the weather cools and the mosquitoes disappear, its time for everyone to get back into the park to visit favorite places and to discover places that will become new favorites. With all the Fakahatchee has to offer, there is no shortage of those special walks and views. One of the most special of these to many visitors, both new and returning, is the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk. It is the most visited place in the entire park. Thanks to a small and very dedicated group of FOF members, this year's visitors will be treated to a boardwalk trip to a safer and newly-rebuilt observation platform. Years of exposure to natural elements coupled with ever increasing foot traffic finally resulted in the immediate need to demolish and rebuild both the platform and its adjacent area. The observation platform was closed and blocked to public access due to safety issues in late November. With peak season nearing, immediate action was required.

A financial commitment made by FOF to the demolition and rebuilding costs coupled with help from the park was only the starting point. The biggest question was "who is going to do the work?" The answer, of course, was found right within our membership. The boardwalk had been repaired and maintained for years by a volunteer group and those folks stepped up again when the need was great. The group, including Dick Hughes, Nelson Tilden and Bud Scott, worked in knee deep water for weeks to both demolish the unsafe area and to construct a safe platform to state specifications. These folks, as well as other volunteers and park rangers, who worked on this project have my most sincere thanks. The work was difficult and lengthy. I have seen the pictures. As a result of the commitment made by these volunteers, the boardwalk is completely open so that our many visitors can fully enjoy this slice of the Fakahatchee. Congratulations.

When writing about the boardwalk, the boardwalk facilities development project is never far from mind. Your board of directors is considering the commitment of a substantial amount of FOF funds to move this project beyond its conceptual stage into raising the money necessary for groundbreaking. This project will require both volunteer time and dedication not to mention money, if we are to be successful. As a small organization, this project may be too big for us to accomplish. Your board hopes it isn't but needs your help if we are to move forward. Many of you have seen the original conceptual plans for this exciting new facility that will greatly enhance the visitor experience and rid us of the need for the somewhat less-than-attractive port-a-lets, which presently greet our visitors at the beginning of their walk.

If you think this project is worth the Friends time and money, please help us to see it through. Write me at lubelm@aol.com or call me at 305 588-9886. We may not be able to do this without you.

See you in the swamp.
Howard Lubel

BUSY SATURDAY!

The first events on our active 2012 schedule take place on **SATURDAY, JANUARY 21.**

The day starts early in the morning with the **EVERGLADES ULTRAS** trail races through the Fakahatchee. Runners will tackle 50 miles or 50 km, or 25 km. FOF is providing volunteers to support them at rest stops. For info, see www.evergladesultras.com.

A bit later in the day, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., FOF will have a table at **ART-IN-THE-GLADES** in Everglades City. This informal arts & crafts sale in McLeod Park includes live music and hot dogs for lunch. For info, phone Marya at (239) 695-2905.

In the afternoon, FOF hosts a **COASTAL CRUISE** to historic Fakahatchee Island. Meet at Everglades National Park in Everglades City at 3:00 p.m. On the island, a naturalist will point out unusual flora as we hike up the shell mound to an old cemetery. Cost is \$75 per person and you can book at www.orchidswamp.org.

Congratulations to NOS

The Naples Orchid Society, of which FOF member Kit Kitchen-Maran is president, has a new website to broadcast its activities. NOS celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2012 with a "Kickoff" Event on **Thursday, February 2.** For info, see www.naplesorchidsociety.org.



VACANCY ON THE BOARD

Due to the recent passing of John Winebrenner, an unexpected vacancy exists on the board of directors which should be filled by appointment by the remaining directors. Any full member in good standing is eligible. The board would like to fill this vacancy within the next 30 days. If you are interested in helping the FOF achieve its goals and want more information on the position, contact Howard Lubel at lubelm@aol.com.

An Unexpected Holiday Gift

In early December, the FOF received a most unexpected but appreciated surprise gift from the Horatio B. Ebert Charitable Foundation located in Mooresville, North Carolina. At the recommendation of Catherine Ebert, a Trustee, the Foundation made a \$2500 donation to honor long time FOF member, Craig Britton. Craig has been an active supporter of the Friends and park activities for some time. As co-owner of the Fakahatchee Hilton, also known as Ballard camp, Craig has made the camp available for years to park staff and FOF volunteers conducting the central slough survey and a host of other scientific activities. FOF sends its thanks to Craig for all his support and especially to the Horatio B. Ebert Charitable Foundation for its most generous gift.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

We have 328 memberships plus 35 Introductory members. Reminders for the 4th quarter were sent in December. Renewal letters for the 1st quarter will be posted with this newsletter.

The new membership categories created by the Board are now listed on the form below and on our website where you can pay with a credit/debit card.

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

Rodney Johnson, Arlington, VA
Frank Lund, Jupiter
Susan Naselli, Ft Myers
David Pickering, Naples
Marc Ravas, Strongsville, OH

FOF's First Lifetime Member

The Friends of Fakahatchee send their warm holiday greetings and thanks to James Nici for renewing his membership as FOF's first lifetime member. The opportunity for lifetime membership was created by the Board of Directors in December, 2011. James is a well-known and respected attorney in Naples specializing in real property, wills, trusts and estate planning. Many thanks to James Nici.



VOLUNTEER CORNER

by Dino Barone



Above is the wonderful group of extremely motivated and hard-working volunteers on Saturday, December 10, when we drove up JSD and cleared culverts and opened up "windows" into the Fakahatchee for all visitors to enjoy.

The next work days are:

Saturday, Jan 14: Trim and treat Brazilian Pepper on East Main Tram above the cabin.

Tuesday, Jan 17: continue trimming on East Main Tram.

Be at the ranger station by 9:00 a.m. Our typical work day ends around 1:00 p.m. Bring gloves, snacks, drinks. If you can help, please email me at sunnyg8tr@aol.com.

What Are We? Who Are We?

The **Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc.**, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation, is the Citizen Support Organization of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, 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 Friends of Fakahatchee strive to aid in the preservation of this ecologically unique area and to educate the public about its importance.

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 300 copies.

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Tom Maish Cynthia Peters

Frank Denninger
Glen Stacell

Dennis Giardina
Francine Stevens

Cindy Hackney
Charles Wright

Howard Lubel

LIFETIME MEMBERS: James Nici

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) ☐ Patron (\$100) ☐ Benefactor (\$500)
☐ Lifetime Individual (\$1,000) ☐ Lifetime Family (\$1,500) ☐ Protector (\$2,500) ☐ Preserver (\$5,000)
☐ Business Patron (\$200) ☐ Business Benefactor (\$500) ☐ Extra Donation (\$ _____)
☐ Youth (\$10) under 18 (birth date: month ____ day ____ year ____)

NAME _____

EMAIL _____

STREET / P.O.BOX: _____

ALTERNATE ADDRESS

CITY _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

PHONE _____

PHONE _____

MONTHS AT ALTERNATE ADDRESS:

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