

The Ghost Writer

JANUARY 2014

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

EVENTS

MAKE YOUR RESERVATIONS for our activities at www.orchidswamp.org

GUIDED SWAMP WALKS

\$50/member, \$70/non-member Reservations Required. for schedule, see www.orchidswamp.org

GHOST RIDER TRAM TOURS

Tuesdays and 1st Saturday at 10am

\$25/person, Reservations Required.

COASTAL CRUISES

Tues, Feb 18, 2:30pm Wed, March 19, 2:30pm

wed, March 19, 2:50pm

\$75/person, Reservations Required.

ART IN THE PRESERVE

Saturday, January 18
Saturday, February 15
Saturday, March 15
Saturday, April 19

See article at right for details.

BOARD MEETING

Sunday, January 12, 10 a.m.

Ranger Station, Copeland

ULTRA MARATHON

Saturday, February 22

see www.evergladesultras.com

FAKAHATCHEE ORCHIDS:

LOST & FOUND IN CUBA

Saturday, March 1, 5:00pm SAVE THE DATE!!!

See article in right column.

You can download the handy FOF events calendar from our website www.orchidswamp.org



prior to his talk on December 7 to a record crowd. Francine told the author that she wore the boots even at "dress up" FOF events to symbolize the outdoor focus of the organization. "Most people never even notice," she admitted. See the President's Message on page 3.

Art in the Preserve – En Plein Air

Join us for a day of nature and art on **Saturday**, **January 18**, from 10AM to 2PM. We'll be starting at the park headquarters which offers several possibilities for sketching. Fellow sketcher and park ranger Karen Relish will be on hand to answer any questions about history, flora, and fauna.

This event is limited to 12 participants, RSVP required. Children are welcome, if accompanied by an adult guardian. We will meet on the third Saturday during the season at a different locations. For info, to add your name to our mailing list, or to make a reservation, call Karen Relish at 239-695-2886 or email Elizabeth Smith at lizardart@gmail.com.

NEW FULL MOON TRAM TOURS SOLD OUT



Propelled by coverage on the first page of the *Naples Daily News* "Perspective" section, the new Friends of Fakahatchee Full Moon Tram tours are sold out for the season. Since there are only three full moons during "season" rarity may also have played a role in

the success of the new way to see the Fakahatchee. All 60 tickets were purchased from the www.orchidswamp.org site by December 9.

While the night rides are sold out, tickets still are available for the daytime tram tours in February and March which give riders a naturalist-led tour of the Fakahatchee with several stops. For dates, details, and reservations, check www.orchidswamp.org Photo of wood stork in the full moon by Glen Stacell.

SAVE THE DATE!!!

Plan to join us on **Saturday, March 1**, when we continue our evening lecture series about the effort to restore rare orchids in the Fakahatchee. Speakers are Dennis Giardina, FWC Regional Biologist, and Mike Owen, Park Biologist. Their adventures in Cuba are part of the story.



Details will be announced in our next issue ...

M.O.ZONE - Seen Around the Strand

On both 11/2/13 and 11/13/13, early in the morning, John Kellam, visitor, observed a Roseate Spoonbill flying from Southeast to Northwest over the beginning of Janes Scenic Drive (JSD). On 11/15/13, around 10AM, Steve Houseknecht, Park Services Specialist, observed 2 American Bitterns in the West Prairies. On 11/8/13, around 3PM, a visitor observed an adult Florida Panther on Jones Grade.

On 11/9/13, around 10AM, Steven Bass, Park Ranger, heard 2 Sandhill Cranes calling while flying North to Southeast over East Main near the Fakahatchee Hilton. On 11/13/13, around noon, Renee Rau, Park Manager, and Steve Houseknecht observed a Florida Black Bear off of SR29 and US41. On 12/1/13, in the morning, Mike Cullinan, visitor, observed a Florida Panther on JSD in close proximity to a **Great Blue Heron** with the Panther seemingly chase after the Heron before it flew.

On 12/1/13, around 8:30AM, a foggy morning, Anthony C. Humpage, visitor from England, also observed a Florida Panther (see his photo below) approximately a half mile north of the East Main Tram on JSD. On 12/3/13, around 11AM, Don and Dee Leonard, volunteers, observed a Florida Black Bear going back and forth on JSD near Gate 16/Mud Tram. On 12/3/13, around 1:30PM, Ken Evans, visitor, observed and photographed a Big Cypress Fox Squirrel on JSD past Gate 16. On 12/6/13, Ray Carroll observed a Big Cypress Fox Squirrel just off the drive near Gate 2 and a Bald Eagle fly over Four Stakes Prairie.

On 12/13/13, in the afternoon, Mike Owen, Biologist, observed 11 Hooded Mergansers in the ditch along JSD. On 12/14/13, in the afternoon, while in Dan House Prairie, Linda Koreny, volunteer, observed a Loggerheaded Shrike on the power lines and about an 18-inch Florida Cottonmouth in her path. On 12/16/13, around 2:30PM, Mike Owen and Tom Trotta observed a 200-350 pound Florida Black Bear along Prairie Canal eating fruit from a 12-15ft high Cabbage Palm.

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



Thanks to English visitor Anthony C. Humpage for this photo of a Florida Panther that he saw on Janes Scenic Drive (see M.O.ZONE above).



Male Roseate Skimmer dragonfly seen on the Boardwalk (read the report on page 3).

FIELD TRIP REPORT

by Karen Relish with Martha Kriek and Mike Owen

On Saturday December 7, 2013, about 30 field trip participants including coordinator Martha Kriek and members/students/parents from Audubon Young Birders Club and Big Cypress Elementary joined Mike Owen, Karen Relish, Virginia Roseberry, and Cyril Marks on a data collecting mission.

In late May there was a prescribed burn on the marl prairie, west of Janes Scenic Drive. The participants were collecting data specifically on that burned area. Using 10 foot poles as guides, they covered four 10 foot wide fire transects each about 600-800 feet long. The 4 groups tallied numbers of Apple Snail shells, Crayfish exoskeletons and burrows, Marsh Rabbit pellets and Fire Ant mounds.

They also recorded other opportunistic observations such as a Striped-mud turtle and Florida box turtle carapace, a Lubber grasshopper and blooming Spider lilies. Along the way, Great Egrets, White Ibis, Immature Little Blue Herons, Redshouldered Hawks and a Common Yellowthroat were spotted. We also headed out through the Gambusia filled ditch to a cypress dome.

Participants contributed valuable data and enjoyed the "chance to get muddy" followed by a brown bag lunch on the visitor center grounds. This field trip provided an engaging and educational opportunity for local families to learn about and appreciate the unique ecosystems of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. See photo on page 6.

BOARDWALK REPORT

by Linda Koreny

Last January I wrote this for *The Ghost Writer*: "I have found it (BCB) to be an amazing place ... it never fails to be an interesting place to spend some time. And it seems that any time of the day there are visitors." I could easily write the same thing today and probably with greater emphasis.

The Florida Bald Eagles appear to be nesting as well as the Osprey. It seems to be a great year to see birds of all kinds including Green and Great Blue Herons, Anhingas, White Ibis, Great Egrets, Red Shouldered Hawks and numerous smaller birds. In addition, three juvenile American Alligators have been occupying the ponds on either side of the picnic tables while two adult Alligators have claimed the pond at the observation platform.

Recently a photo of a **Roseate Skimmer Dragonfly** was captured at the BCB (see page 2). Donna Day & Ernie Winn, volunteers at Fakahatchee, shared this information:

"The coloring of the male is striking with his lavender thorax and purple or red eyes and bright pink abdomen. Both sexes are about two inches in length.

This dragonfly likes to perch horizontally or obliquely and will pick a stick or similar vegetation near water. The males are keenly intent on having the best perch possible and will aggressively chase out other dragonflies to gain a coveted perch.

The egg-laying technique of the females involves flicking eggs in water droplets towards the shore or some type of vegetation. These beautiful, delicate creatures gravitate to water and live in or near marshes, ponds, lakes, and ditches."

One afternoon a Boardwalk visitor pointed out this tiny green **treefrog** on the back of one of the benches.

Looking at the UF website, I found this:

"Their toes have adhesive disks that allow them to climb easily on bark or twigs. The green treefrog is usually bright green, but its color may vary to yellow, dull green, or slate grey when it is hidden



or inactive. A yellow or white stripe that varies in length, may extend farther along the body on one side than on the other, or may be lacking entirely. Many individual green treefrogs have golden colored spots on their backs."

About 5 p.m. on Sunday, December 15, several visitors, one from Munich, Germany, were very excited to report seeing a **Florida Black Bear** on the east side of observation platform who seemed to inhabit the area for quite some time but not quite long enough for me to get there!

All creatures bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all creatures – oh so fascinating!

The Boardwalk maintenance volunteers have been very busy this month replacing quite a number of rotted boards on the deck, railings and one of the benches. This is a challenging environment!

President's Message

by Francine Stevens

Lately I've had my boots on, something I wish I could do more often.

I had the pleasure of assisting **Patrick Higgins** on the first FOF Coastal Cruise of the season to Fakhatchee Island. FOF is



very fortunate to now have Patrick's help leading our tours and it's wonderful for **Glen Stacell** to have such a qualified partner to fulfill FOF's mission to educate the public about preserving the Fakahatchee. Patrick is a National

Association for Interpretation (NAI) Certified Interpreter Guide, Florida Master Naturalist and has a combined degree in Biology & Environmental Science. Patrick is also American Red Cross Adult & Child First Aid/CPR/AED certified, a 'permitted' member of the Python Patrol Network, and is a USCG licensed Captain, but Patrick doesn't talk much about his accreditation; instead he speaks louder by his actions and his professional conduct. FOF is very well represented by Patrick.

I also had the pleasure of going on a long swamp walk

with **Mike Owen** and a group of six visitors and also **Linda Koreny** and **Gene Roseberry**, both Park volunteers, who have been assisting tour leaders. I learned so much on this swamp



walk that I wish I had the capacity to retain every bit of information Mike so patiently shared with us. Given how many times he's repeated the same info over and over again Mike's enthusiasm is still insatiable and infectious; before you know it Mike had us all participating in his data collection and, because of our newly assigned responsibility, we were all paying more attention to details and discovered so much more than what we expected. It was fun to see how proud we were when we could point things out to Mike and be validated by his approval. Three of the visitors had done a swamp walks with FOF before and were back for more; they told us they truly enjoyed their day and they will be back again. Mike O. was on his 441st swamp walk – I suspect he's finally getting the hang of it!

It is when I have my boots on that I re-charge my battery; there is an enormous sense of well being that takes over me when I'm in the swamp, peace and tranquility takes over and all my worries are temporarily disengaged as my brain is too busy absorbing the visual beauty of being "in" the Fakahatchee.

As I close this letter I want to thank all of you who attended the Welcome-Back dinner. It was another very nice evening; speaker **Gary Schmelz** good stories and good humor were inspiring. I sure enjoyed everyone with whom I had a chance to chat and I appreciate your encouragement and support – it did put a good spring in my step!

Wishing you all happiness, health, and peace in the coming New Year.

Under the Dome

by Patrick Higgins

For a change of scene I decided to visit a cypress dome instead of a prairie hammock. The mid-December day I choose coincided with the passage of a rapidly moving cold-front, so I set off under a grey sky. I had noticed a classic dome on Copeland Prairie on a previous excursion and thought it would be fun to investigate as domes are really the opposites of tree islands, as I shall later explain. My target was located $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles up the track running north from the first bend of Jane's Scenic Drive.

I had expected the Prairie to be essentially dry like Lee-Cypress across the road, so was lazily sporting calf-high Wellington boots appropriate for muddy English country walks, but which would fill with water if overtopped. As it turned out several inches of water remained, perhaps because of JSD's damming effect. I found that I had to teeter-totter along the track's central ridge to avoid sections where the ruts were perilously deep - something I wouldn't have thought twice about if I was wearing my regular 'wet' boots. But this gave me the opportunity to observe the little mosquito fish that had been concentrated in them and only weeks before were spread all across the Prairie

Dull light isn't the best to appreciate the Florida landscape, but to either side, bare hat-rack cypress stood like lonely sentinels. These dwarfs, standing only 10-15 feet high, are stunted pond cypress that eke out a meagre existence on slivers of soil over the prairie's bedrock and may actually be over 150 years old, deserving our respect. There's debate whether pond cypress are a separate species from bald cypress (Taxodium distichum) or merely a variety of the same species (var. nutans) but opinion seems to be leaning towards the latter. Whatever the taxonomy, pond cypress do have special adaptations to the harsher niches they occupy, including thicker bark to increase fire resistance and needles closely appressed to their upturned branchlets to aid in water retention, versus the droopy feathery branchlets of bald cypress.

All around me the almost fluorescent, blue, bobbing heads of Glades Lobelia visually popped against the dry grass along with the intense white of String Lilies in their prime. There were still the occasional Grassy Arrowhead in bloom, but these had long peaked and were looking forlorn. Crushed Water Hyssops underfoot released a minty-lemon fragrance and attracted White Peacock butterflies. Frosty-colored Liatris seed heads released tufts of white as I brushed by, and the odd apple snail shell caught my attention. With the sound of the wind as a companion, I had a delightful hour's hike to the dome.

A line of Slash Pines, perhaps only inches higher in elevation gradually closed in from the west at my destination leaving only a narrow gap for the track to continue onwards. As if on cue a ray of sunshine pierced the clouds transforming the grey leafless dome to gold momentarily. With the Sun appeared several Halloween Pennant dragonflies and a Scarlet Skimmer. I stopped to take a photograph and despite the shallow depth of the mud, my boots began to stick, pulling out with a distinct pop as I left the track to approach the dome.

My cypress stand was some 80 yards in diameter. Classically lower trees encircled it and each succeeding concentric ring rose slightly higher creating a perfect dome shape with the tallest trees towards the center perhaps as high as 70 feet and certainly besting the tallest pines nearby.

To the uninitiated cypress domes are counter intuitive. They appear from a distance almost as little hillocks but are in fact water-filled depressions, at least in the wet season, which brings us back to opposites and prairie hammocks. Those tree islands typically develop on limestone outcrops that raise them slightly above the surrounding terrain. Cypress domes, however, form in slight depressions created when weaker areas of limestone bedrock subside or dissolve from the action of the acidic by-products of rotting plant material.

One might think the taller trees in the middle represent greater age, but the difference in height may be due to increased growth vigor instead. Imagine a newly formed depression on the prairie. The initial trees that colonize the beginnings of that ephemeral pond will have no better soil conditions than our hat-rack cypress. So an outer ring of stunted trees develops. Over time they drop their needles into the pond creating slightly better soil conditions for the next ring of trees which grow slightly taller, and so on and so on.

Each successive ring also has a slightly longer hydroperiod because they are further into the bowl. So the tallest trees may not necessarily be the oldest trees, rather they have just experienced the best growing conditions. And to confound the model, were we able to count the rings of individual outer trees, they might not be older because the outer trees also experience the highest mortality due to a shorter hydroperiod and greater susceptibility to fire.

Cypress trees, like all aquatic organisms, face certain challenges from being periodically inundated. Water is an excellent solvent, able to readily transport most chemicals required for life, but it's also about 10,000 times more viscous than air, meaning that life supporting gases, primarily oxygen and carbon dioxide move very slowly in their dissolved state, requiring special adaptations. Water lilies for example have hollow stalks so that oxygen can be channeled to roots buried in anaerobic muck.

On the outer fringes and into the dome's interior I encountered cypress knees; those knobby conical structures that have proved such a mystery to scientists. All sorts of sophisticated experiments have been conducted over the past 80 years, even hermetically sealing them in transparent cases with hoses connected to all sorts of instruments, but the results are inconclusive or contradictory. However, most likely they are involved in some sort of gas exchange as they typically grow to an average height just above the local site's mean high water level, and they also provide some sort of anchoring mechanism as they typically appear where the root system takes a distinct downward turn, perhaps here in South Florida exploiting a small solution hole. We also know they store starch.

Although the dome was dominated by cypress there was a struggling understorey kept in check by the cypress canopy's shade. It comprised pond apple, Dahoon holly, pop ash, a few Carolina willow and some cabbage palms near the outside; all species that create a succession canopy in swamps if there is a perturbance like logging or fire. This one sheltered some sparse sawgrass too.

The cypress trunks had characteristic buttressed bases. These swellings help them absorb water and provide stability in high winds. I could detect the normal high water level from the line where the patches of lichens ended. The closely spaced trunks serve to dampen air movement and trap moisture under the canopy, so that higher up the cypress branches were festooned with bromeliads.

Waxy cones and pendulous catkins hung on many of the cypress and the typically clear water below was instead dusted with their pollen. Each cone typically contains 16 seeds that look a bit like dried-up petals about the size of a finger nail. Squirrels often messily tear apart ripe cones and in the process drop seeds. In the not so distant past noisy flocks of now extinct Carolina Parakeets would have also performed this service. The seeds then need a complex sequence of conditions to successfully germinate.

Ideally they will fall into water where they can soak for several months to soften their tough outer husks, but they can't germinate there and must ultimately settle on exposed, but moist soil. This is why cypress trees need alternating wet and dry. The seedling then must quickly thrust upwards to avoid being submerged when the rainy season returns or they'll drown. Once mature however, they can survive both periodic flooding and drought.

Because of this, if there's permanent water in the center of the dome, there will be what looks like a donut hole from the air, devoid of cypress. My dome was true to form and sure enough as I sloshed inward I encountered a small flag pond open to the sky. The alligator flag indicated even deeper water. Had I been a truly dedicated scientist I would have waded into the center to measure the depth, but in the dry season these frequently become gator holes, and as I was alone and had the excuse of inappropriate boots, I opted just to admire the pond and head home. My hike back was much quicker as I decided to bypass the rutted track altogether and found it much faster striding over the firm prairie in just a few inches of water. It helps to have long legs though!

Patrick Higgins has been tromping around the Fakahatchee since 2004 and has helped with FOF Coastal Cruises and Ghost Rider tram tours as an expert interpreter. He operates his own eco-tour company www.tropicbirdsailing.com

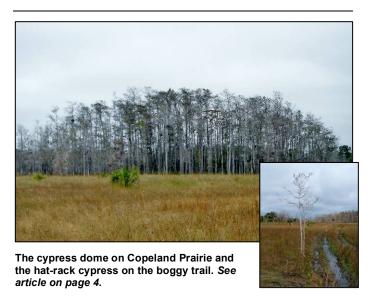


FAKA-HACKERS ATTACK EAST MAIN

by Dino Barone

Saturday, December 14, was a very successful volunteer work day. The FOF Resource Management Committee, working together with Bob Becker, race director of the Everglades Ultra Marathon, organized 11 energetic, fearless, focused, hardworking champions to take on 11 months of unabated growth of Brazilian Pepper, Hog Plum, intermixed with a variety of vines and Caesar weed on East Main tram, prepping the tram for the February 22 Everglades Ultra Marathon. Armed with Machetes, Loppers, weedwacker and chainsaws, this vigorous group took to the tram like hungry termites to fresh wood. The day's accomplishment was close to a mile of the tram being cleared by hand labor. The smiles on the faces for the achievement of the team was rewarding to all. I would like to THANK everyone who was able to participate: Howard Lubel, Bob Becker, Tom Maish, Paul Joslyn, Dino Barone, Dave "FOF Energizer" Pickering, Jen Stine, Dave Halpern, David Camargo, Christian Trejo, and Tom Asiala.

For those who did not have the opportunity to participate in this event, not to worry – there will be plenty of other opportunities between now and race day. Please contact me with any questions sunnyg8tr@aol.com



BoardWalk Vision Report

by Tom Maish, Committee Chair

As the New Year approaches; we look for 2014 to be the pivotal year for our BoardWalk Vision.

After the 2010 on-site meeting with Park Service Planners, the changes in the Park Service coupled with many cut-backs in staff and funding, plans that were presented to the FOF Board in 2013 bore little semblance to our proposed Vision submitted to the planners. The plans were of a "roadside rest" design for the visitors' pavilion – hardly a design that would complement the beauty of the Fakahatchee.

If we made a mistake, it was in relying upon the 2010 momentum which fizzled out with these changes.

The Board asked for a meeting with District 4 officials to present our views. At that meeting; Ezell "BJ" Givens, Assistant Bureau Chief, admitted when queried about the lack of "green initiatives" in the plans, that the Park Service did not have anyone qualified in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (L.E.E.D)

This was the "aha moment" when the Board realized that the Friends must take charge of our Vision!

BJ Givens suggested that the FOF fund and hire a LEED Certified Architect to draft the "green initiatives" that are so important to our Vision and submit these ideas to the Park Service. The Board acted promptly sending out Requests for Proposals with three firms responding. David Corban, Architect, was unanimously selected and hired. Corban's report was quite explicit with ideas to improve the design!

The Corban report so interested the Board that it then funded additional work to design the "cracker cabin" visitors' center and other changes. This report is currently in progress.

For the next step, Renee Rau, Park Manager, will prepare Requests for Proposals to design the Interpretative displays along the pathways and boardwalk to complete our Vision.

Our goal in 2014 is to have a complete rendering of the BoardWalk Vision to present to the Park Service for approval. Only when we have these completed renderings can the Friends initiate grant writing and the fundraising process.

THANK YOU to the many donors who contributed to our first campaign in 2010 and, especially, for their patience in waiting for their money to be put to work. These funds are being invested in the plans that will be sent to the Park Service for approval.



FOREST FESTIVAL

Learn about our neighboring Picayune State Forest at the first annual "Festival in the Woods" on **Saturday, January 25.** This free event takes place at the Sabal Palm Hiking Trailhead, 3.3 miles east of Collier Blvd (CR-951) on Sabal Palm Road from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

For info and reservations, phone Heather at (239) 690-3500, ext. 121.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

We have 373 memberships including 33 from the 4th quarter who received renewal notices in early December.

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

Ben & Marilyn Currier, Naples William Dettinger, Naples Christina Evans, Largo Jean C. Hall, Naples Ken Keefe, Palm Springs Carl Kepford, Marco Island Robert Lasseter, Madison, WI Christie Marcoplos, Naples Sara Summers, Marco Island Maureen & Steve Swanson, Largo

Note from the Editor

Thanks to my Everglades City neighbor Elaine Middelstaedt for her diligent proof-reading of *The Ghost Writer*.



Visitors of all ages from Audubon Young Birders and Big Cypress Elementary School enjoyed helping to collect data during a Field Trip (see report on page 2). Photo by Martha Kriek.

What Are We? Who Are We?

The **Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc,** a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation <u>C</u>itizen <u>Support Organization</u>, 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 300 copies.

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