



The Ghost Writer

MARCH 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

Saturday, March 10

Tuesday, March 20

See article on page 6

BOARD MEETING

Sunday, March 11, 10:00 a.m.

Ranger Station, Copeland

For info, phone (305) 588-9886

Art in the Preserve

Saturday, Mar 17, 10:00 a.m.

Phone Karen at (239) 695-4593

ANNUAL PICNIC

Sunday, Mar 25, 12 noon

Mesce Pavilion, Copeland

See article on page 3

COASTAL CRUISE

Saturday, Mar 10, from 3:00 p.m.

Sunday, Mar 25, from 3:00 p.m.

Boat Trip to Fakahatchee Island

See article on page 3

ANNUAL MEETING & DINNER

Sunday, April 15, 5:00 p.m.

Details in our next newsletter

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 1/29/12, two visitors from Canada observed an **Anhinga** fishing, two **American alligators** and a **Peninsula Cooter** on a log. On 1/31/12, at 4:08PM, Mike Owen, Park Biologist, and Steve Houseknecht, Park Services Specialist, observed a **Crested Caracara** fly East over the burned prairie north of the Harmon lakes. On 2/1/12, at 3:57PM, Mike Owen observed a **Short-tailed Hawk** white morph fly South over Four Stakes Prairie during the prescribed burn. On 2/1/12, at 5:15PM, Steven Bass, Park Ranger, heard a **Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake** in Four Stakes Prairie.

On 2/2/12, at 7:52 AM, Donna Glann-Smyth observed a **Roseate Spoonbill** 2.7 miles North of SR-29 and about 50 feet South of US-41. On 2/2/12, around 4:14PM, John Kalafarski, volunteer, observed a large **Bobcat** north of Gate 7. On 2/4/12, around 5PM, Rose Flynn, volunteer, observed an adult **River Otter** in the water of the South Ditch off of Jones Grades. On 2/9/12, at 3:15PM, Jeff Kneisley, Park Ranger, and Bob Russell, volunteer, observed an adult **Florida Panther** near Gate 7/West Main.

On 2/10/12, at 1:20PM, Mike Owen and Barb Stoner, volunteer, observed a **Red-tailed Hawk** fly West to Janes Scenic Drive (JSD) then back East and later observed a **Cooper's Hawk** near the end of the drive and near a puddle perched, then fly into the Strand. On 2/12/12, around 7:45AM, Barb Stoner observed a **River Otter** running into Firetower pond from JSD. On 2/13/12, Renee Rau, Park Manager, and Wynlyn McBride, Administrative Assistant, observed on the north side of US 41, the **American Crocodile** with its mouth open about 100 feet West of the East River turnoff.

On 2/14/12, around 9:30AM, Don Leonard, volunteer, observed an adult **Florida Panther** trotting across JSD around Gate 2. On 2/14/12, around 9:30AM, John Elting, volunteer, observed an adult **Everglades Mink** off US-41 and East of Port of the Islands. On 2/16/12, between 7:45 and 10:45AM, Jim and Cyndi Krakowski, birders, observed among other birds, a **Louisiana Water Thrush** and 2 **Hermit Thrush** along Jones Grade. On 2/18/12, between 10-2PM, near the Harmon lakes the artists participating in the Art-in-the-Preserve En Plein Air noted 2 **Common Moorhens** in winter plumage on the lake, a **Red-shouldered Hawk** calling as well as **tree swallows** and an **American Woodstork** fly-over.

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

IMPORTANT DATES FOR BOARD MEMBER ELECTIONS

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| March 19 | Deadline for submitting nominations |
| April 2 | Ballots and bios mailed to membership (US Mail) |
| April 14 | Absolute deadline for <i>receiving</i> ballots (US Mail) |
| April 15 | Election results announced at Annual Meeting |

For more info about the election, see article on page 3

The Problem with Pythons

by Dennis Giardina

It could be said that if you haven't heard about pythons in the Everglades yet, you'd have to have been hiding under a rock. If that rock happened to be in South Florida, you may still have become aware of the presence of pythons because there's a chance you'd be sharing that cool, dark shelter with one of them. Over the past ten years there have been many very good articles written about pythons. There have been interesting, informative vignettes on radio and television programs but now it seems that the hype machine is rolling wide-open, pummeling hapless consumers of information with sensational anecdotes and images of an invasion of giant, malevolent snakes. The reality of the situation may be somewhat less shocking than portrayed by the sensationalistic media but no less concerning, albeit for different reasons. Let's start close to home. Are there pythons in Fakahatchee and, if so, what threats do they pose?

Yes Virginia, there are pythons in Fakahatchee. We know this because one was collected by an exotic plant treatment crew in January of 2007 at the borrow pit lakes area in the northeast corner of the preserve. Another was observed floating upside down in the canal on the south side of US 41 by Mike Owen about a month ago, most likely hit by a vehicle. The epicenter of the spreading population of Burmese pythons is Everglades National Park. There are several theories of how they got there but whether the population originated by a breeding facility destroyed by Hurricane Andrew or as a result of multiple separate releases or both – the damage has been done. That SE Florida population has now spread in every direction aided by the network of canals that crisscross South Florida. For the past ten years Burmese pythons have been observed and collected in SW Florida, especially in the Collier-Seminole State Park – 6L Farms – Rookery Bay NERR – Marco Island Airport area. Some suspect that this SW Florida population may be the result of a separate introduction of Burmese pythons but regardless, there seem to be more sightings and collections every year. Mike Owen and I feel that the number of pythons that occur in Fakahatchee at this point is very low, filtering in up from US 41, down from I-75 and over from Big Cypress. We have yet to receive a report of a python on Janes Scenic Drive. When that happens, we will have to reconsider our population estimate.

The threats that pythons pose have more to do with their impact on native wildlife, especially local mammal and bird populations and less with any direct danger to humans. Pythons are not accustomed to eating us and even the largest Burmese pythons would have a hard time getting their jaws around even the narrowest of human shoulders to swallow one of us. They, like any animal, when threatened or cornered will defend themselves. Their bite/constrict/swallow feeding behavior is different from their defensive behavior which is more like other snakes: they coil up, inflate their body and raise their head, making a loud hissing sound. There are few animals (other than humans) that would continue to approach

a large python in full-blown defense display but if one were to do so, the python would then strike repeatedly. Unlike animals, human beings usually wear clothes and if the curved teeth of the striking python were to snag a pant leg or a shirt sleeve, the python would not be able to simply release it and would try to pull its head back into its coils and perhaps it would go into wrap and constrict mode. I don't know but if you are afraid to walk in the woods because of the danger of being bitten or eaten by a python, all I can say is don't be, they are not going to bother you.

Skip Snow, the Wildlife Biologist at Everglades National Park who has been dealing with pythons longer than anyone, has noticed something concerning. It seems that small mammal populations, everything from marsh rabbits to bobcats seem to be on the decline along the main road inside the park. In areas where there were numerous sightings and sign of animals like tracks and scat, now seem to be much less or absent. Because circumstantial evidence does not a case make, Skip, UF Scientist Frank Mazzotti and others have embarked upon a study to see if they can prove that this observed decline has been caused by pythons alone, or whether its due to other factors like disease – or both. It's hard to imagine that a population of pythons, likely numbering in the thousands wouldn't have a noticeable impact upon a native mammal fauna unaccustomed to their predation but it's our job to back up our feelings, insights and observations with data. That is science and there is (in terms of the physical world) no better arbiter of truth.

It seems to me and most of my colleagues that pythons and other large exotic reptiles like monitor and tegu lizards are here to stay. We think they will continue to spread, eventually throughout the entire peninsula. Cold weather events will knock them back, but they will self select for more cold hardiness over time as well. Native mammals and birds will have to develop strategies to avoid being eaten by them so that enough of them are able to reproduce and persist as species. Natural areas managers and scientists will continue to innovate methods to trap and kill them to keep their population levels low and reduce the average size of individuals but there is no magic bullet. There are however many tools in the toolbox. One particularly promising one is the use of dogs trained to sniff out pythons. A pilot project last year, using two Labrador retrievers from the Auburn University Canine Unit showed that in certain applications they were tremendously successful at locating hidden individuals and with targeted seasonal surveys, many pythons could potentially be removed from the environment in a short amount of time. Currently there is so much information available that if you want to read more, Google "Burmese pythons in Florida."

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.

BOARD MEMBER ELECTIONS

Nominations are now open for Board Members for a two year term beginning April 15, 2012. All members are encouraged to submit nominations of candidates. *You may nominate yourself.*

The Board of Directors functions as the governing body of the Friends of Fakahatchee, responsible for management, finances and expenditures, goals, as well as organizing and conducting events for the organization. Board meetings are held monthly between November and April and every other month during the summer.

Nominees must be FOF members in good standing, at least 18 years of age, and willing to participate actively as Board Members. They will be asked to submit brief (300 word) biographical data indicating their interest and experience relevant to serving on the Board.

The Deadline For Submitting Nominations Is March 19. Email, mail or phone your nomination to Allen Caldwell (address below). Indicate nominees name and contact information.

IMPORTANT DATES

March 19 Deadline for submitting nominations

April 2 Ballots and bios mailed to membership (US Mail)

April 14 Absolute deadline for *receiving* completed ballots (US Mail)

April 15 Election results announced at Annual Meeting

Allen Caldwell, Chairman, Nominating Committee

2600 Cardena Street, Ph-3

Coral Gables, FL 33134

E-MAIL llewdlacnella@msn.com

Phone (305) 443-2490



This photo of a python was taken in the Fakahatchee in 2007 by one of the Southeastern Chemtreat team who were working there. *See the article on page 2.*

A new book about pythons titled *Snake in the Grass* by Larry Perez (who spoke at one of our dinners) has just been published by Pineapple Press and is available online. Larry has been a park ranger for many years in the Miami area and writes in a fluent, friendly style.



COASTAL CRUISE

A group of 28 people, many of them from the Bonita Bay Nature Club, enjoyed the Coastal Cruise to Fakahatchee Island on February 25. On the way out, we saw a pod of 6 to 8 dolphins. Once on the historic island, volunteer biologist Glen Stacell pointed out unusual plants on the trek up the shell mound path to the old cemetery. He was helped by Park Ranger Karen Relish.

The next cruises are on **Saturday, March 10**, and **Sunday, March 25**. Attendees meet at Everglades National Park in Everglades City for the chartered boat ride. Cost is \$75 per person. You can book at our website (click on Events). For info, phone (239) 695-2905.

ANNUAL PICNIC



Join us for the FOF Annual Members' Picnic on **Sunday, March 25**, from 12:00 noon to around 2:00 p.m. at the Mesce Pavilion in Copeland. We will provide the hotdogs and burgers, cooked on the new grill donated by Ultra Sports after the marathons last month, but we are asking attendees to bring a side dish.

Please phone Marya at (239) 695-2905 or email FOF_90@hotmail.com to let her know what you'd like to contribute.

By the way, the first FOF picnic took place in 1998 when the Friends were just getting together as a support group so we are continuing a long tradition.



NAPLES ORCHID SHOW

The Annual Orchid Show & Sale takes place on the weekend of March 16-18 at Moorings Presbyterian Church in Naples. Displays will be judged for prizes and vendors will also be on hand. For info, see www.naplesorchidsociety.org.

Rookery Bay Batfish Bash



Join the annual signature event at Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve on **Saturday, March 24**, from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. The feast includes Old Florida fare plus fine wines. There will be live music and an auction. Cost is \$175. Rookery Bay is in East Naples on CR-951 (Collier Blvd.) just west of US-41 (Tamiami Trail). For info, see www.rookerybay.org or phone 239-417-6310.

MANAGER'S MESSAGE

The Everglades Ultras at Fakahatchee Strand was a resounding success! There were 86 participants from all over the world, most first time visitors who have never even heard of Fakahatchee Strand before the race was publicized. Many of the participants brought friends and family to the area and enjoyed staying in local hotels and visiting the park throughout the weekend. We were also fortunate to welcome Jesper Olson, the first man to run around the world. Mr Olson is currently running from the southern tip of South America to the northern tip of North America.

I was very pleased at the benefits to the resource as a result of the Everglades Ultras. Clearing portions of trails allowed us to access parts of the Preserve that staff and volunteers haven't been to in years. We were able to safely and successfully conduct a prescribed fire in an area that has no known burn history. Law Enforcement is able to travel to parts of the park that they were previously unable to. And last but not least; our network of trails now look the best that they have in many years. We're getting compliments from our visitors and more people are coming to the park as a result of hearing about the condition of the roads and trails.

The ultra-running community is one of the best user groups I've had the pleasure of working with. Over 70 miles of trails were used over the course of 14 hours and I picked up less than 5 pieces of garbage park-wide. This was testament to how much everyone respected the location. The race participants were mindful of the resource and excited about coming back to hike, kayak and/or possibly train for another ultra marathon.

I would like to thank our amazing network of volunteers and park supporters in the Friends of Fakahatchee. We couldn't have done it without you. Now we can add another superlative to our already long list. Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park is the first Florida State Park to host an Ultra Marathon.

Thank you for making this possible.

Renée M. Rau

THANKS to Bob Becker of Ultra Sports LLC for a very generous donation to the Friends after the Ultra Marathons. To learn more about his organization, see www.ultrasportsllc.com or call (954) 439-2800.



Some of the cyclists on the Everglades Bike Ride on February 26 rode out Janes Scenic Drive and visited Ballard Camp ("the Fakahatchee Hilton"). The event benefited FOF and the Everglades River of Grass Greenway (ROGG), a proposed hiking & biking trail parallel to US-41. For info, see www.evergladesROGG.org and the sponsor's website www.naplespathways.org. And, thanks to the FOF volunteers who staffed the aid stations!



Jammin' in the Hammock for the Friends of Fakahatchee

by Dino Barone and Karen Relish

On Saturday February 11, Howard Lubel, Glen Stacell, Rose Flynn, and Dino Barone manned the Friends of Fakahatchee booth at Collier Seminole State Park. Cyndy Marquez and James Dean came in on Sunday. They overlooked the water and enjoyed the great music and weather. They answered questions and provided information and education about the FAK, sold FOF merchandise and displayed some beautiful photographs of the orchids found in the Fakahatchee.

Other booths were there from Fakahatchee's neighbors including Rookery Bay, Big Cypress National Preserve, and Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. Furthermore, there were booths selling food/drink, hiking staffs and homemade children's colorful clothes. A fun-filled weekend.

PANTHER OPEN HOUSE



The Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge is holding its annual Open House on **Saturday, March 17**, from 7:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. There will be walks, talks, buggy tours, and lunch.

The Refuge is on the west side of SR-29 (road to Immokalee) just north of I-75 (Alligator Alley) Exit 80. For info, phone 239-353-8442 x 222.

President's Message

Boardwalk Facilities Development Project Update

The Boardwalk Facilities Development project is moving forward with the creation of conceptual designs by board members. Your board is considering hiring a consulting firm to conduct the first phase of a capital campaign feasibility study of both the Friends and the project. This study will cost in excess of \$15,000. It is designed to determine if the Friends Of Fakahatchee have the resources, commitment and potential donor prospects to make the project fund raising campaign successful. Additionally, the consultant will help the Friends prepare a donor engagement event in the fall. The results of the study will be used to help FOF build a successful fund raising campaign, create a roadmap to build an organization capable of running such a campaign or inform us that the project is beyond our reach presently. It will not be a fund raising effort.

Your board has been informed that local Native Americans may have an objection to the boardwalk facilities plan based upon an issue relating to an impermissible use of sacred tribal land. The board has been unable to determine the exact nature or extent of this objection. The state has not yet acted in concert with the Native Americans to resolve this objection. Consequently, the board may vote in March on whether or not to move forward with the feasibility study expenditure without having a resolution of this potential obstacle. If the study yields positive results and the Native American objections are resolved, FOF can use the findings as the basis for conducting a successful capital campaign. However, this expenditure cannot be recaptured if the study results indicate FOF is presently unable to run a successful campaign nor can it be recouped if the Native American objections delay, derail or otherwise negatively affect our ability to undertake the project.

I urge you to share your thoughts on this matter or any other aspect of the boardwalk facilities development project with me prior to our board meeting scheduled for Sunday, March 11, 2012. You can contact me at lubelm@aol.com. Offers of help are always welcome.

See you in the swamp.
Howard Lubel

NEW DIRECTORS

Welcome to Jimene Rinehart and John Kaiser who have been appointed to the Board of Directors to fill the vacant positions of resigned members Cindy Hackney and Julie Cardenas.

BOARDWALK REPORT

February has been a beautiful sunny month on the boardwalk with visitors of all ages and from many different countries. Several Road Scholar groups (formerly called Elderhostel) enjoyed resting on the benches of the newly rebuilt observation platform. It is good to have such a significant structural improvement to the boardwalk this year. It is a strong visual reminder of the constant need of repair. The wood for the new structure was entirely funded by visitor donations. Thanks to all of you who give so generously each time you visit. We especially appreciate our return visitors whose faces we recognize.

Friends of the Fakahatchee board secretary Francine Stevens reported seeing two juvenile wood storks at the alligator pond a week ago, and they have returned several times since then. They are not fully grown yet and their fuzzy heads can't help but make you smile! They already use that distinctive scratching foot action and seem to be finding what they seek. We have also had mature wood storks, black crowned night herons, ibis, great egrets, great blue herons, red shouldered hawks, a green heron, and anhingas. There appears to be some nesting at the red shouldered hawks nest, just past the twin bald cypress trees.

A black crowned night heron has been seen several times in the right pond just before the start of the wooden boardwalk (at the 'river otter sign'). Usually they are hidden in some branches across the alligator pond and difficult to spot without binoculars, so this is a real treat this season.

Our mother alligator and her 9 babies have been very entertaining this season. They are located in the canal along the path that leads to the actual boardwalk. In the late morning, the babies can often be observed draped over some dead branches right at the edge of the water by the trail. In the afternoon they are usually on the far bank of the canal. The mother alligator is almost always present, sometimes submerged just below the surface of the water!

On a sad note, it appears that our bald eagle pair was not successful this year. Although they nested and seemed to be bringing food to the chick(s), activity at the nest ceased about a week later. The adults have been seen once or twice since then, but not on the nest. Hopefully they will return to the nest again in the fall.

Dick Hughes has assumed the leadership of the boardwalk repair team. The next projects will be to level several areas of the boardwalk that have sagged slightly over the past few years. Thanks to Bud Scott, Nelson Tilden, Bob Barrows and Steve Koreny for their faithful attendance at the Tuesday work days. Thanks also to Kathy Hatch and Edite Hughes for their continued volunteer service at the boardwalk. We appreciate you so much.

Come visit the Boardwalk, everyone! The bald cypress trees are green again!

Caryl Tilden
Boardwalk Volunteer

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

We have 336 memberships plus 32 Introductory members and 16 in arrears from the 4th quarter. Reminders for the 1st quarter are being sent this week. Thanks to members who responded promptly in January.

You can join or renew online at our website with a credit or debit card. Just click on About Us and follow the link.

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

Mike Duever & Jean McCollom, Naples
David Fisher, Naples
John Gruen, Sanibel
Ted Hall & Stacy Stanley, Minneapolis, MN
Tom Harvey, Ft Myers
Joanne & Michael Jackson, Ft Lauderdale
John Keefe, St. Petersburg
Richard Kozlowski, Findlay, OH
Mr & Mrs John Relish, Leesburg
Sharon Ross-Bishop & Robert Bishop,
Lauderdale-by-the-Sea



VOLUNTEER CORNER

by Dino Barone



Here are the tentative work projects for our March Volunteer Work Days

Saturday March 10th, Flagging and scouting a trail reroute from Gate 19

Tuesday March 20th, Continued work on reroute section of trail at Gate 19

We will be leaving the ranger station promptly by 9AM, as it will take approx 45 minutes to drive out to Gate 19.

Please bring gloves, snacks and drinks. As always, your time and help is Greatly Appreciated.

Please contact me by email with any questions 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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OFFICERS: President – Howard Lubel Vice-President – Glen Stacell
Secretary – Francine Stevens Treasurer – Dino Barone

BOARD: Dino Barone Frank Denninger Dennis Giardina John Kaiser Howard Lubel
Tom Maish Cynthia Peters Jimene Rinehart Glen Stacell Francine Stevens Charles Wright

LIFETIME MEMBERS: James Nici, Warner Blow

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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 _____
STREET / P.O.BOX: _____

EMAIL _____
ALTERNATE ADDRESS _____

CITY _____
STATE _____ ZIP _____
PHONE _____

CITY _____
STATE _____ ZIP _____
PHONE _____

MONTHS AT ALTERNATE ADDRESS:

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