



The Ghost Writer

MARCH 2014

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

EVENTS

**MAKE YOUR RESERVATIONS
for our activities at
www.fofreservation.eventbrite.com**

WET WALK & TRAM TOUR

Thurs, March 6, 9:30am

\$60/person, Reservations Required.

GHOST RIDER TRAM TOURS

Tuesdays and 1st Saturday at 10am

\$25/person, Reservations Required.

COASTAL CRUISES

Wed, March 19, 2:30pm

FULLY BOOKED.

ART IN THE PRESERVE

Saturday, March 15

Saturday, April 19

Call Karen Relish at (239) 695-2886.

See article on page 5.

BOARD MEETING

Sunday, March 16, 10:30 a.m.

Ranger Station, Copeland

ANNUAL PICNIC

Saturday, March 22

Reservations Required.

See article in right column.

Everglades Bike Ride

Sunday, April 13, 7:30 a.m.

www.EvergladesROGG.org

See article in right column.

ANNUAL MEETING & DINNER

Sunday, April 13, 5:00pm

See article in right column.

**You can download the FOF events
calendar from www.orchidswamp.org**



Attendees of all ages were at our "Fakahatchee Orchids" event at Rookery Bay on March 1. See the President's Message on page 4 for report and more pics.

ANNUAL PICNIC

Join us to greet old friends and make new ones at the Annual Picnic at 12:00 noon on **Saturday, March 22**, at the Mesce Pavilion in Copeland (turn left just before the Ranger Station and follow the balloons).

By the way, the first picnic was held in 1998 (*photo at the Fakahatchee Hilton*).

We'll have delicious food but donations of side dishes and desserts are welcome. Reservations are required; phone Marya at (239) 695-2905 or email us at FOF_90@hotmail.com with a list of attendees.



ANNUAL MEETING & DINNER

The Annual Meeting & Dinner will be held on **Sunday, April 13**, when the results of the elections for Board members and Officers will be announced. There will be a report from the President about what's been happening during the year and a re-cap from the Park Manager, as well as the presentation of awards.

See our next newsletter for details about the venue and how to book.

ENP Super Retires

Dan Kimball, the popular and friendly Superintendent of Everglades National Park, is retiring after ten years. There will be a farewell dinner for him on **Friday, March 21**, at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. For info and reservations, see www.southfloridaparks.org or call 305-665-4769.



Everglades Bike Ride

Bike rides of various lengths will take place, starting in Everglades City, on **Sunday, April 13**. One of them is a 27-mile ride on Janes Scenic Drive. The event partly benefits FOF and is organized by the Everglades River of Grass Greenway. For info and to register, see www.EvergladesROGG.org or call Patty at (239) 695-2397. Volunteers are also welcome at aid stations.

M.O.ZONE - Seen Around the Strand

On 1/8/14, in the afternoon, Mike Owen, Park Biologist, observed 18 **White Ibis**, 1 **Great Blue Heron**, 2 **Great Egrets**, 1 **Tricolored Heron**, and 1 **Belted Kingfisher** along the beginning of Janes Scenic Drive (JSD). On 1/8/14, at 3:24PM, Mike Owen observed a **Short-tailed Hawk** white morph circling about 100 feet high. On 1/9/14, at 9:19AM, Mike Owen observed over 200 **Tree Swallows** flying over JSD. On 1/10/14, at 1:46PM, Mike Owen, observed an adult **White Crowned Pigeon** around Gate 7/ West Main flying from East to North and then back to the East.

On 1/17/14, at 10:15AM, Mike Owen observed an **American Kestrel** and a **Red-shouldered Hawk** near Gate 2 and later a **Florida Black Bear** along JSD. On 1/22/14, in the evening, Mike Owen observed a **Coyote** on the west side of SR-29 just north of US-41. On 1/23/14, between 9:15-9:25AM, Chris Becker, District Biologist, observed an **Adult Crested Caracara** flying to the north along SR-29 north of Jerome and later a **Short-tailed Hawk** white morph flying over Headquarters.

On 1/23/14, around 12PM, Don Leonard and Bob Becker, volunteers, observed an adult **Barred Owl** off of Jones Grade. On 1/24/14, at 4:31PM, Mike Owen observed a **Coppers Hawk** which flew to north over JSD just before West Main. On 1/27/14, between 2:30-4:30PM, Amy China, volunteer, observed her first **Limpkin** in Fakahatchee as well as 3 **Black Vultures** feeding on a snake, **Great Egrets**, juvenile **White Ibis**, flocks of **Robins**, and a **Great Crested Flycatcher** along JSD. On 1/30/14, at 12:39PM, Mike Owen observed an **Anhinga** with a sunfish in the North end of the Firetower Pond.

On 2/1/14, at 10:19AM, Mike Owen observed 2 female **Hooded Mergansers** and later 4 **Hooded Mergansers** in a ditch. On 2/3/14, at 4:30PM, Ken and Debbie Kaprielian, on-site volunteers, observed a **Big Cypress Fox Squirrel** off of JSD off in the Marl Prairie. On 2/10/14, in the late afternoon, Ray and Pat Carroll, volunteers, on the way down Mud Tram, just short of a leaning cabbage palm, observed three **Black Bears** (looked like momma and two cubs) and later observed 3 **Florida Panthers** inside of West Main/Gate 7 (looked like 2 juveniles and one adult). On 2/10/14, around 5PM, Tommy Owen saw 4 **Florida panthers** together at ¼-mile west of Janes Scenic Drive on West Main/Gate 7 tram.

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 Jean Hall for this photo of Wood Storks courting in the Fak during early February.

Our Tshirts and hats are now available in Sweet Mayberry's Café & Gift Shop at 207 West Broadway, Everglades City, FL, 34139. They are open from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. serving organic teas, pastries, sandwiches, and gelato.



Thanks to Fred Townsend for this photo of what he called "a large feral cat" snapped on February 24 at 1:22PM at the "fishing cabin" on East Main, Gate 12.

Another observation sent by email:

On Saturday, February 22, at approximately 9:30AM, FOF member Howard Lubel saw a **Black Bear** cub rambling around the 4 Stakes Prairie side of the Hole in the Wall.

BOARDWALK REPORT

by Linda Koreny

Ginny Roseberry, a BCBB volunteer, shared her recent Boardwalk observations: *"Today the **Banded Water Snakes** were active. We saw two at the first pond on the left by the picnic table and two more hunting by the 'snake log'. A nice 6' alligator was sunning at the Village store water and the **Great Blue Heron** was present also. A **Great Egret** fished in the alligator pond with a **Little Blue Heron** and a couple **White Ibis**. The Two Baby Eagles took turns popping up from the nest and entertaining visitors while two **Wood Storks** soared overhead."*

Visitors and I have been enjoying the **Barred Owl** who is often perched in one of the oak trees. He appears to be curiously watching the Boardwalk visitors as they walk by apparently content that he is completely camouflaged. A **White-tailed Doe** has been sighted several times in the brush west of the walk just before the observation platform. A couple of **Black Crowned Night Herons** have been faithfully hanging out around the 'Gator Pond with our two **American Alligators**.

The other day 30 **Wood Storks** were counted in the area of the pond, many in the trees. The Wood Storks have an unusual and effective fishing technique – they open their beaks in the water, stir up the bottom with their feet, hold up one wing to create shade to attract the fish and then when one touches their opened beak, it instantly snaps shut!

The young **Florida Bald Eaglets** are now often standing on the side of the nest. They will soon fledge; this is an active and fun time to observe them. Take your binoculars to enjoy the best views.



"The tree is infested with these bugs and it will die", I heard a man state alarmingly to his wife as I was walking by one afternoon. I stopped to see what had captured their attention and realized that they were looking at an aggregation (grouping) of nymph (immature) **Eastern Lubber Grasshoppers**. These interesting and colorful insects, according to the UF webpage, actually ascend vegetation to roost, especially at night. Presumably this behavior removes them from ready access by night-active ground-dwelling predators

The nymphs begin a completely black color with a distinctive bright yellow, orange or red stripe down their backs. As they develop, they molt numerous times, their legs turn a dark burgundy red color and eventually the quite large adult Lubber becomes a bright yellow/orange color with black and other color variations. The yellow coloring is a warning to predators that they contain a toxic substance. BCBB volunteer Kathy Hatch pointed out perhaps one of the most interesting features of this insect, that no vertebrate will eat them except the Loggerhead Shrike, a cool little bird that decapitates them and then impales their carcasses on thorns or barbed-wire fences so the sun can bake out the toxins before mealtime.

During the winter months many visitors ask about the "dead" trees, the **Bald Cypress**, named "bald" because their leaves drop in the fall. The past few days, however, these deciduous trees are suddenly sprouting their new leaves and the strand is turning bright green!



We received this email from race director Bob Becker:

If rave reviews were dollars, every one of you volunteers and staff at Saturday's EVERGLADES ULTRAS would be millionaires! By any measure, you exceeded the runners' demanding expectations for support and enthusiasm out on those long and hot trails. I am so proud to have my name attached to this race and each of you who reflected total concern and care for our athletes. No one could ever ask for more.

Please accept my sincere thanks for a fabulous job. I do hope you enjoyed yourselves and will consider coming back and doing it all again next February!

Very best regards, Bob

ULTRAS Volunteer Prospective by Dino Barone

I am one of the fortunate volunteers who has been on the ground floor since the inception of the races in the summer of 2011. Bob Becker (Race Director), Renée Rau (Park Manager) and Park Rangers spent a lot of time, endeavoring to develop a race course, in the largest strand swamp in the world, for the 50 mile, 50K and 25K events that would ideally be "dry" by race day. Well, most of course is dry but "Mud Tram", as the name truly denotes, has some soft areas.

We start in December. Armed with chainsaws, double sided hedge trimmers, machetes, and loppers, the FAKA-hackers take on the vegetation that has grown over the rainy season. Hey, lookie there, that is Bob Becker, live and in color, hacking and whacking his way, with other FAKA-hackers from the FOF or Ultra runners, doing our best to keeping the trails open.

Two weeks to Race day has arrived. Each course has to be clearly marked with the correct race colors as we do NOT want any runners blazing their unique trail in search of Yogi & BooBoo bear and a picnic basket.

One week until race day, time to put the jigsaw puzzle of assignments/logistics together; volunteers to aid stations, rangers and volunteers marshalling specific segments of the course, a supply runner. Begin to stage tables and chairs at all the aid stations.

Race Day ... it's Show Time folks. By 4AM the Park Campus comes alive. We offload the supplies. Arriving at Pennington Post around 7AM, the 50 mile runners are already an hour into their adventures; there they are, like whitetail deer in a methodical running rhythm. Looking at these ultra-conditioned athletes, you have no idea if they just ran a mile or 17 miles. A quick stop, smiles and THANK YOU to the volunteers at the aid station and poof like the road runner (*Beep-Beep*) they are running to the next aid station.

Later in the day, the sun is now setting but we know there are runners still on the course, battling fatigue. With their head lights on, these last few runners make their way to the finish line. This is their shining moment.

Now it is time to clean up the tent site, break down all the equipment, load the supply truck back up, park all the vehicles back at the shop, turn off the lights, and head home. I just cannot wait until the fourth running of the Everglades Ultra in 2015

Editor's Note: This is a condensed version of the well-written email report that Dino sent. I wish I had space for all of it!

President's Message

by Francine Stevens

Election is heavy on my mind these days. As I said on my last letter, I currently have the best Board a President could wish for; however, as my boss used to tell me all the time when I worked for Bell Telecommunication "one thing we can always be sure of is change" and change is what the Board is constantly challenged with given a Board member's two year term and, so I ask again, where is the next FOF Treasurer? Where are the next FOF Finance committee members? Our finances are in good shape, whomever will take over the financial responsibilities will be lucky to find an approved budget for fiscal year 2014/15 and excellent financial reports as a result of a "Tour de Force" from our current Treasurer Kathy DaSilva, former finance chair Jimene Rinehart, current finance chair Ken Shapiro, and our energizer bunny bookkeeper Marya Repko. If it sounds like I'm bragging again, I am because I'm extremely proud of the progress they have made in one fiscal year. I'm just a phone call away at 239-495-6744 for you to chat with me further about this.

Boardwalk Vision architectural design. As you saw on our last Newsletter, some pretty impressive work has been accomplished by the Boardwalk Vision committee; the assigned task of getting a LEED architect to submit recommendation to the State has been accomplished – as Kermit the frog use to say "it's not easy to be green" but for the Boardwalk Vision committee being green is about being responsible and respectful to the environment. The dialogue with the State about the LEED recommendations is ongoing and that's always a step in the right direction. Lastly, remember what my Bell Tel boss use to say about changes; the blue prints published in our February newsletter are subject to change, it's like the first blue prints of a new house – you can expect revisions before they reach their final 100% approved plan ready to put the shovel in the ground. Progress continues because of the folks in the committee who are keeping this progress in motion; chair Tom Maish, Dennis Giardina, John Kaiser, Bruce Bunch, Jimene Rinehart, Patrick Higgins, Glen Stacell, Rose Flynn, and new-comer Jerry Williams.

Everglades Ultra race. The third annual race event held on 21/22 Feb was a success. Bob Becker, race director, leads an impressive group – just imagine 200 runners throughout the park; some ran 50 kilometers and park staff and volunteers

stayed until the last one came across the finish line late in the evening. Mike Owen monitored the last of the runners driving behind at a distance making 10 minutes intermittent stops and, of course, using his time to collect data. While there, I was thinking it all looks so easy and yet there was so much work involved to make it look easy.

"Fakahatchee Orchids Lost & Found in Cuba" Event on the 1st of March was a success. Dennis Giardina and Mike Owen gave an hour lecture on their adventures and discoveries. All who attended really care about the orchid restoration project and I'm grateful they chose to spend the evening with us. I must mention Collier County Commissioner Donna Fiala's visit who had told Tom Maish and me a year ago that she would attend and she kept her word; she is very supportive of the Orchid restoration project and appalled that folks poach orchids. She is, of course, supportive of a safer BCBP entrance/parking area along with avid supporters Jane Parks, Kit Kitchen, and Maran LaRaw. *See photos below.*

Surprise visitor on the 18th Feb Fakahatchee island cruise.

Capt Franklin Adams decided to join Glen Stacell and our guests on the cruise. He did a great job talking about the history of the area with our guests and I was very happy to see him again as I always enjoy his stories and peaceful nature and it was truly comical to witness the sense of humor between Glen and the Captain. Thanks to Jinny Ball, Board secretary, who managed a few pictures (including this) while on the boat which is always a challenge.



Annual Picnic on the 22 March: I look forward to the old-fashioned Annual Picnic at noon in the Mesce pavilion. As you know, this is a potluck picnic so call Marya Repko directly at 239-695-2905 and tell her what you'll be cooking up for the picnic. The FOF will provide hotdogs on the grill and beverages but the homemade dishes brought by our members make it a special treat for all. I wonder if we'll get another surprise visit, they say it comes in threes!



Mike, Commissioner Fiala, and Dennis.



LaRaw Maran & Kit Kitchen, orchid aficionados and FOF supporters.



Jane Parks, who helped to save the Fak, in blue print slacks, chatted with attendees over snacks & drinks.

Resource Management Report

by Howard Lubel, Chair

The resource management committee has continued its work helping to clear trams, coordinating volunteer work days as well as assisting the park with vehicle acquisition and repair.

On January 11, 2014, the committee conducted a volunteer work day to clear Mud Tram from gate 16 to the prairie. Assisting in a full work day were Jim & Niki Woodard, Jay Staton, Paul Joslyn, Jen Stine, Dave Pickering, Glen Stacell, Bob Becker, Tom Asiala, and Richard Eguino. A special thanks is sent to two first time volunteers, Tony Nassif and Alicia Frew. The effort was quite successful in clearing an overgrowth of Brazilian pepper and hog plum. The tram is now walkable from the gate to the prairie using the spur trail. Another special thanks goes out to Ray Carroll, Cindy Carroll, their family and friends, for clearing the main trail out to the prairie canal.

FOF, working with funds from the Oil Well Road Trust Agreement, has taken action to help alleviate the park's vehicle shortage. The new Kubota has been delivered to the park by Triple D Equipment. The vehicle is currently owned by FOF and we are in the process of evaluating the best ownership form to protect the vehicle from re-assignment within the park system.

Additionally, FOF is utilizing OWRT funds to pay for repairs to the park's Polaris Ranger UTV. These repairs have been completed by Cypress Cycle in Naples for the approximate cost of \$4,200. The vehicle has been returned to the park and performed well transporting volunteers and equipment during the Everglades Ultras on February 22. The Polaris is the only park UTV that can seat up to five people and still carry equipment and is quite important for use on volunteer work days. Swamp buggies can also seat numerous individuals but are too large and cumbersome to be used regularly in trail maintenance.

The resource management committee also answered a park call for volunteers to assist in the repair of Janes Scenic Drive. We recruited folks with certain heavy equipment skills to assist in this task and were able to find a number of good folks who offered their time for this effort. FOF also rented a bobcat to assist in the work. The cost of the rental will come from funds donated during the annual campaign. All fill recently purchased with annual campaign funds has been used on the road. As a result of this work, Janes is in much better condition and is now safely drivable all the way to gate 19.

FOF has received a donation from the Ebert Foundation in the amount of \$5,000 with a designation that the funds be used for maintaining the East Main tram from the gate to the cabin. Any funds remaining thereafter can be used for other purposes. We are presently exploring the most efficient means to satisfy the donor's intention that this popular hiking and biking trail be kept open for easy access. Many thanks to Craig Britton for helping us with this effort.



En Plein Air

by Elizabeth Smith & Karen Relish

There were 10 participants for *Art in the Preserve ~ En Plein Air* who met in the area of the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk. We parked at Weaver's Station, sharing the parking lot with members of the Classic Car Club of America. The 8 classic cars ranged from 1932 to 1947, and included Lincoln Continentals, Cadillacs, and Packards. Apropos, since these same models likely utilized the comforts provided by the original Weaver Station built in 1928. The station was one of six built along the newly-constructed Tamiami Trail, and was probably named for the first officer at the station, S.M. Weaver. The station offered fuel, food, and other necessities for the driving adventure through the Everglades, and provided us an inspiring venue for art and great conversation.

Photos taken by Karen Relish with Elizabeth Smith's camera.



EMAIL THANKS

We received this email from a Ghost Rider Tram Tour participant:

Mr. Marx,

I am thankful for the Friends of the Fakahatchee for their interest in protecting our natural resources by giving so much of themselves.

Please continue the tram tour. There are individuals who cannot walk it on their own. This gives them the opportunity to experience areas they normally would not be able to experience. I have done a swamp walk and love getting up close and personal with nature but am happy that through your tour many others can also enjoy and learn (so important) about our surroundings.

The other aspect I liked of the tram tour is your narration. When we drive along we see but really do not know the details of what we are seeing, which you presented so well.

The marvels of nature ... amazingly beautiful.

Thank YOU for all you do, Anne Drew

A WHITE TIE EVENT

by Patrick Higgins

Last month I was tearing along Tamiami Trail for an early morning FOF meeting when my eye was caught by one of those Florida spectacles that just stop you in your tracks. Late or not, I squealed over onto the verge. Hundreds upon hundreds of birds were engaged in a feeding frenzy in a series of ephemeral ponds stretching southward across the tidal marsh, just north of the East River. Crowds of great egrets, snowy egrets, white ibis, wood storks, cattle egrets and even white pelicans were hobnobbing in the pools.

As they strutted and bobbed they were perfectly reflected in the waters below. There was a constant fluttering of wings and an undercurrent of coarse “arr, arr, arrs” from great egrets, and what sounded almost like a heron being throttled, followed by a hyena-like cackle from the snowys. Scattered amongst this host were a few great blues, and a few spoonbills, but it was very much a white tie affair. They were gorging themselves almost shoulder to shoulder on the highly concentrated prey resulting from the seasonal dry-down. By my return in the late afternoon the birds had all dispersed.

But 80 years ago a Russian ecologist named Gause developed the Competitive Exclusion Principle. He postulated that two or more species, having identical patterns of resource use can not coexist in a stable environment, as one will be better adapted and eventually out-compete and eliminate the other. So how do all these different species coexist?

This free-for-all is the exception. The superabundance had allowed each species to temporarily step out of their niche. Most of the year direct competition is avoided by resource partitioning. Although the birds share the same habitat, they avoid direct completion by either exploiting different resources, or the same ones but in different ways. This is largely achieved by specialized bill adaptations, varying leg lengths, and differing hunting and feeding strategies.

The ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) for example feeds by probing with its narrow decurved bill in a frenetic manner. It explores in, around and under obstacles. As a result it captures a higher percentage of invertebrates, typically crayfish and insect larvae in fresh water, and small crabs in salt water. Much of the ibis’ quarry is taken directly from burrows or other hiding places, and this strategy seems equally adapted to our lawns.

The wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) typically feeds in water 18” or less with its head down. It’s a grope feeder – swinging its partially open beak from side to side until contact is made. This triggers one of fastest reflexes in the animal world. Its bill snaps shut in 3/100th of a second. Sometimes the wood stork also slishes its feet about to startle prey. Its tactile feeding technique works well in turbid water, but prey must be abundant to be effective and it’s ineffective in

clear water as potential prey can see and evade them. Hence their nesting time coincides with the dry-down when prey is concentrated.

The roseate spoonbill (*Ajaia ajaja*), has an unusual spatulate-shaped bill which it swings from side to side, open-billed and submerged to stir up food as it wades in shallow water. Like the wood stork when it feels a prey item it snaps its bill closed, pulls the prey out of the water, and swallows it. Several birds often team-up forming a cooperative line. Most of their feeding is in salt water areas and their food is primarily crustaceans- especially prawns and shrimp, which aids the development of their pink coloring.

The great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*) on the other hand by virtue of their large size – up to 4’6”, are able to fish in waters deeper than other wading birds. They are fairly representative of the 12 Florida species in the heron family. They are all visual hunters and mostly tallish birds that tend to stand upright and still in shallow waters or on the shore as “sit and wait predators” staring intently at the water, or patiently stalking through them. When prey is spotted they dart out their long necks to seize or spear it. Great blues tend to be solitary hunters not tolerating the close presence of other birds and are able to tackle larger fish up to 15” or even small mammals. Some of the other herons may employ lures like the snowy wiggling its yellow feet to attract prey, or the tricolor heron may dash about in a shallow pool, then suddenly stand stock still with its wings out to create shadow to attract the panicked fish.

Resource partitioning may be temporal as well as spatial. We have two nocturnal specialists, the black-crowned (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) and yellow crowned night heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*), although the former is the more nocturnal. Both of these stocky birds have larger eyes to aid night vision, but comparatively short legs for herons. This restricts them to shallower water. They prefer wading on mud flats and sport heavy shear-like bills to tackle their favourite prey: crabs and crayfish, which they pull apart before ingesting. Unlike most herons they prefer not to stand in the water when hunting, but to perch on mangrove roots or other objects at the water’s edge, leaning over to seize their prey.

Other wading birds like the limpkin (*Aramus guarauna*) are even more specialized with a chisel-like bill to tackle their favourite food, the Apple snail. After breaking through operculum, the snail’s trap door, it slips its lower mandible into the shell to snip the muscle that attaches the snail to its shell and extracts and swallows it whole. Its lower mandible actually curves slightly to right to accommodate curvature of shell. Although it hunts visually the limpkin can also probe tactilely under surface vegetation and in turbid water. Due to its selective diet it encounters little competition from other wading birds.

Similarly the cattle egret has carved its own niche via its association with cattle and by frequently hunting in terrestrial habitats. Similarly differences in heron sizes sort them into what depths they can stalk. While diminutive green-backed herons are restricted to hunting on the edge and extreme shallows, great blues can wade out into substantial depths and tackle sizable fish that would be impossible for a greenback to handle.

So while the great blues, greenbacks and snowy egrets pursue fish, white ibis forage for fiddler crabs, roseate spoonbills sift in search of tiny aquatic invertebrates and least bitterns snap at dragonflies, all avoiding direct completion through resource partitioning aided by their specialized bill and other adaptations.



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

Experience the Fakahatchee East Main Trail

by Anthony (Tony) Marx

Visitors seeking to experience the interior of this subtropical wilderness will find that this trail provides an easy hike or bike through a forested wonderland without ever getting their feet wet. If you want to experience a glimpse of S.W. Florida's primeval past this is it.

Stop at the Ranger Station 1/3 mile on the right and pick up a leaflet at the information kiosk and pay a small toll fee. Then turn right on Janes Scenic Drive to continue west, observing the 15 mph speed limit; if nothing else to void the pot holes which increase after the first 2 miles. After a short distance, the paved road ends and continues the width of 1-1/2 vehicles for just over 7 miles when you will see an ample parking lot on your right ending at the #12 gated entrance marked for the East Main Hiking Trail. Over this distance you will have passed through scenic wet prairies interspersed with hardwood tree hammocks, before entering a dense cypress forest containing a large variety of trees, ferns and bromeliads which thrive in the humid sub-tropical climate which exists here.

Walk around the side of the gate and you now find yourself on a double track raised trail which was once a tramway (small railway) track built together with over 100 others, to haul out the ancient and stately Bald Cypress trees logged here in the first half of the 20th century. Unlike nearly all of the former tramways which were abandoned and quickly reclaimed by Nature, this trail is kept in reasonable condition because it leads to a privately owned cabin known as Ballard Camp.

In most places, the forest grows right up to the edge of the trail. Cypress trees rise tall close up to the trail, host to several varieties of bromeliads which cluster and cling to their branches. The occasional stately Royal Palm towers high above wherever it can establish a firm base, while Cabbage Palms and Carolina Willows provide shade along the way. Pond Apple, Pop Ash, Dahoon Holly, Coco Plum and the occasional Florida Maple add color during season. The dense understory is dominated by Wild Coffee, Marberry, and dozens of other glossy leafed bushes and small trees, while ferns of many varieties including the Giant Sword fern crowd in successive waves of brilliant green. Look carefully and you may spot a butterfly orchid or an even rarer species.

In summer, the water level rises almost to the top of the trail in places, and in winter recedes to the point you may step down to venture a few yards over dry ground into the forest, but be careful not to lose sight of the raised trail as it is easy to get lost. A GPS and compass is a must if you intend going farther.

Wildlife is present in its many forms. Alligators may lie basking at the edge of the trail or occasionally snooze right on it. In which case making a noise with a stick or waving your arms will get their attention and they will plunge off into the water. Florida Black Bear may appear and they are quick to flee when they see you. The Florida panther is also a visitor but rarely seen, although captured on video by hidden cameras. Harmless grass snakes may cross the trail quickly, and be observant for the sluggish cottonmouth which, though seldom encountered is present and venomous. Pass it at a respectful distance of at least 3 feet. Herons, and egrets mutter and squawk in the trees, and the occasional red shouldered hawk with its haunting cry swoops along the trail seeking snakes and rodents. A silent and fleeting shadow announces that a barred owl passed overhead and disappeared into the trees, somehow avoiding branches with its uncanny natural guidance system. The rare Everglades Mink dwells here, and others may provide an unexpected diversion. There is always movement and sound of one kind or another, and photographic opportunities abound.



After 1.5 miles the trail opens into a clearing and the rustic cabin known as Ballard Camp appears, one of the privately owned inholdings which still exist in the Park and a relic of the mid-20th Century when it was a logging company supervisor's quarters. A quaint sign on the wall proclaims it as 'The Fakahatchee Hilton'. The owners kindly permit you to rest a while on the porch, but be respectful of their privacy especially if their presence is evidenced by a parked vehicle nearby. Behind the cabin is a fishing pier leading to a small lake which can be packed with dozens of alligators in the late dry season March – May.

At this point the trail forks. The left fork trail is short and passes a quaint old fashioned outhouse, and peters out a short distance farther on. It ends at an inlet from the lake where some fairly large alligators sometimes bask alongside the water.

Take the right fork and the trail continues through a forest where cypress, pop ash and pond apple are host to rarer epiphytes such as the powdery Catopsis, which contains a water tank in its center. Unsuspecting insects slide down the slick surface of the leaves into this trap where they become nutrients for the plant's survival. Look for the occasional wild orange tree in February to March, but while thirst quenching, its sour taste discourages more than a few bites.

After a third of a mile you reach a spot known as 'Guzmania' named for the genus of bromeliad which clusters in profusion in a clearing to the right of the trail. Many other varieties are present there including Fuch's bromeliad, the only Guzmania native to the United States. It is a peaceful and charming spot to stop and enjoy the tropical scenery. The trail continues, getting narrower until it ends after a half mile where encroaching vegetation blocks further travel and it is also underwater in summer. It is partially hand cleared in February when the park suddenly expands its human presence February 22 to welcome more than 500 runners and helpers competing in the tough and challenging annual Ultra 50 mile/50 Kilometer Marathon, when it is possible to hike but not bike a further 10 miles to the northern end of the Park close to I-75. Within 3 months Nature will reclaim this portion of the trail and by May it is again sealed off from human activity.

However, at this point – 2.6 miles from the gate you will probably turn and make your way back, completing a round trip of just over five miles. If hiking, allow yourself about 5 hours including stops and carry at least 2 quarts of water per person.

Tony Marx is a Florida Master Naturalist and a Board Member of Friends of Fakahatchee.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

We have 365 memberships including 135 whose renewal is due during this quarter. Please try to send in your check or pay online before March 31 which is the end of our fiscal year.

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

Georgia Garrett, Everglades City
Catherine Kennedy, Naples
Jack Murray, Marco Island
S. Louis Rathje, Wheaton, IL
Sandra Roberts, Davie
Manuel Tajeda, Miami Lakes

ELECTION SCHEDULE

March 5: nominations deadline (extended from February 26)
March 7: deadline for receipt of biographies
March 18: ballots posted to all members in good standing
April 1: returned ballots must be postmarked
April 13: results announced at Annual Meeting & Dinner
For info, call Patrick at (239) 595-4828.



This is just a snapshot of the amazing quilt that Suzanne Becker is making to benefit the FOF. Raffle tickets will be available at the Annual Picnic on March 22 and at the Annual Meeting & Dinner on April 13 when the lucky winner will be drawn. Tickets are \$10 each or 3 for \$20.

What Are We? Who Are We?

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. 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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	Secretary – Jinny Ball	Treasurer – Kathleen DaSilva			
BOARD:	Jinny Ball	Bruce Bunch	Kathleen DaSilva	Frank Denninger	Shaun Floyd
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	Tony Marx	Ken Shapiro	Glen Stacell	Francine Stevens	Tina Streeter

LIFETIME PRESERVERS: Bruce & Janet Bunch

LIFETIME FAMILY MEMBERS: Tom & Judy Maish, Glen & Laura Stacell

LIFETIME INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS: Warner Blow, Peter Haffenreffer, James Nici, Ken Shapiro, Carol Vartanian

BUSINESS PATRONS: EarthTech Environmental, Everglades Adventure Tours, Naples Bicycle Tours, North American Canoe Tours
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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) ☐ Supporter (\$50) ☐ Patron (\$100) ☐ Benefactor (\$500)

☐ Business Patron (\$200) ☐ Business Benefactor (\$500) ☐ Extra Donation (\$ _____)

☐ Youth (\$10) under 18 (birth date: month ____ day ____ year ____)

☐ Lifetime Individual (\$1,000) ☐ Lifetime Family (\$1,500) ☐ Lifetime Protector (\$2,500) ☐ Lifetime Preserver (\$5,000)

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