

The Ghost Writer

SEPTEMBER 2015

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

EVENTS

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED!!!

for dates & costs, see

www.orchidswamp.org

and select Tours & Events

GHOST RIDER TRAM TOUR will resume in the fall

MOONLIGHT TRAM TOUR will resume in the fall

TRAM TOUR & WET WALK will resume in the fall

BIOLOGIST'S SWAMP WALK will resume in the fall

BOARDWALK AFTER DARK will resume in the fall

FOF BOARD MEETING Sunday, September 13, 10:30 a.m.

Ranger Station, Copeland

WELCOME-BACK DINNER Sunday, December 13, 5:00 p.m. Venue to be announced.

DISCOVER THE JEWEL OF THE EVERGLADES Saturday, March 5, 5:00 p.m. Naples Botanical Garden

ANNUAL APPRECIATION PICNIC Saturday, March 12

Time and Venue to be announced.

ANNUAL MEMBERS' DINNER Sunday, April 10, 5:00 p.m. Venue to be announced.

FAK GETS AWARD!

TripAdvisor®, the world's largest travel site, has named Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park a 2015 Certificate of Excellence award recipient. Now in its fifth year, the award celebrates hospitality excellence worldwide and is given to accommodations, restaurants and attractions listed on TripAdvisor that consistently achieve outstanding traveler reviews.

Francine Stevens, president of the Friends of Fakahatchee, said: "Earning this TripAdvisor honor is a tribute to all our volunteers and park staff members who show off this jewel of the Everglades to visitors. We are thrilled with the recognition and will work hard to improve our TripAdvisor ratings this season."



New Face at Big Cypress Preserve

Big Cypress National Preserve announced the selection of Tammy Whittington to be its new superintendent.

Ms. Whittington has a 27-year career of service to the public with both the NPS and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS). She was born and raised in Colorado and holds a bachelor's degree in engineering from the Colorado School of Mines. Her hobbies include scuba diving, hiking, biking, tennis, kayaking, wildlife watching and photography, and caring for her pet cats.

"I am extremely honored to be selected to serve as superintendent of Big Cypress National Preserve," Ms. Whittington said. "The uniqueness of the Preserve's resources and the issues therein will prove to be challenging and exciting. I am inspired by the NPS Centennial goal of 'connecting with and creating the next generation of park visitors, supporters, and advocates.' I will work with the Preserve's exceptional staff and partners to make that goal our compass towards success."

In a recent email, Tammy added "I look forward to understanding the local culture and resources within the community." She anticipates that she will be at Big Cypress National Preserve around the middle of October.

M.O.ZONE - Seen Around the Strand

On 6/7/15, at 12:29PM, Mike Owen, Biologist, observed an adult **Raccoon** near Gate 12/East Main. On 6/8/15, in the early afternoon, Skip Fisher, volunteer, observed a **Florida Black Bear** north of East Main on Janes Scenic Drive. On 6/9/15, at 8:05AM, Steve Houseknecht, Park Services Specialist, observed 2 **River Otters**, not quite full grown, at the Firetower Pond. One of them was eating a fish.

On 6/11/15, in the evening, Thomas Owen heard a **Florida Bonneted Bat** flying over canopy of Janes Scenic Drive near Gate 12. On 6/13/15, in the late morning, Steven Bass, Park Ranger, noted 12 **American Swallow-tailed Kites** soaring and circling over mangroves over the Faka-Union Canal, South of US-41.

On 7/10/15, at 12:15PM, Steven Bass reported seeing a juvenile **Barred Owl** attempting to eat a Lubber grasshopper off JSD just south of the Firetower.

On 7/30/15 at 9:11AM, Donna Glann-Smyth observed a road kill Least Bittern on the side of the road at the southeast corner of SR-29 and US-41. This is only the second road kill Least Bittern observed/reported since October 1999!

At the end of March to present, one is observing swallowtail butterflies along Janes Scenic Drive including **Eastern Tiger Swallowtail** and **Palamedes Swallowtail**. On 6/23/15, Wynlyn McBride, Administrative Assistant, and Skip Fisher, volunteer, observed 2 **Polydomas Swallowtail** butterflies. One also may see **Ruddy Daggerwings**, **Viceroys**, **White Peacocks**, and **Zebra longwings** or heliconian. Lately, **Phaon crescents** and **Tropical-checkered Skippers** being seen. If one is lucky, you may catch a glimpse of the bread and butterflies.

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



Photo of a White Peacock Butterfly taken on 8/3/15 near Gate 7/West Main off of JSD.



Florida Wildlife Federation is holding a photo contest. Deadline for entries is December 31. For more info, see www.fwfonline.org.



Thanks to Tod Dahlke who took this photo on East River in mid-June.

ALLEY RADIO

If you are driving along I-75 (Alligator Alley) check out the local radio station at 107.9FM where you might hear an interview with Mike Owen about the Fakahatchee.

President's Message

by Francine Stevens

Summer and the Friends

Summertime is no longer a down time for the FOF. As the organization grows and increases its goal to support the Park, the Board of directors and committee members find themselves just as busy in the summer assessing what administration process can be improved for the coming season, preparing the schedule and promotional material for the upcoming tours, improving the FOF website and social media, fine-tuning the FOF financial reporting, managing all complexities of the Boardwalk Expansion project, and planning FOF's most exciting event in years – "Discover the Jewel of the Everglades" coming up on the 5th March, 2016, at Naples Botanical Garden.

All the while, our fearless outdoor volunteers continue to machete their way into the Fakahatchee to assess the impact of the summer rain and explosive growth in the Park in order to prepare once more to clear out the most favored trails for our visitors.

Even our globe trotters on the Board travelling the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Labrador, Maine, Grand Canyon, Ohio, Michigan stay connected to the FOF via e-mail and attend Board meetings on the conference phone line, all much to the dismay of their spouses I'm sure!

I mention this because I have seen a big difference in the FOF summer workload since I joined the Board in 2010. The continued success of the FOF lies in our capacity to stay connected and "run the business" all year round, and so I extend my most sincere appreciation to all who recognize their role in this letter.

My sense of pride comes easy – I'm associated with the very best Friends one could have!



Francine Stevens was at the ribbon-cutting in May of the new community center at Eagle Lakes in East Naples named in honor of County Commissioner Donna Fiala whose constituency includes the Fak.

HACKING IN THE FAK

by Dino Barone

Ah, August has arrived, and so have the dog days of summer. Finally, within the last couple of weeks, steady afternoon rains are slowly filling in the ditches alongside Janes Scenic Drive and next to many of the trams. The water levels in the Sloughs are slowly rising and you can begin to see the sheet flow of water endeavoring to flow south. I am sure the gators are happy, as they can begin to move out of crowded lakes, ponds and their favorite gator holes that have been sustaining them since February, to new areas along the linear strand swamp.

The FOF, with their intrepid Fearless FAKA-hackers, have been busy out and about in the Park. Most mornings start out with clear blue skies, temperatures as low as 80, humidity around 50%, if we are lucky maybe even a slight breeze. We know this is as good as it will be all day. We are undeterred. As that orange globe ascends, radiating its heat down onto the moist prairies, breezes come in from the coast, meeting up with the rising columns of hot moist air from the prairies, thus creating its own weather system. Combine this with any of the other numbers of micro weather systems and the afternoon weather has the potential to become wicked very fast. Downpours and electrifying lightning storms are the new norm for August and September afternoons. One must always be cognitive of the surrounding weather, with a safety action plan ready to initiate.

Trees and vegetation are all growing fast. With our afternoon storms, lightning-struck trees either fall or major branches break off, all causing a domino effect on neighboring trees, usually entangled with the various vines. Sometimes the sheer weight of the water will cause the upper canopy to collapse. Some of these end up partially or completely blocking Janes Scenic Drive or the trams. Park Rangers and FAKA-hackers are out and about, doing our best to keep Janes unobstructed for Park visitors or for crews who have to respond to a lightning-induced wildfire in one of the prairies.

Ah, August – heat, humidity, and the sometimes pesky Fakahatchee Phlebotomist (aka The Mosquito) – we endure while earning our sweat equity FAKA-hacking. The dividend for park visitors is the marsh hare seen crossing Janes. Maybe that once-in-a-lifetime sighting of the majestic Florida Panther just up the recently cleared road, or even better yet, seeing Momma Bear and her cub walking out of the strand, causally heading that a way for a distance, pausing, then back in to the strand for more life's lessons or an afternoon siesta.

NEW VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

Park Ranger Melissa Miano has moved away from the Fak and her role as volunteer coordinator has been taken over by WynLyn McBride, administrative assistant at the Park office in Copeland.

You can email her at WynLyn.McBride@dep.state.fl.us.

Fakahatchee Swampwalk Reflections

by Quinn Hiaasen

The Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is a wetland in the Florida Everglades. Recently we had the treat of visiting this wild place. It is one of the most biologically rich places in the United States, and contains many species that are found nowhere else in North America.

I have always loved nature, and being in the middle of it. The silence and serene qualities of the "middle of nowhere" are very intriguing to me. The swamp was quite literally, the "middle of nowhere". I was blown away by how small you suddenly feel as you walk deeper into the swamp. Its beauty can pull you further and further into it, and before you know it, you are lost in a seemingly endless landscape of marsh.

As a photographer, the Fakahatchee Strand was the most dramatic environment I have ever been in. Light refracts through the water vapor rising off of the saturated marsh floor, casting long shadows behind trees and plants. Fallen cypress stumps display their ancient architecture that has been etched into their wood by hundreds of years of enduring the watery domain. Water droplets cling to the leaves of bromeliads as a morning dew settles on the plant. Ferns and orchids attach themselves to trunks of pond apple trees. Alligators bask beneath a layer of green slime, patiently waiting for their next meal. There seemed to be an endless number of frames to capture, every square foot of the swamp was special in its own way. I soon realized, however, that I had to pace myself and look for the things that you may walk by without even noticing.

It was an incredible trip. I have come away with some amazing photographs, as well as fond memories. Someday I hope to go into this swamp again, and continue to explore more of the 80,000 acres of wilderness.



Quinn is the son of author Carl Hiaasen whose family visited the Fak at the end of May. Quinn is a talented photographer and will have a one-man show at the Museum in Everglades City during the months of November & December this winter.

BOARDWALK REPORT

by Karen Relish

(regular reporter Linda Koreny is on vacation)

At the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk, one has been seeing and especially hearing White-eyed Vireos, Carolina Wrens, Cardinals, Pileated Woodpeckers and Red-bellied Woodpeckers. The Red-bellied Woodpecker adult male can be differentiated from the female with its visible red on its forehead, cap and nape or back of the neck. The female Red-bellied Woodpecker has visible red on its nape not forehead. The juvenile Red-bellied Woodpecker does not appear to have any red. The faint reddish color of the "Red-bellied" is closer to the legs and does not extend upward. They have a "rolling call" and an "undulating flight." The Red-Bellied Woodpecker is the most commonly observed Woodpecker at Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.

At the Boardwalk, one has also been seeing **vultures** both Black and Turkey.



Red-bellied Woodpeckers Left: Adult Male Middle: Juvenile Bottom. Adult Female

Photos thanks to Dick Brewer.





Patrick in his Fakahatchee cap and the Higgins family overlooking Derwent Water in England's Lake District. As you can see, it wasn't quite as warm there as here.

TRAVELLERS' TALES

by Patrick Higgins

Martha and Patrick Higgins went back to England to see their 3 grandchildren, the highlight of which was camping and hill-walking together in Lake District National Park, a ruggedly beautiful part of NW England with black-faced sheep, towering peaks rising from sea level and stone walls running almost straight up them.

Along the way Patrick was invited to give a talk to the Royal British Legion on the Fakahatchee. The audience included one fine old gentleman who operated fast motor torpedo boats in World War II, probably constructed from Fakahatchee's cypresses, who was still able to outpace Patrick to the pub afterwards!

Where have you been this summer??? Send us your TRAVELLER'S TALES ... whether they be visiting nearby family or exploring exotic places. Email about 300 words (and a photo?) to FOF_90@hotmail.com

A Big ULTRA Birthday Gift

Bob Becker, who organizes the Everglades Ultras races in the Fak, completed the Badwater Double (292 miles in 2 runs) in the parching desert near in Death Valley in August. He is only one of 27 people to achieve the double and, at 70 years of age, the oldest one.

The next Ultra Marathons in the Fak are on **February 20**. See www.evergladesultras.com for details and to sign up.



Approximately, forty 7-8 year old campers from the Greater Naples YMCA visited the Big Cypress Swamp including the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk in early August. The campers readily share their outdoor experiences and ask great questions, especially in the shade where it is cooler.

report by Mike Owen, photo by Karen Relish



Dino Barone sent this photo of a 9-foot alligator skeleton that he found in the Fak on a weekend in mid-August. He was also pleased to see a momma gator with some new hatchlings and plenty of water in some places.



One man's fruit; another man's poison

by Patrick Higgins

After spending July in England I was ready for a Fakahatchee fix. So still jet-lagged I headed to the swamp, stopping first at Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk to see how our new signs were faring. Donning my Fakahatchee cap and in a matching shirt, I was an obvious target as I stepped out of my SUV and was quickly waylaid by a charming French couple and their ten year old daughter. They asked if the Indian Village was worth visiting. Hmm - a common misconception that our new entrance will address.

They had pulled over to picnic and complained they had just been on an airboat tour and not seen a single gator. They quoted their guide, "with so little water gators are hard to find." This was August. When I left the rainy season was in full swing. What was up?

I ended up giving our French guests an extended tour, but sure enough there wasn't any water until the gator hole, except for the small pond in the root hollow created by a toppled tree. Nevertheless they were delighted. I was able to point out a well camouflaged 6 ft female alligator with half a dozen hatchlings in the borrow ditch. The hatchlings were the smallest I'd ever seen and couldn't have been more than a day old. After that a barred owl obligingly flew in and roosted not 10 ft from us and a 5-lined skink let us get close—up and personal. Their day was made. The new signs were holding up well by the way.

My next stop was to check out Six-pipe slough on Janes Scenic Drive. Instead of water gushing through the culvert, there was barely as much water as we had for our winter swamp walks. If rain didn't come to the Fakahatchee soon, and lots of it, the season ahead looked tough.

It was then that I spied the marbled-green fruit of a pond, aka custard apple. Pond apples, (*Annona glabra*) with their cherry-like bark, big glossy leaves and buttressed trunks are one of my favorite trees. They bear the largest fruit of any of our natives and its light wood was used by Calusa and later Native Americans to make fishing floats. The pond apple also happens to be the larval food of the giant sphinx moth; the pollinator of the ghost orchid. Although the vast majority of our ghosts are found on pop ash trees, about 15% utilise pond apples.

I collected a fallen fruit and sliced a wedge out with my knife, being careful to avoid the poisonous seeds and took a bite. Not quite ripe - the flesh hadn't yet turned yellow. Perhaps a passing vehicle had detached this one prematurely. Its taste was not unpleasant, although a bit insipid with just a hint of passion fruit. But it's an important wildlife food, hence one of its other aliases alligator apple, although more commonly it's consumed by turtles, birds, raccoons and squirrels.

Pond Apples trees were once much more common in Florida. Patrick D. Smith, in his *A Land Remembered*, paints a portrait of a vast bygone pond apple forest that grew along the southern shores of Lake Okeechobee, swarming with moon vine, airplants and Carolina parakeets that has since been destroyed by drainage dikes to make way for sugarcane and other agriculture.

Like most of our tropicals, the pond apple is at the northernmost limit of its range. They naturally occur on both sides of the Atlantic aided by their buoyant fruit and range from South Florida through the West Indies, to South American and West Africa.

Due to its hardiness and tolerance of brackish conditions *A. glabra* has been used as a rootstock to graft some of its more desirable cousins, such as soursop (*A. muricata*) and sugar apple (*A. squamosa*). What's one man fruit is another man's poison. In Australia escapees from this process have become highly invasive, especially in the wet tropics of northern Queensland where ironically, or maybe in a case of poetic justice, the invasive pond apple threatens their melaleuca wetlands, as well as some native mangrove communities.

The Friends of Fakahatchee's Captain Franklins Adams remembers a large pond apple swamp along Janes Scenic Drive in the late 1950's and early 60's when the Fakahatchee was still a State of Florida Wildlife Management Area run by the old Game & Freshwater Fish Commission.

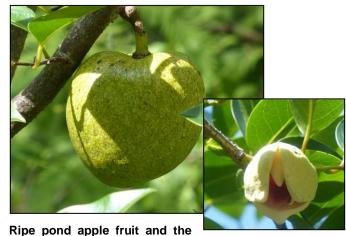
Franklin says, "My family and friends would camp and sometimes hunt the area for turkeys or buck deer. Janes Scenic Drive had not been designated and the old main logging road was then referred to locally as the Copeland Grade."

"The pond apple swamp location as I recall was near the west end of the Copeland Grade primarily on the south side of the tram. In the evening wood ducks would fly into the pond apple swamp to roost for the night. We sometimes camped in the wide spot on the south side of the grade where today there are some sour orange trees, the Fakahatchee sign and a water gauge location. On the opposite side are the old rock borrow pits."

"1961 was a drought year and may have been the year that fire was able to enter the pond apple swamp and burn the muck down to the limestone foundation. Nothing remained of this beautiful area and subsequent wet seasons filled the limestone cavities with detritus."

Franklin has been back a number of times to try and find the pond apple swamp's remains but there's no trace of it. For now we'll have to be content with a scattering of trees along our trams and Janes Scenic Drive and the population deep in the swamp.

Patrick Higgins is a National Association of Interpretation Certified Interpreter, Vice-President of the Friends of Fakahatchee, and Project Manager for the development of the Boardwalk Master Interpretive Plan.



creamy yellow flower of the pond apple with petals and sepals in 3's.

Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve – Fort Myers' Mini Fakahatchee?

by Bruce Bunch

A little more than 70 miles to the north of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park is Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve, a 3800 acre natural oasis in the middle of Fort Myers' housing developments and commercial centers.

At first glance, Six Mile would seem to have little in common with the Fakahatchee. North Fort Myers residents Janet and Bruce Bunch, who volunteer for both preserves, see a number of similarities.

Bruce explains, "Both preserves owe their existence to the efforts of an individual - Mel Finn in the case of the Fakahatchee and high school teacher Bill Hammond for Six Mile. Hammond organized a group of his students who led the drive to save the Slough from development."

The similarities between the Fakahatchee and Six Mile are numerous - both feature boardwalks, abundant wildlife and are known for guided swamp walks - called wet walks in the Slough. Both have active Friends groups that raise funds for park needs, offer programs, and promote park activities.

Because of its location, Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve attracts more visitors than the Fakahatchee – a record 198,000 last year. Janet Bunch, who leads tours of the Slough boardwalk, says a number of the visitors stop by to recharge their batteries before heading to nearby Southwest Florida International Airport. "It's remarkable - you can be looking at gators, snakes and herons one minute and be checking your bags at a modern airport fifteen minutes later," she notes.

The flora and fauna of the two sites are similar, minus the ghost orchid for the Slough. But a panther did hang out there two years ago.

"We love both preserves and are amazed at the similarities," Bruce says. "Because the Slough is funded by Lee County, it has a modern eco-friendly visitor center, paved parking lot and other amenities visitors appreciate. Because of its location, you have to make an effort to find the Fakahatchee, but once you do, you are hooked."

For more info about Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve, see www.leeparks.org/parks and click on Parks in left column.



The Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve Boardwalk passes several ponds that teem with wildlife. One is named for otters.



Guided wet walks are a popular offering of Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve. Photos by Janet Bunch



ROOKERY BAY NEWS

Gary Lytton has retired as director of Rookery Bay NERR after 25 years and is now executive director of Friends of Rookery Bay.

He has been replaced at the NERR by Keith Laakkonen, a native Floridian whose last position was environmental sciences coordinator for the Town of Fort Myers Beach.

For more information and a list of the many events, see www.rookerybay.org.

Fak Featured Online

The Fakahatchee was the focus on the Friends of Florida State Parks website in May with a big splash in their monthly online newsletter sent to members by email.



See www.friendsoffloridastateparks.org and click on Newsletters to read all about us.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

We have 314 current memberships plus 38 in arrears from the 2nd and 3rd quarters. For info, call Jinny at (239) 695-1023.

Renewal notices for the 4th quarter will go out by email in early October but if you want to renew before that, just go to our website www.orchidswamp.org and click on "Join Us".

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

Alicia Astorga, Naples Tere Comancho, Miami Ted Center, Ft Lauderdale Diane & Robert Dempsey, Madison, WI Nicole DiSantos, Canada Robbyn Drake, Buffalo, NY Kristin Foster, Naples Scott Little, Oakland Park Bob Ravitz, Naples Kathleen Tennison, Tampa Chuck Wagner, Cooper City



The Fakahatchee tram carried dignitaries during the Independence Day Parade in Everglades City, thanks to Glen Stacell who drove the truck and to Francine Stevens who made the guests welcome.

<u>What Are We?</u> <u>Who Are We?</u>
The Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation <u>Citizen 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 400 copies.

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