

The Ghost Writer

DECEMBER 2013

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

EVENTS

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

GUIDED SWAMP WALKS

1st and 3rd Saturday

\$50/member, \$70/non-member
Reservations Required.

GHOST RIDER TRAM TOURS

Tuesday, 1st Saturday at 10am

\$25/person, Reservations Required.
Resume on December 10.

COASTAL CRUISES

Thurs, Dec 19, 2:30pm

Tues, Feb 18, 2:30pm

Wed, March 19, 2:30pm

\$75/person, Reservations Required.

WELCOME-BACK DINNER

Saturday, December 7, 5:00pm

Everglades Seafood Depot
Reservations are Required!

BOARD MEETING

Sunday, December 8, 10 a.m.

Ranger Station, Copeland

LOST & FOUND IN CUBA

Sat, March 1, 5:00pm

SAVE THE DATE!!!

*details of orchid adventures evening
to be announced soon ...*

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



Florida State Parks received the Gold Medal Award for the "Best State Parks in the USA" for an unprecedented third time from the National Recreation and Parks Association. FOF President Francine Stevens (white shirt) was at the November CSO meeting to accept the plaque with other CSO and park representatives. *Photo by Tom Maish.*

CHRISTMAS CRUISE

Start celebrating the holiday season on **Thursday, December 19**, with a Coastal Cruise to historic Fakahatchee Island. Festive fare will be served on the boat during our return journey. Places are limited so visit www.orchidswamp.org for reservations.



Ghost Rider Tram Tours

Our first Ghost Rider Tram Tour of the winter is on **Tuesday, December 10**, and every Tuesday thereafter, plus the first Saturday in the month. This is a great way to see the Fakahatchee without getting your feet wet. The tours last 2½ hours and the tram can accommodate wheelchairs. You can make reservations at www.orchidswamp.org



Janet Bunch (center) led a training session for FOF volunteers.
Read about this and other news in the President's Message on page 4.

Visit www.orchidswamp.org for events, newsletters, glorious photos, and more.

M.O.ZONE - Seen Around the Strand

On 10/17/13, at 8:40AM, Bente Torvund, Administrative Assistant, observed a **Black and White Warbler**, a **Northern Parula**, a **Prairie Warbler**, **White-eyed Vireo**, two **Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers**, and a **Palm Warbler** behind the Park office. On 10/18/13, in the morning Mike Owen, Biologist, observed a female **Anhinga** basking along edge of Coastline Drive and in the evening heard a **Great Horned Owl** near Park Headquarters.

On 10/21/13 at 4:15PM, Howard Lubel observed 4 **Roseate Spoonbills** standing in the West Prairie about ½ mile down and about 75 yards west of JSD. On 10/23/13 at 10:20AM, Glen Stacell, volunteer, observed a male **American Redstart** on Janes Scenic Drive just south of the Fire tower and Bente Torvund observed one on 11/1/13 in the afternoon on the oak tree at the office. On 10/23/13 and 10/24/13, in the late morning and early afternoon, Mike Owen observed an **American Kestrel** just past the Harmon Building which had landed on JSD and then flew east and landed in an oak, whereas the other was about a 1.5 miles down and just off JSD before it flew south.

On 10/24/13, at 1:40PM, Mike Owen and Karen Johnson, volunteer, observed a **Florida Black Bear** about 90 pounds that ran and dove into the East ditch with two loud splashes off of JSD past Gate 7/West Main. On 10/25/13, at 2:35PM, Bente Torvund observed an immature reddish-brown female **Indigo Bunting** on JSD about 30 feet West of SR-29 at the intersection of SR-29 and US-41. On 10/27/13, in the late afternoon, Mike Owen observed a **Short-tailed Hawk** (white morph) circling over Park Headquarters and one later, in the early evening, soaring over Park Headquarters about 400 feet high to the west with **Black and Turkey Vultures** and saw another one in the early evening.

On 11/2/13, at 11:55 AM, at culverts on a log off of Janes Scenic Drive, Christian Brix, MD, visitor from Germany, observed 6 juvenile **American alligators** (see photo below). On 11/4/13, at 7:10AM, Patrick Higgins, volunteer, observed 4 **Wood Storks** feeding behind the Harmon Building and later observed a flock of 18 **Roseate Spoonbills** fly directly over the ranger station in a north easterly direction.

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 visitor Christian Brix, MD, from Germany for this photo of a baby gator (see M.O.ZONE above).



Thanks to Rose Flynn for this photo of the Slough Survey and Exploration led by Mike Owen on November. She reports: *It was an area in the Fakahatchee that Mike had not previously been to. He invited a bunch of Friends from all over the State, Canada, and even as far away as Austria to join him in surveying the sloughs we found. It was a fun and exciting day for all!*



Leather Ferns and fish-eating spider seen on the Boardwalk by Linda Koreny (read her report on page 3).

BOARDWALK REPORT

by Linda Koreny

Park volunteer, Lori Paulson, took a walk with me on the Boardwalk on a recent Sunday morning. Between us we found many things to easily capture our attention and our cameras. Three juvenile **American Alligators** were sunning themselves on the log in the west pond near the picnic tables (*see photo below*). They looked so lazy ...

We took note that the **Florida Bald Eagles'** nest is larger this winter and, while we were wondering whether they were laying eggs yet, we suddenly heard quite a bit of chatter and then one of them flew out of the nest and right over our heads. Does this mean they are laying eggs? Could be – this is the right time – we will be watching ...

As it turns out, Lori has a distinct aversion to spiders so, therefore, she manages to spot them even when they are almost totally camouflaged. This spider was about eye level on one of the twin snags just after the Bald Eagles' nest. Checking this out later with the Park Biologist we learned that it is a *Dolomedes okefinokensis* or better known as a **fishing or fish-eating spider**. According to Wikipedia: "*Dolomedes spiders are covered all over in short, velvety hairs which are unwettable (hydrophobic). This allows them to use surface tension to stand or run on the water, like pond skaters. They can also climb beneath the water, and then air becomes trapped in the body hairs and forms a thin film over the whole surface of the body and legs, giving them the appearance of fine polished silver. Like other spiders, Dolomedes breathe with book lungs beneath their abdomens, and these open into the air film, allowing the spiders to breathe while submerged. The trapped air makes them very buoyant and, if they do not hold onto a rock or a plant stem, they float to the surface where they pop onto the surface film, completely dry*"

Several **Leather Ferns** with their fiddleheads unfurling caught our eye as they had a very surreal, other worldly, but very interesting look which we both enjoyed photographing.

From the Observation Platform, we noticed two adult **American Alligators**. This is interesting because there was only one back here last winter as the second one had died. Though the water level is dropping quickly, there is still a considerable amount in the strand so they are apparently moving around. One day last week this second one was in the area just before the platform by the Turtle Sign and then she swam under this narrow section of the boardwalk four times which was so close and totally delighted our visitors and me!

Walking back we noticed a long, thin **Peninsula Ribbon Snake** right on the boards. She/he must have felt our vibration, quickly moved off onto the vegetation and out of view but not before we managed to get a snapshot.



Resource Management News

by Howard Lubel, Committee Chair

In the recent weeks, FOF's Resource Management Committee has completed several projects designed to educate the park's visitors and to enhance their experience in the Fakahatchee.

Working with Glen Stacell, we cleared a portion of the tram at gate 2, which will enable those visitors taking the Friends' Ghost Rider Tram tour to explore on foot an area of the park previously inaccessible. Many thanks to FOF members Paul Joslyn, Jay Staton, Niki & Jim Woodard and Dino "chain saw" Barone for their hard work clearing this tram trail.

We also trimmed foliage and cleared debris on Janes Scenic Drive between gates 7 and 12 to make the drive more enjoyable for visitors wanting to use their cars or bikes to explore the park. Again, thanks are due to Paul and Dino for their volunteer spirit. Another work day found us clearing East Main Tram of hog plum, Brazilian pepper, smilax, and poison ivy in order to make the hiking and biking experience more fun. The up-close contact with the park's charismatic wildlife and many species of bromeliads made this day enjoyable for our volunteers as well. The swamp buggy ride was worth the hard work on the tram. Thanks to Jen Stine, Rose Flynn, and Dino for their time and effort. Thanks are also due to Craig Britton for his work and hospitality throughout the years.

The committee has also supported the rangers' efforts to control exotic and invasive species and to maintain tram trails by purchasing tools and equipment used in this important park goal. FOF recently acquired pumps, hoses, spray guns, machetes, and a pole saw for this work and has donated them to the park. The purchases were made with funds donated in the last annual fundraising campaign. Thanks to all of you who contributed to this effort.

Resource management committee members Patrick Higgins, Tony Marx, and Dino Barone have just completed Python Patrol Responder Training at Big Cypress National Preserve. Although the Fakahatchee has not been besieged with this invasive species yet, the Friends now have our own python capture team in readiness.

The committee's next objective is to assist FOF member, Bob Becker, in preparation for the Everglades Ultramarathon to be held in the Fakahatchee on February 22, 2014. We could sure use help preparing trails for this major event. Anyone able to offer some volunteer time will likely get to see some of the park's more remote areas. For more info and to volunteer, contact Dino at sunnyg8tr@aol.com.

Baby gators at the Boardwalk.

For more Boardwalk photos, see page 2.

President's Message

by Francine Stevens, FOF President

This month I care to start my letter by welcoming **Tina Streeter** as a new Director to the FOF Board; the Board voted in favor of Tina taking a vacant seat expiring April 2014. You will see Tina's name connected to organizing our upcoming event on March 1st 2014 about the orchid restoration project lead by **Dennis Giardina**. Tina, like a few of us on the Board, has a full time job so I don't take for granted that she is willing to give some of her time to serve FOF.

CSO District 4 meeting in Venice, FL: On the 17th November I attended a one-day seminar with park manager **Renee Rau** and Boardwalk Vision chair **Tom Maish**. The room was filled with other CSO's and the exchanges that took place during the day made me realize that the FOF is an ambitious CSO and a CSO who in many respect is ahead of the curve. I attribute this to the quality of business and life experience that each Board Director brings to the table; each Director could be volunteering for any other organization in this area, there certainly is no lack of choices, but they chose to volunteer to FOF. I don't take their dedication for granted and was quite proud to represent the FOF in Venice.

Training for Volunteers update: **Janet Bunch** is a certified Interpretive Guide by the National Association of Interpretation and completed all three University of Florida Master Naturalist programs; she's also certified as volunteer Naturalist by Lee County Parks & Recreation and leads Boardwalk and wet walk tours at Six Mile Cypress Slough. The reason why I'm taking the time to bring her credits to your attention is because, as busy as she is, she took the time to spend the afternoon of the 17th November to give a training/awareness session to volunteers who answered **Glen Stacell's** (chair of Education and Interpretation) call to get more leaders and assistants to help out with the Ghost Rider tram tours, the swamp walks and the Fakahatchee Island cruises. The turn-out was better than expected as I counted 23 volunteers at the session. My sincere appreciation to Janet

who shared her expertise with the group and to the volunteers who have decided to forge ahead and help us increase our success in raising awareness about the Fakahatchee and therefore support FOF.

Boardwalk project: You will recall in my November letter that the Board voted to hire a LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) consultant to review the state's 60% Boardwalk blue prints. Well – mission accomplished, the Boardwalk Vision committee chaired by **Tom Maish** wasted no time considering proposals received by two LEED consulting firms and, after selecting one, checked references and retained David Corban, a LEED consultant in Naples. David was at the proposed construction site several times, met our very tight deadline, and the Boardwalk Vision committee has already submitted the recommendations to DEP for review. We await DEP's invitation to discuss the recommendations and their feasibility.

Annual Fund update: Each one of you who so far contributed to this year's annual fund assured **Jinny Ball** and **Bruce Bunch** that their time was well spent preparing and mailing almost 400 envelopes. Next time you drive down Janes Scenic, stop and get out of your vehicle and look down at the rocks laid on the road and pat yourself on the back for your help stabilizing Janes Scenic; we really could not have done it without YOU !

In the field: on the weekend of 9th of November **Howard Lubel**, chair of Resource Management committee, organized a group of energized volunteers to clear the turn-around point of the Ghost Rider tram – a nice demonstration of team work as this committee chair was receptive to **Glen Stacell's** Chair of Education and Interpretation suggestion to do so. Some interesting discoveries took place during the clearing and will be shared with all Ghost Riders.



Above: Fresh crayfish chimneys on Lee-Cypress Prairie after the dry-down.

Right: A rampant crayfish caught in the open who probably lost a claw in a struggle with an Ibis.



Beneath the Prairie



Crawfish seen from above, photo courtesy Rose Flynn.

Beneath the Prairie

by Patrick Higgins

I happened to step out on the south end of Lee-Cypress Prairie on the very day in mid-October when the last of the water receded. That event was so fresh the black mud was still glistening. As I stood still to take in the scene I could hear water seeping back into my footprints. The grassy arrowhead, whose white billowing flowers had dominated the prairie only weeks before, had now mostly gone to seed.

This year's rain had come early and heavily, and as the whole Prairie tilts ever so slightly to the southwest, water had stood here long and deep enough that most of the clumps of bunch grass had rotted away. This left wide spaces between each arrowhead plant. On the surface between them was a patchwork of overlapping prints from half a dozen species of wading birds that had feasted here only days before on their concentrated prey of amphibians, small fish and crustaceans. They had now moved on.

But something else was happening. All around me the surviving crayfish were busy excavating their burrows down to the water table where they would spend most of the dry season. Their chimneys looked like piles of miniature black meatballs and their earthworks contrasted starkly in patches where the dun-colored periphyton had already dried.

At 3 to 5 inches, crayfish are the Park's largest invertebrates. There are something like 350 species in North America. Some are obligate burrowers and others not, and many of them are such habitat specialists that they may occupy only one particular river basin system. We have more than 50 species here in Florida, even some cave dwelling troglodytes, and two that make the Fakahatchee their home. These are the similar looking Everglades Crayfish (*Procambarus alleni*) that we find on the wet prairies and the Slough Crayfish (*P. fallax*) who are less adapted to seasonal drying and favor more permanent water like their namesake sloughs.

Crayfish are non-selective omnivores. They will eat almost anything organic they can catch or scavenge and chop up small enough to put in their mouths, including algae, plant material, fish eggs, worms and insects. But they're also cannibals too, usually directed from larger to smaller and particularly molting individuals. Like all arthropods they have a rigid exoskeleton and need to periodically molt to grow, and it is at this stage when they are most vulnerable. Maybe because of this, females exhibit some parental care.

Most crustaceans release their eggs into the water and do not care for them. Crayfish females carry their eggs on their swimmerets to protect them from predators and here they hatch as perfect miniatures and go through three molts before releasing and taking up free-living lives, thus increasing their survival rate. They reach sexual maturity in about two months and probably live up to three years although chances of surviving that long are pretty slim. There are sharp beaks everywhere. Females in their burrows are egg laden at the end of the dry season and young crayfish are very quickly able to

repopulate newly flooded prairies. This makes them critical prey for wading birds in the lag before fish species appear in any quantity.

Crayfish are a vital component of Fakahatchee's food web by dint of both their sheer numbers and because virtually anything that can catch a crayfish will eat it. There are at least 40 species of vertebrates that feed on them: from fish to pig frogs, water snakes, young alligators, raccoons and wading birds. They are a particular favourite of ibis who use their long curved bills to probe for them. On my visit the exposed mud was still pitted with holes from their foraging.

The numbers of crayfish tend to increase with the plant community's complexity as this provides both shelter from predators and increased food resources. True to form, where I first stepped on to the denuded beginning of the Prairie, I was observing about 2 - 3 burrows per square meter, but by a quarter of a mile in, where there was more vegetation, up to eight, and remember this was after the feasting of the dry-down when the population is at its lowest.

But their role as a food source is only part of their importance. In wet prairies they may be considered a keystone species with a role analogous to that of the gopher tortoise in the pine flatwoods, but on a miniature scale. Crayfish burrows serve as refuges for many other small aquatic organisms that retreat to them as the prairie dries and then quickly repopulate it when water returns. Also by heaping up piles of earth they are creating perfect habit for seeds to grow where fire has not exposed the soil. Whatever name you call them, crayfish, crawfish, crawdaddies or mudbugs, crayfish are a vital part of the Fakahatchee's ecosystem.

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



Grassy Arrowhead blooming on Lee Cypress Prairie and standing water 2 weeks before the dry-down. More photos on page 4.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

We have 263 fully-paid memberships plus 49 names in arrears who have not renewed from previous quarters. Watch for your renewal notice in early December if you joined in the 4th quarter of the year.


Do not confuse membership with the Annual Fund Appeal which goes directly to park needs ("rocks" this year).

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

Eric Bauer, Woodbridge, OH
Lyn Brown, Ft Myers
William Dettinger, Naples
Anthony Humpage, Ft Myers
Ginny Roseberry, Marco Island
Jane Stevens, Ft Myers
Peter Vertin, French Lick, IN

**BEST WISHES FOR
A JOYOUS HOLIDAY
AND A PEACEFUL NEW YEAR!**

ANNUAL FUND PASSES \$10k MARK!

The 2014 Friends of Fakahatchee Annual Fund campaign has already raised more than \$10,000 from 64 donors, surpassing last year's total of \$9,027. 

Last year's total wasn't achieved until early in the new year so Marya Repko, who has the happy duty of depositing the donations, expects the 2014 total to grow even more.

The campaign kicked off in November with a letter from FOF President Francine Stevens requesting tax-deductible donations for the park. This year, donations will go to the purchase of rock to fill the pothole-pocked park roads.

"We are very gratified by the response to this year's campaign, as is Park Manager Renee Rau," said Stevens. "The rock purchased with our donations will make the park experience better for everyone."

There's still time to make a donation to this year's Annual Fund campaign and be eligible for a deduction on your 2013 income tax. We will, of course, acknowledge your contribution formally.

Please make your check out to FOF Annual Fund and mail to Friends of Fakahatchee, PO Box 35, Everglades City, FL 34139.

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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OFFICERS:	President – Francine Stevens	Vice-President – Glen Stacell			
	Secretary – Jinny Ball	Treasurer – Kathleen DaSilva			
BOARD:	Jinny Ball	Bruce Bunch	Kathleen DaSilva	Frank Denninger	Shaun Floyd
	Rose Flynn	Dennis Giardina	Patrick Higgins	John Kaiser	Howard Lubel
	Tony Marx	Ken Shapiro	Glen Stacell	Francine Stevens	Tina Streeter

LIFETIME PRESERVERS: Bruce & Janet Bunch

LIFETIME MEMBERS: Warner Blow, Peter Haffenreffer, Tom & Judy Maish, James Nici, Ken Shapiro, Glen & Laura Stacell

BUSINESS PATRONS: EarthTech Environmental, Naples Bicycle Tours, North American Canoe Tours, Shamrock Bank, Shurr Adventures

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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)

NAME _____
STREET / P.O.BOX: _____

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ALTERNATE ADDRESS _____

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CITY _____
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MONTHS AT ALTERNATE ADDRESS:

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