



The Ghost Writer

MARCH 2016

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

Thursday at 10am

MOONLIGHT TRAM TOUR

Mar 22

TRAM TOUR & SWAMP WALK

Tuesday at 9:30am

BIOLOGIST'S SWAMP WALK

Saturday at 9:30am

GUIDED BOARDWALK TOUR

Thursday at 9am

FOF BOARD MEETING

Saturday, March 12, 1:30 p.m.
Ranger Station, Copeland

ANNUAL VOLUNTEER

APPRECIATION PICNIC

Saturday, March 12, 4:00 p.m.
see President's Message on page 5

ANNUAL MEMBERS' DINNER

Sunday, April 10, 5:00 p.m.
see President's Message on page 5



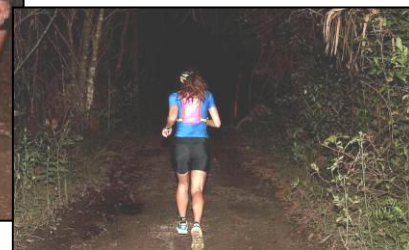
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The EVERGLADES ULTRAS marathons took place in the Fakahatchee for most of the day on February 20. Runners started the 50-mile race at 6am. Photos thanks to Jay Staton. See more on page 3 and read the President's Message.



A comment on TripAdvisor was:

Ran the 25k trail run in Feb (look up Everglades Ultras). Beautiful park with extremely friendly park employees. If you want to run a 25k, 50k, or 50 miler I can't say enough about the run, well organized, great people. The park has a lot to offer, orchids, gators, panthers, bears ... it really is a unique and beautiful place.



Thanks to Helen "Bicky" Homer, an artist visiting our area for a few months during the winter, for these photos of fish swimming in JSD and an American Bittern which she sent on February 4 after an excursion into the Fakahatchee.



GET ON YOUR BIKE ...

Sign up for the Everglades Bike Ride on **Sunday, March 13**. One option is the "bumpy ride" on Janes Scenic Drive but there are also smooth rides around the Everglades City area. FOF benefits and FOF members get a discount.

To register, see www.evergladesrogg.org/j/frogg and click on Everglades Ride or phone Patty Huff (a former FOF President) at (239) 695-2397.

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

BOARDWALK REPORT

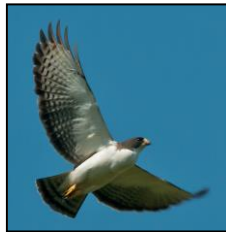
by Linda Koreny

The mother **American Alligator** has been consistently keeping her babies in the borrow canal in front of the Indian Village Gift Shop this winter. We are still counting up to at least 20 babies, a large number.

Kathy Hatch, a volunteer you might catch on any given Tuesday, sent this to share with you:

Last week visitors to the boardwalk watched a wildlife scenario. Mama gator was snoozing at the edge of the pond in the water. The babies were basking in the sun on a branch. Along stalks a great egret eyeing a tasty snack. It came closer and closer ever so slowly. Suddenly mama lunged out of the water! The egret backed off but persisted. Three times the mama had to leap out of the pond. It was exciting to watch Mother Nature at work. The babies survived ... this time.

An interesting array of visitors enjoy our Boardwalk. An experienced birder pointed out a **short-tailed hawk** flying over the gator pond. Since I was unfamiliar with this beautiful bird, I wanted to learn more. On the www.Audubon.org website, I read that sighting this bird is "very uncommon in Florida" which made the experience all the more exciting. The site said that Florida has a stable but widely scattered population of about 500. It flies high and "often appears to hang motionless in the air". This hawk prefers "open country next to woodland ... trees involved may be pines, cypress, mangroves or mixed swamp forest but must have large expanses of open prairie, farmland or marsh nearby" which describes the area of the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk to a "T".



There is still a lot of water in the strand and our resident alligators have changed their habits at the gator pond at the end of the Boardwalk – it is a treat when one of them swims into the area of the pond. In previous winter seasons, the alligators consistently chose the large log at the far end of the pond but there is still a lot of water there this year. Recently one swam in from the right toward the platform and then climbed onto the cypress log which supports the platform and made herself very comfortable. It was fun to watch her climb so effortlessly and it was so easy to see her. Others have reported the same experience so this must be her new favorite spot!

Plan to take a stroll on the Boardwalk any day from sunrise to sunset. A pair of binoculars will enhance your experience, a camera or art supplies will create memories of your time spent there, and/or join our **Thursday morning** naturalist-led interpretative tour by making reservations on www.orchidswamp.org and learn more about this amazing place.



Gators at the Boardwalk. See Report in left column.

FOF Vice-President Patrick Higgins emailed:

I saw my first pair of **swallow-tail kites** of the season swooping low over the trees on East Main by the Fakahatchee Hilton on Saturday, the 27th of February – always a welcome, spirit-lifting sight. By Sunday I was spotting them in Naples along Collier Boulevard, too.



FOF member and artist Jo-Ann Sanborn of Sunshine Studios at the Esplanade on Marco Island sent this observation:

Lately I've noticed a variety of birds fly overhead carrying a bit of string or dangling a twig. It's nesting time in South Florida. Even though the birds may nest in the same spot each year, they know that the grass gets dry and brittle over time, and sometimes bits of soft grass or just the right twig can shore up a weak spot. They are redecorating to make their home comfortable and pleasant while they stay home raising chicks. They are feathering their nests.

BOARDWALK REVIEW

A comment on TripAdvisor during mid-February by a visitor from Tucson, Arizona, said:

We were exploring Tamiami Trail (US Hwy. 41) and stopped at Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk, located on the north side of the road 8.8 miles east of San Marco Blvd. (Rt. 92). It is on the right side of the Seminole Gift Shop. This is a 1.2 mile long boardwalk trail with interpretative signs that meanders through a cypress swamp. The parking area and a short distance to the trail are gravel surface, the rest is boardwalk and we were able to traverse it with a wheelchair. We visited mid-day on a Saturday and there were a few people there but it wasn't crowded. We saw a bald eagle nest and interesting trees and plants very different from those in our local desert environment. The trail is open everyday from 8am to sunset and there is no admission fee, although donations for trail upkeep are encouraged and greatly appreciated. Portable restrooms are available at the trail head.

President's Message

by Francine Stevens

This month I must bring your attention to the Ultra Race marathons that took place in the Park on Saturday, February 20. Results posted on the **Everglades Ultra** website www.evergladesultras.com indicate that 200 runners made it to the finish line. Runners come accompanied by their family and friends and so the marathon brings a great number of folks in the Fakahatchee in just one day.

Once again the success of running the marathon in the Fakahatchee is the result of a collaboration between Park staff and volunteers. This winter they faced unusual challenges due to the excessive rain washing out Janes Scenic and the trails; clearing the marathon trajectory was a laborious task for all and since some trails remained either too muddy or flooded, much of the marathon took a difference course. I extend my sincere gratitude to all the volunteers who spent numerous weekends on the challenging task and to all the volunteers who came in the wee hours of the morning to help at the runners' stations along Janes Scenic and the open trails, to Jinny Ball who patiently represented the FOF at a table under the giant tent, and to the last volunteers who stayed into the evening – without your collaborative effort the marathon would not be possible.

A special thank you to Bob Becker, President of Ultra Sport LLC, www.ultrasportsllc.com, who adopted the Fakahatchee to hold the Everglades Ultra marathons. Bob has been extremely generous with his time volunteering in the Park and generous donations to the FOF. The 2017 race on February 18 is already posted.

The Annual Members dinner will take place at the Everglades Adventure Center in Everglades City on the Sunday, April 10. Perhaps you will care to bring your own flashlights in case another transformer blows out but fortunately we will be on Daylight Saving Time so our chances are good for dining in the light! Our special guest is William J. Mitch, Eminent Scholar and Director of the Everglades Wetlands Research Park. Please read all about his accomplishments at

<http://www.fgcu.edu/swamp/BillMitsch.html>.

Expect to receive the Annual Dinner invitations via e-mail and instructions to register.

Already into the month of March, the FOF Board of Directors is again hosting the **afternoon Volunteer Appreciation picnic set for Saturday March 12, from 4 pm** to last person leaving. All our members have received their invitations via e-mail with instructions on how to register. This year the Everglades Astronomical Society <http://naples.net/~nfn19284/eas/> is joining us and will set up their telescopes so we can all have a close look at the magical sky above us – we are all hoping for a clear night sky on the March 12th. The Society has been favoring the dark sky of the Fakahatchee for 30 years.

I am looking forward to seeing you at the picnic on the shore Lake Harmon.



Ultra Sports founder Bob Becker welcomed runners for the early 50m race. Volunteers staffed the aid stations along the way, handing out welcome drinks. Shorter races started in daylight.

Thanks to Jay Staton for sharing the album of photos he took during the Ultras on his Flickr page:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/140426185@N04/sets/72157664316699879/with/24589493904/>

Fearless FAKA-hackers

by Dino Barone

We received this report and photos by 14-year-old Jonathan of Miami. It is the third time he has been helping in the Fak.

On February 13 I was working with the Faka-hackers at Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park clearing trails for the upcoming ultra-marathon race. I saw all these amazing animals and took photos of some of them. We saw a **Barred owl** gripping a bird with orange legs in its talons, a **Virginia Opossum**, a couple of **Alligators**, **Great Egrets** and **Gray Catbirds**. The name Catbird sounds weird but the reason for the bird's name is the cat noises they make. They were seen mostly near the ground unlike most birds seen when looking up in the trees or air.

I always have a great time at Fakahatchee because of all the beautiful people, animals, and plants (mud and water) found there.



Nicole, Uncle Dave, Jonathan (black shirt)
photo courtesy of Fred Dolan



On Saturday, February 13, we had a tremendous turnout. A total of 17 came on out to help with last minute clearing & trimming on the trams that were used for the 5th running of the Everglades Ultras marathons on February 20. Due to the size we broke up into two groups. Pictured here, L-R: Nicole, Dave, Jonathan, Stephen, Jürgen, Uncle Dave, Fred, and Dino



ELUSIVE EVERGLADES MINK

FOF member and photographer Jay Staton is documenting the rare Everglades Mink which lives in the Fak but he needs more motion-sensitive cameras like the one which captured this photo on the right and was paid for by donations.

You can help by visiting website www.gofundme.com and searching for "Fakahatchee".

DEP HOTLINE

To report environmental crimes in the Fakahatchee, call 1-877-272-8335 (1-877-2 SAVE FL) or dial #DEP on your cell phone.



FWC News

You can read the news and regulations about hunting, fishing, and animals at the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission website www.myfwc.com.

GUARD YOUR VALUABLES!

You lock your home when you leave. Why don't you lock your car?

And, even if you do click the vehicle doors shut, why do you leave purses, cell phones, and shopping bags in full view where they're a temptation for thieves to break in and take them? Always stow valuables away in the trunk, out of sight.

Please be careful during this busy season. There are gangs of thieves just waiting for the opportunities we provide at tourist sites such as the Fakahatchee Boardwalk.

If you see anything suspicious, phone the Collier County Sheriff at (239) 352-9300 or, in emergency, dial 911.



Dino Barone sent this photo taken on February 13 at Moccasin Corner at the west end of West Main.



MSD FESTIVAL

Patrick Higgins spoke about the Boardwalk Expansion and Mike Owen talked about Orchid Restoration at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Festival in the Museum of Everglades during the week of February 23. The keynote speaker at the opening luncheon was FOF historian Franklin Adams who recalled his friendship with Marjory.

The annual festival in the third week of February draws hundreds of visitors for talks, walks, and trips in the greater Everglades including the Fakahatchee.

IN THE NEWS

A family from Jupiter posted this review on TripAdvisor at the end of February::

Thank you Patrick Higgins for a wonderful day on the Fakahatchee Strand, walking in the Swamp, looking for rare Orchids, plants and animals. We learned a lot about the ecology and history on our beautiful Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. This was our third Orchid Walk with our family and the weather was perfect. Our guides Patrick and Jim were experts in guiding our group through a recently new Orchid Walk area on the strand. We experienced new varieties of Orchids, plant and animal species. Please wear your sneakers and light weight pants on this swamp walk. Guides will provide water and a walking stick for you. Have a change of clothes and shoes when you get back to your vehicle. Our friends and family are looking forward to our next Orchid Walk in the near future.

Mollusking in the Fakahatchee – Part I

by Patrick Higgins

FOF Vice President, naturalist, and frequent swamp walk leader Patrick Higgins with an apple snail
(photo courtesy of Robert Fisher)



As I was recently stalking through one of Fakahatchee's sloughs, I found myself fantasizing that I was a great big wading bird. It seemed perfectly natural to move ponderously so as not to create a ripple in the golden water. I slid each foot forward in slow motion, conscious of everything around me; the sun streaming through a leafless winter canopy, a single red maple leaf floating by, a movement in the cutgrass to my left, the rustle of an anhinga taking flight ahead, the plop of a frog into the water. I froze as my eye caught something shimmering on the dark bottom. And then, fortunately just before I plunged the imaginary spear-like bill on my face into the water, I shook myself out of my reverie.

Instead I fished down clumsily with my hands, wetting my sleeves in the process. I had to feel around a bit due to refraction, but finally my fingers closed around my target. It was the fragment of a bivalve's shell and shone like burnished silver. When we think of swamp invertebrates our minds tend immediately to go to crayfish, insects, snails and such, but we seldom give much thought to the snail's mollusk cousin: the freshwater mussel.

After a bit more probing I was able to come up with a whole shell, although it was empty. Its ebony exterior was striated by growth rings, some of which had eroded revealing the iridescent mother-of-pearl beneath. In the center was a neatly chiseled rectangular opening, probably the work of a limpkin's bill. This is the same mother-of-pearl that was used for over half century in button production until plastic came into being in the 1940's. Today ground freshwater mussel shell is still favored as a seed material for Japan's cultured pearl industry.

However freshwater mussels are not simply freshwater versions of the marine mussels we love to eat cooked with butter and garlic and washed down with a glass of white wine. True, they both are aquatic filter feeders, sort of resemble each other by having asymmetrical shells that are longer than wide, and are both bivalves, but freshwater mussels are members of an entirely different subclass (*Palaeoheterodonta*). In fact marine mussels are more closely related to oysters and scallops than they are to their freshwater namesakes.

The biggest difference is in their life cycles. Marine mussels are sessile. They typically attach themselves in clumps with those stringy byssal threads we scrape off when preparing them for the pot. They reproduce by releasing sperms and eggs into the water in a rather hit or miss fertilization process and then go through a floating planktonic stage before settling out of the water column to live in a fixed location.

On the other hand, only male freshwater mussels release gametes into the water column which are then sucked into the female's siphon where her eggs are fertilized internally. They develop in specialized brood chambers in her gills into tiny motile glochidia. This specialized larval form has an array of hooks which allow them to attach to fish where they live as parasites for a period.

Many species are highly host specific. Some mussels even use mimicry to lure in host fish by packaging their glochidia to look like prey items such as fish eggs or insect larvae. Typically the glochidia attach to the fish's gills, although some species also

utilize the tail fins. This is an important adaptation to aid distribution. Otherwise in freshwater streams and rivers distribution would be one in direction only, i.e. downstream. After a few weeks feeding on the host fish they complete their metamorphosis into juvenile mussels, then detach and fall to the bottom to begin their adult stage.

This is where a second huge difference comes in. Freshwater mussels have a powerful clam-like foot which enables them, through a series of muscular contractions and expansions to burrow, anchor themselves or move along the bottom. It is seldom more than a few hundred feet but could be critical to survival as water levels drop. Finally they are known for their longevity. Some species live up to a hundred years.

The mussel I was holding in my hand appeared to be a Florida shiny spike (*Elliptio buckleyi* or to some taxonomists *E. jayensis*) – one of 365 North American, 62 Floridian, and 14 lower peninsula species. I say probably because many freshwater mussels are incredibly hard to identify without the aid of magnification as the same species from different habitats often have variations in shell shape. There is so much speciation in freshwater mussels because of their intolerance to saltwater. This inhibits spreading from one river basin to another, isolating populations. It is therefore not surprising that 69% of Florida's freshwater mussels are endemic, some to specific catchment areas.

To date three host fish species have been identified for Florida shiny spike's glochidia. These are Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, and the Florida Gar but in the incredible web of life about 40% of shiny spikes are in turn parasitized by several species of mites.

Freshwater mussels provide an important ecosystem function. As filter feeders they are constantly straining bacteria, algae and particulate matter from the water column, cleansing it in the process and reducing contaminant loads. They can filter as much as of 1-2 quarts per hour depending on the bivalve's size. Their fecal matter and ejected particulates then provide food for invertebrate communities that in turn support fish populations.

Although they occur in almost every freshwater habit except highly acid rivers which inhibit shell production, some 60 North American and 7 Florida freshwater mussel species are listed as threatened or endangered, mainly due to habitat loss or alternation such as from silting or pollution. So keep a look out for those tell-tale glittering fragments of mussel shells next time you're in the swamp.

Oh, one final difference between marine and freshwater mussels, they are prized food source by raccoons, otters, crayfish, and many wading birds and were consumed by Native Americans after much boiling but apparently taste like old boot – something I haven't put to the test yet!

A handful of Florida shiny spike (*Elliptio buckleyi*) freshwater mussels shells fished up from one of Fakahatchee's sloughs. They can grow up to 100 mm (3.9") The neatly chiseled holes look like the work of a limpkin (photo Patrick Higgins)



HAMMOCKS AND CYPRESS DOMES

by Tony Marx



Visitors to Southwest Florida are often intrigued by the undulating tree-covered backdrop which seems to comprise small hills. Most obvious as you drive along I-75 Alligator Alley, this is also evident in the Fakahatchee Strand State Park as you begin driving along the dirt-surfaced Janes Scenic Drive after leaving the paved road. Look to your right at the distant tree line and it is not level as you would expect, when viewed across the open marl prairie. Rather than a rise and fall in elevation, the dome shaped mounds of trees actually indicate a water-filled depression or solution hole under the dome. At its deepest point, the bald cypress trees grow tallest, gaining height and strength from the peat that accumulates at its deepest point. As the trees grow towards the sides of the dome, they grow shorter although in effect they are the same age.

These Cypress Heads or Domes, as they are called, remain wet all year round when the sawgrass prairie and open areas dry up and become parched during the winter and early spring Dry Season. Here alligators and wading birds collect to feed on the surviving aquatic life and the turkey vultures gather in great numbers to feast on the left-overs. In winter, the cypress trees are bare as they shed their needles annually which decay and, besides adding to the peat, produce acid which continues to dissolve the limestone base. Thus, the depression very slowly expands over the years.

The sub-tropical South Florida landscape although seemingly flat is sensitive to the slight rise and fall of elevation, when a matter of inches can promote a sharp change in scenery. The Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park offers an ever changing skyline as just about all tree and plant communities found in the larger adjoining Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades National Park are found here. Where the land remains mostly unflooded, pine and palm trees replace the cypress or dense tracts of hardwoods. The 'tree islands' seemingly sprouting out of the open stretches of marl prairie as you drive along Tamiami Trail are also found here and one can be seen next to the road on your left about a mile along Janes Scenic Drive.

The opposite to a Cypress Dome, which sometimes looks like a tree island set in a wide expanse of sawgrass prairie is a Cypress Head, or Hardwood Hammock, it may be a small

clump of hardwoods and palms growing on a limestone ridge above the surrounding marshland or a wider stretch of jungle vegetation dominated by Gumbo Limbo, Cabbage Palms, Oak, Mahogany, Red Maple, and others which need to remain several feet above the surrounding swamp land. As may be expected, it is home to a variety of animals, birds, and reptiles and at the center often contains a 'gator hole' where alligators gather when the surrounding marsh land dries up in winter. In times of heavy rain when the surrounding area can flood to a depth of several feet, deer, bear, and Florida panther may also take temporary refuge there.

Seen from the air or on maps, these hammocks have a distinct tear drop shape usually running north to south. They rarely flood and are often surrounded by a moat of water which keeps fires at bay. A profusion of ferns, orchids, and bromeliad adds to the jungle atmosphere.

Knowing and recognizing the different tree and plant cover as you drive along Janes Scenic Drive will make your trip all the more rewarding. Deer may be seen on the open prairie, wading birds in shallow water, an owl perched silently watching for an unsuspecting rodent, a raccoon climbing a tree, and always an alligator floating lazily by or resting close to the trail. If you are really lucky, and it's early morning or close to dusk, you may encounter a black bear or panther crossing the road or appearing ahead on the trail.

Take your time, drive slowly and stop where safe and clear. Look down at the water, then through and up into the trees and you will often get a pleasant surprise and a photo opportunity. Whether you see them or not, the Fakahatchee animal, reptile, and bird population is always nearby. Find a spot to park and watch quietly; one of them may appear and venture across the road or be noticed only a few feet away. Of course, a short hike along one of the marked trails is better still. Walk quietly and stop now and again to look and listen. A rustle, call, or movement will direct you to where one of our wildlife friends is going quietly about their business.

Tony Marx is a Florida Master Naturalist and former FOF Board Member. He is also a volunteer interpreter for the Fakahatchee guided tram tours and frequently contributes articles to The Ghost Writer.

MEMBERSHIP

We have 287 current memberships excluding the 27 members in arrears from the 4th quarter of 2105.

You can join or renew on our website. For info, call Jinny at (239) 695-1023.

Welcome to new members since our last newsletter:

Pam Chapman, Attica, MI
David Donovan, Essex, MD
Michael Feuer, Washington, DC
Bruce Fried, Arlington, VA
Laurence Green, Pittsford, NY
Sheryl Lamb, Sarasota
John Lunday, Naples
Robert Schultheis, Naples
Rodman Steele, West Palm Beach
Tracie Story, North Port
Alejo Vada, Miami
Barney & Jerri Winger, Naples



Did you know? Amazon will donate 0.5% of the purchase price of goods you buy on the website to a charity of your choice.

The Friends of Fakahatchee is on the list and has already received donations.

You can register at www.smile.amazon.com using your existing Amazon password, then select your charity. After that, each time you shop the charity is all set up for you at smile.amazon.

Please tell all your family and friends. It doesn't cost them anything and will benefit the FOF.

EDITOR WANTED! If you would like to help with this newsletter, please email Marya at FOF_90@hotmail.com.

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 400 copies.

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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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