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## Searching for direction on Janes Scenic Drive

BY CYNTHIA MOTT

Special to Florida Weekly



Residents welcome Fakahatchee visitors. [Janes Scenic Drive](#) virtually guarantees up-close opportunities to see alligators. CYNTHIA MOTT / FLORIDA WEEKLY

The Chevy car came toward us too fast for the narrow shell road. It bounced through water-filled pot holes and low spots, spraying muddy water high into the air. Honey slowed his Ford truck to a near stop and edged close to the black swamp-water ditch. He said, "Something's up with that car."

We were easing through the [Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park](#) on [Janes Scenic Drive](#). We'd been there for half a day photographing alligators, orchids, ferns, birds, and the million other wild swamp sights begging to be captured. We met the occasional vehicle, maybe one every 15 to 20 minutes, but all were poking along, like us.

As the speeding Chevy drew near, the driver lowered his window and frantically waved an arm. Worried, I told Honey "Be careful." [Janes Scenic Memorial Drive](#) is not the sort of place you expect to find people-trouble, but if you do, it's not the sort of place you'd find quick help. To get there, you drive to the middle of nowhere and where the paved road ends, you keep going. Officially, you go to [Copeland](#) and then west.

The Chevy stopped beside us and a man in his 30s, blond haired, flushed red cheeks, and worried grin said “Hello, thank you for stop.” His English was rough, his accent was German. “Long time on road. Go all to end. No out. Come back. Low fuel. Is late. How much road longer end?”

Janes Drive is only 11 miles long, but with so much to see, it’s easy to extend your visit. It dead-ends into a maze of roads built for a housing development that never happened. Dead roads are now weedy and after heavy rain, which was the case during our visit, some have water running over the top. The surest, safest way to exit Janes is to turn around and retrace the 11-mile journey.



A great white egret stalks the shallow swamp for small prey. Epiphytes, orchids, bromeliads and ferns grow profusely in the sultry swamp. CYNTHIA MOTT / FLORIDA WEEKLY



Swamp lilies — native perennial, herbaceous emerged flowers — decorate the swamp.

The Chevy man had an elderly woman in the front passenger seat who wore an expression like she had been sucking on Fakahatchee green soda apples. In the backseat was a blond woman who looked to be partnered with the driver. “Holiday,” she said with a little wave, a bright white smile lit her face. “He want to see swamp. On holiday. Found road in book in [Germany](#). Come here see swamp for maybe we think one hour. Be here all day. Think maybe never get out.” We laughed. She and the man laughed too. The old lady looked even less happy and said something we couldn’t understand.

“Don’t worry,” Honey assured them. “You only have maybe seven miles to go. When you get to 29, turn right and you’ll find a gas station not too far. You’ll make it. It seems longer than it really is.”

Chevy man smiled and looked relieved, then started making motions. “Need get out, you know, out, afraid alligator bite.” The best we could make of their haste was that soda apple lady needed to use the restroom but was afraid to get out of the car for fear of being attacked by an alligator. We did our best to assure them that was very unlikely. We parted wishing each other good luck and happy vacation.

As our vehicles pulled away I said to Honey, “You know, just a few years ago a 90-

[Where's the story?](#)

year old woman who lived in [Copeland](#) was attacked in her front yard by a big gator that tried to drag her into the canal. She lived, but I think she lost a limb."

Honey said, "Yeah, I remember that. But I didn't think those poor tourists needed to hear that story just then. Grandma looked like she needed to get out of that car in a bad way."



7 Points Mentioned

Cypress country

[Janes Scenic Drive](#) is a place to get up-close-and-personal with a real live authentic swamp, and no telling who or what else. It's a nature-lover, explorer, photographer's paradise. The road is built atop an old logging trail named for three Janes brothers – J. B., Winford and Wayne – who settled in the area to grow tomatoes in 1930. Lee Tidewater Cypress Company showed up in 1944 with railroads, men and machinery to butcher the largest remaining stand of virgin cypress in the United States. Crews were sent into the ancient jungle to score a ring around the woody giants. Some were more than 3,000 years old, towered over 100 feet, and had girths of 25 feet.

A scored (girdled) tree died and lost water-weight within a year. This made the giants easier to move and helped prevent breakage when they crashed to the ground. Teams of loggers, wielded two-man crosscut saws, cut down the trees, removed branches, and cut logs into 32-foot lengths. These were hauled from the swamp by cable, toothed log grabbers, and flat-bed rail cars. The logs were reloaded in [Copeland](#), then shipped 400 miles north to a mill in [Perry](#). There the durable, light, rotresistant cypress wood was turned into coffins, roof shingles, house gutters, and even the hulls of torpedo boats. So massive was the logging operation that it took only 12 years to denude the area of all its old-growth trees.

[Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park](#) is a strip of land 20 miles long and five miles wide. Logging operations made side trails off the main railroad bed, which now lies under Janes Drive. The trails were called trams and many are now open and maintained for hiking, biking or even running should something happen to make that necessary.

The swamp forest has been called "the Amazon of North America" for its large variety of native orchids, bromeliads and unique epiphytes. Susan Orlean made the area famous, and some locals infamous, with her 1998 hit book, "The Orchid Thief." Unfortunately, orchid thievery is still happening in the Fakahatchee. In August 2013 Mike Owen, park biologist, reported three extremely rare ghost orchids were taken. In one instance, an entire tree was cut down to reach the fragile plant. "To keep one alive, that's grown up for 20-plus years in its native habitat, is not going to happen. But it will bloom, and they may have a flower for a week or 10 days." Mr. Owen has monitored 370 known Fakahatchee ghosts for more than two decades.

It takes a certain boldness of spirit to leave the pavement and follow Janes Drive into the heart of a

great swamp jungle. And sometimes, those who really want to be there, who come from very long distances, can't wait to get out. As Honey and I neared the far end of the Drive, we saw circle markings in the road where vehicles had turned around, and what looked like skid marks in mud. Honey said, "Huh. There's their hubcap."

I said, "Whose hubcap?"

He said, "Those German tourists. Their car was missing a hubcap. Poor things, I hope they got rental car insurance. That guy will never live this down with Grandma."

Miss Margaret Webb, native of the small village of [Copeland](#), didn't run from the swamp; she recovered and returned to the place where an 8-foot gator lunged from the canal, and tried to drag her into the inky water.

A younger [Copeland](#) neighbor with a bold spirit of his own, saw the struggle and rescued Ms. Webb from the jagged jaws. At the hospital, her leg was amputated below the knee and Ms. Webb spent months in rehab. Interviewed by a television reporter four months after her attack, the intrepid, one-footed 90-year old was asked how she felt about returning to such a wooly home. Ms. Webb shrugged and in her old-Florida charming accent said she never considered not returning — "No matter who you are or where you come from, when you get home you feel good." !

- >> What: Janes Scenic Drive at the
- >> Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park & Boardwalk
- >> Where: U.S. 41 (Tamiami Trail) about 7 miles west of SR 29, Copeland
- >> Info: [www.floridastateparks.org/fakahatcheestrand](http://www.floridastateparks.org/fakahatcheestrand)

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