



The Ghost Writer

Newsletter of the Friends of Fakahatchee

The Ghost Writer – January 2019

Executive Director's Report

by Francine Stevens

Executive Director, Friends of Fakahatchee

I hope you can feel the energy in this newsletter!

Park Manager Steve Houseknecht just accomplished a "tour de force" with an unprecedented prescribed burn for the Florida Parks Service by burning 8,800 acres in the Preserve. The FOF funded a \$4,000 portion of the total cost. Congratulations to Steve and his staff! Soon there will be a burst of nutritious tender growth feeding all the creatures living in the Park.

I never fully understood the reason for prescribed burns until I got involved with the Friends of Fakahatchee. After you enjoy the "Mega Fire" photo essay below, please consider the comprehensive article on our website, "Fire, a Natural Part of our Ecosystem," written by Patrick Higgins a couple years ago – it merits another look.

On a different subject, the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk is getting a lot of traffic. There is evidence that a panther has been visiting the Boardwalk, and Dave Boesche is keeping an eye on that. The Boardwalk was visited by 73,665 people in 2018, with 12,198 visitors in December alone! Just imagine how many more will visit when the Expansion project is completed; maybe our new parking will not be big enough!

FOF funded the Park's needs to the tune of \$97,212 thanks to your generosity and grants. We are busy closing the FOF fiscal year and are reminded of an amazing project near completion. Four wayfinding kiosks will be installed on Janes Scenic along with one at the East River, thanks to a \$46,720 grant from Collier County Tourism.

Our FOF Interpretation Tours program generated a revenue of \$22,600 thanks to all the volunteers who often get up early in the morning to drive to the Park to conduct the tours, then don't get back home until late afternoon or evening – most volunteers live 45 minutes to an hour from the Park. We are still receiving donations for the Pole Barn Project; donations are now up to \$22,000. These funds from our generous members, combined with a grant later this year, will enable us to fund the cost of constructing the Pole Barn.

I have been receiving numerous calls requesting group tours on dates outside of our regular weekly tours program. I want to say a special thank you to Patrick Higgins and Jim Winger who conducted an impromptu swamp walk just a couple days after the New Year for a family who called me on the FOF line. Additional special thanks to Dave and Patti Boesche who answered my call to conduct a tram tour the day after Christmas for a family reunion. So far 10 special tours were possible thanks to the flexibility of our guides and their assistant!

In other news, we will be sending our members a special bulletin about the election timeline within a couple of weeks. Also, we sure could use someone who has the time to apply for grants. And of course we will hold our Annual Picnic in March; we'll confirm the date in the near future.

Please enjoy all the pictures and feedback from our visitors and in case you didn't know you can always revisit past Ghost Writer newsletters on the FOF website at <http://orchidswamp.org/about-fof/the-ghost-writer-archives/>



News from the Strand

Memorable prescribed burn in the Fakahatchee

The largest prescribed burn in Florida Park Service history took place within the boundaries of the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park on January 14-15, 2019. Park Manager Steve Houseknecht, his staff, the District's Viper Team, as well as staff from Lake Kissimmee, Collier Seminole, Charlotte Harbor and Estero Bay all worked together on this historic 8,800-acre prescribed burn. FOF contributed \$4,000 to the funding of the memorable prescribed burn. Congratulations for such outstanding efforts by all!



The historic Fakahatchee Mega-Fire Team: At the forefront, Park Manager Steve Houseknecht, along with his staff, the District Viper Team, and staff from Lake Kissimmee, Collier Seminole, Charlotte Harbor and Estero Bay. Many thanks, Team!



Careful planning and coordination is essential to conducting a prescribed burn of any size. Here the crew plans all facets of the operation.



Although they look like ping pong balls, they are actually small incendiary devices that allow the team to light fires on target across large expanses.



Airborne management of the burn facilitates both ignition and monitoring.



Low intensity, fast moving fire is used to eliminate intruding shrubs while preserving trees.



Despite appearances, native vegetation will re-emerge quickly following the burn with renewed vigor from nutrients and reduced competition for sunlight.



Great care is exercised to ensure the fire is extinguished when its objectives have been met.

A heartfelt message from Rita Bauer

"I feel so privileged to document the activities and be part of this Fakahatchee Mega Burn. I learned an incredible amount about a prescribed burn and acquired the greatest respect for this hard working team of professionals. It just shows that hard work, great personalities and a wonderful sense of humor goes hand in hand with the greatest results."

– Sincerely, Rita



Volunteer photographer Rita Bauer with the guys. All photos by Rita Bauer. Thanks, Rita!

East River Clean Up

Thank you to Park Specialist Steven Bass and Fearless Faka-Hacker Dino Barone for clearing the way for smooth kayaking on the East River...looks like it was more fun than work!



You too can volunteer your time and talents! See how at <http://orchidswamp.org/support/how-to-volunteer/>

We Help Make Memories in the Strand!

If State Parks Director Eric Draper had a bucket list, he says “it would include wading through a cypress slough with an orchid expert.” In a recent “Message from the Director,” Eric shared the Fakahatchee swampwalk experience that followed our December 7th Ground Breaking Ceremony and the Friends' 20th Anniversary Celebration lunch.

*“After wading deep into the slough and learning so much about the diversity of plant species, the sun started to set. It was all I could do to turn back. I had that feeling I often get when in the Everglades. My toes curl in my shoes as if trying to take hold of the muck. I call it toe-gripped conservation — the feeling of connection and not wanting to let go or leave the place.”*System is crucial. Eric Draper and I have been through many wars together, and I know that he was much impressed by, one, the quality of staff, and, two, the turnout of members. Again, well done.”

— Eric Draper, Florida State Parks Director



The Earney family called the FOF phone line just after New Years to see if they could arrange a private tour. We were glad to share the Fakahatchee with this lovely family. Photo by Rita Bauer.

"The tour far exceeded our expectations; Patrick Higgins was the perfect guide and Jim Winger and Rita Bauer were a bonus. We appreciated their patience and expertise in handling our family of varied ages. We were confident in their abilities to help us understand, appreciate the beauty of, and negotiate an environment that we were all leery to visit. It was a wonderful morning and will be remembered for years to come. Thank you to all for your part in the experience."

— Sincerely, Suzan Earney

How do you spend the day after Christmas? – the Lipsey Family Holiday Tour

by Dave Boesche

How Do You Spend Christmas?

Recently a holiday hostess visiting from Tennessee had that very question. She had the big family down to Naples for Christmas and needed a 'day after' activity. Lucky for her she called our Executive Director, Francine Stevens, and booked a Tram Tour of the Fakahatchee. So hostess Nancy L. got her activity and then some!



All aboard for 18 folks – 4 kiddos and 14 adults. Actually, a couple of the adults were acting...oh heck, it's Christmas! Almost to the person, they wanted to see a Florida Panther and a Black Bear; throw in a couple big gators and a few Ghost Orchids. I explained that I had left my Disney - Animatronics remote control at home, but we would certainly see some Real Florida Nature.



Well, after explaining about how the Everglades Ecosystem should work, the limestone filter layer, river of grass, etc, etc, it took almost 50 feet to see our first creature. So we learned about the Black Vulture, their job, how they commute to work and their remarkable defense of projectile poop. The kids said "eww," the adults laughed. (NOTE: I am guessing the adults had changed a diaper or two!)

Next we spotted a Hardwood Hammock on one side and a Cypress Dome on the other. Wow, what a difference a inch or two can make! Then throw in a prescribed burn, a wet and dry season, a Cabbage Palm that many had tried via hearts of palm, how the Calousa had used this 'Tree' which isn't a tree after all, then before you knew it, they were loving this swamp stuff.

Along the way we stopped for plant samples. We learned that Fakahatchee Grass smells like its cousin, corn, and that Rag Weed gets a bum rap for allergies when most guests agreed it smelled like its relative the carrot. Wow, there was the Cardinal Air Plant; looks like a pineapple and is indeed related. Later we found a Vanilla Orchid and everyone wanted to live in the swamp. Well, not everyone.

We stopped at 6-pipe along Janes Scenic Drive, and boy did that stop deliver! We measured the water temperature at 71 while the road temp was a balmy 82. The kids got to play with my laser pointer to entice the bream fish to nibble at the green dot. We found a Florida water snake (I still like the name "Banded Water Snake" better but...) and then a small Gator sunning on a distant log with a white Great Egret within a foot or so. Another learning activity. Why does the gator have stripes? Why doesn't it eat the bird? No, they don't look like the killers we had imagined. Since everyone was now comfortable with creatures all about, they starting to locate snakes, gators, birds, fish (but very few bugs) all by themselves. We may have educated ourselves out of a job!

Our two hour trip was pushing three when we returned to the parking area. Who had the most fun? The kids? The adults? The guides? Heck let's call it a tie game. They had a fun family picnic at our picnic tables in the shade.

Patti (first time driver did a great job) and Dave put the Friends' toys away. Then we headed over to the boardwalk for a picnic lunch of our own. Likely because we still had our uniforms on our quick lunch took 90 minutes. All the questions we received were great. About that time Nancy's party arrived and were happy to see us again. Off they went down the boardwalk. After a while they all returned excited. Seems they played name that _____. They were laughing, happy, teasing, generally having some family fun. THAT, is why we love the Fakahatchee!

PS: We left the panther and bear for another trip.

*"Happy New Year Francine,
Just to let you know our family
reunion tour on the 26 December
went GREAT! Everyone enjoyed
it and we felt so close to the
wildlife and nature. Dave and
Patti Boesche were so nice and
patient with the young children.
We saw several gators of various
sizes, some snakes and turtles
besides the beautiful birds. We all
had a beautiful family trip in
Naples and surrounding area.
Thanks for all you did to help
make it happen."*

– Regards, Sue Ann Lipsey

Getting around with a little help from the Friends

From Francine: This fellow had a very short visit and I couldn't get him on an FOF tour so I gave him a lot of info so he could visit solo...this is his feedback.

"Thanks Francine, I had a great day in the Fak. I saw a lot early morning on the boardwalk, connected with Dee at the ranger station, crossed paths with your crew working out by the Hilton and even got to talk with Mike Owen out in the field with botany scientists. Your help made it happen. Swamp walk next time."

– Tom Simpson



Crowd control on Janes Scenic Drive – "Did you pay your fee?"
– Photo by Rita Bauer.

"We Took the Ghost Rider Tram Tour"

As reported this month in TripAdvisor

We booked the tram tour operated by the Friends of Fakahatchee, led by volunteer John Kaiser. John was an excellent tour guide and although we saw only a small portion of the park, we learned a great deal about it. The tram stopped at several places along the road ... so John could point out highlights and offer in-depth details. He explained about the limestone base under all of south Florida and told us interesting facts about cypress trees and the various palm species.



This photo of the Ghost Rider Tram is courtesy of TripAdvisor

We saw dozens of storks flying overhead throughout the 2.5-hour tour, as well as swallows and many great egrets. We went for short walks where we saw black water snakes, young alligators, and turtles, as well as plants such as the rare terrestrial water spider orchid. (We didn't see the ghost orchid, which is increasingly rare and blooms in mid-summer.) One tree had a long limb covered in shelf fungus. One of the more interesting facts I will remember is that "hatchee" means "river," which helps explain Fakahatchee, Caloosahatchee, Myakkahatchee, and so on.

The driver (Tom Maish) was helpful and accommodating to a passenger who had mobility issues, picking her up right at her car and driving her back there.

– 88Tropicsfan, North Port, Florida

Seen in the Strand

How do you top a panther sighting? By seeing a Ghost orchid in bloom on the last day of December! Rita Bauer is the lady who saw the panthers earlier in December. She was able to take this photo of a Ghost orchid blooming in winter. This is a rare event since they usually bloom in summer!



Winter in the Swamp

by Patrick Higgins

Standing on Watlington Hill just before Christmas, collar up and hands thrust deep in my coat pockets, I exhale a frosty breath. A few spiky evergreen gorse bushes are in early yellow flower. The chequerboard of England's Oxfordshire countryside lies below. Neat hedgerows demark the fields. Bare ancient trees are silhouetted like black cutouts in the fading light and smoke curls up from chimneys. Above all it is damp. This is a far cry from the Fakahatchee, four and a half thousand miles away.

There is however a connection between the two. The Gulf of Mexico's loop currents wrap around the Florida peninsula feeding the Gulf Stream and North Atlantic Drift. Their waters follow the US coastline to Newfoundland before crossing the Atlantic where they bathe these sceptered isles in warmth. This creates a climate of almost perpetual spring, so that in southern England the temperature variation between seasonal extremes is only about 22 degrees Fahrenheit. Without the Gulf Stream we'd have a climate like Labrador's. Like Labrador we have gloriously long summer days with up to 16 ½ hours of daylight but incredibly short winter ones. It's barely 4 PM and dusk is upon me!

A week earlier, 26 degrees of latitude further south and 1540 miles closer to the equator I was wading in one of Fakahatchee's sloughs. Winter comes here too. Its effects are just subtler, with temperature and day length less of a factor than rainfall, or rather the lack of it.

Continued next page >>



Sunlight streams through the open canopy of winter. Photo by Patrick Higgins.

Winter in the Swamp, Continued.

A couple of months into the dry season the needles of our deciduous cypress trees have already turned rusty-brown and dropped. At first, they stained the swamp's water to the color of tea, but as the water receded, they've carpeted the forest floor. Red maple and pop ash dropped their leaves too, revealing blue skies. Sunlight now transforms the swamp-scape. Mixed flocks of migrating song birds move through the now open forest, expertly gleaning insects from bare branches. Small groups of white ibis and the occasional egret forage isolated pools of water. Doomed mosquitofish await their fate in barely inch-deep puddles and empty apple snail shells are exposed.

It's a time of misty mornings and of gossamer spider webs, bejeweled by beads of dew. As the sun burns it off, the neat workings of sapsuckers on silver cypress trunks are revealed. There are splashes of color from red lichens, holly berries and tiny emerging maple flowers. The drumming of woodpeckers travels further. Wind rustles bent-over dried alligator flag. The last dogwood leaves are turning purple as they withdraw chlorophyll and wither. The once mauve flowers of climbing asters have become white puff-balls ready to disperse their seeds on the breeze.

The swamp's alligator holes, often in the form of cutgrass ponds surrounded by willows, now take on importance and become a shared resource. Apart from their obvious crocodilian inhabitants, raucous wading birds and anhingas congregate around them and epiphytic orchids find favor on the neighboring trees. On my ramble I encountered the last blooms of some clamshell orchids and the first appearance of dingy star orchid blooms, as well as the solitary flower of night fragrant epidendrum. Quite a few of the zig-zagging vanilla vines sported healthy seed pods, and a few white flowers of moon vine endured into the colder day.

The stark white of a few hold out swamp lilies punctuate a still green ferny mass, but it seems as though mother nature has turned down the color-tone dial so the green isn't quite as bright. Here and there are patches of royal fern with their russet spore-bearing plumes.

As I emerge through the borrow ditch bordering Janes Scenic Drive, I see the once-suspended periphyton slime has dried to khaki sludge. It will gradually turn to dust adding minutely to the soil depth. And so the Fakahatchee settles into its winter pattern of mostly mid-fifties to low sixties by night and mid-seventies by day, no significant rain, and a periodic cold front coming in from the north to rustle its hair.



Cypress branchlets festoon this dahoon holly. Photo by Patrick Higgins.



Gossamer spider webs are bejeweled by beads of morning dew. Photo by Patrick Higgins.



Roseate spoonbills, woodstorks and egrets scour the remaining ponds. Photo by Patrick Higgins.

Membership News

Does your employer have a “Matching Gift” program?

Several of our members have taken advantage of their employer’s matching program (General Electric, Exxon Mobil) for donations to not-for-profit organizations by sending us the “matching” form. We do the rest – it’s that easy! We have revised our Membership Form with a reminder. Please visit <http://orchidswamp.org/support/memberships/>

Annual Fund appeal to build the Pole Barn continues

You can still donate to the Pole Barn Project which will protect the FOF and Park equipment and vehicles. Give via PayPal through our website at <http://orchidswamp.org/>. If you prefer to mail a check, download the 2018 ANNUAL FUND APPEAL FOR POLE BARN form at <http://orchidswamp.org/support/>. Either way, many thanks for your ongoing support of the Park!

Become a Friend of the Fakahatchee
Visit <http://orchidswamp.org/support/memberships/>

Members make a difference.

Welcome and thanks to Lifetime Members
John and Pauly Kaiser!

Also welcome new members Brenda Brooks, Ft. Myers, Ben Clement, Miami, Kenneth Goff, Lake Wales FL, Catherine Goodin, Naples FL, Juila & Ian Vose, London England, Claire Decoster, Marine City MI, Elizabeth Kiser, Arlington VA, Philip McGuire, Naples FL, Jeanne Tucker, Naples FL. We now have 325 members!



If you haven’t yet opened your free AmazonSmile account, please take a few minutes to do so. Visit [smile.amazon.com](http://smile.amazon.com/ch/59-3511352), then choose the Friends of Fakahatchee as your charity to receive the donations from your purchases. To get there quicker, go to <http://smile.amazon.com/ch/59-3511352> which is our direct link. This works for your shopping all year round, and when more FOF members join in the donation parade, we’ll see more money for our Park. Thank you!



Stay up to date with what’s seen in the Strand on our FOF Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/orchidswamp>

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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.

The Ghost Writer, named after the endangered Ghost Orchid which blooms in the Preserve, is currently edited by Next Steps Collective, LLC, which also manages the Orchidswamp.org website. Contributions to Ghost Writer that relate directly to the business and purpose of the Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc. are welcome. Please write news@orchidswamp.org, subject line: Ghostwriter.

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