

A Gate 18 Cycling and -Hiking is Attainable and Unique

There is an attainable and unique option in the Fakahatchee for a day outing that involves a bit of cycling, some walking, and then cycling again- totaling 7 miles cycling Janes Scenic Memorial Drive and 3 hiking the yellow blazed Gate 18 Trail.

It is a leisurely quiet option which allows time to immerse yourself for a while in the surrounding wilderness with its diverse patchwork of habitats, sounds, creatures and flora.

To start your outing, first stop at the Copeland Drive Ranger Station Visitor Center to check out the information kiosk; pick up a map; chat with knowledgeable Visitor Center volunteers and to pay the small visitor fee. Then turn right on Janes Scenic Memorial Drive to continue west, observing the 15 mph speed limit for 6 miles to Gate 12 where you will park next to native Royal Palms and get ready to do a bit of cycling while reflecting on the interesting things that you have already observed along the way. Many visitors walk or cycle out East Main Tram to the cabin (aka Fakahatchee Hilton) and back which is a wonderful 4 mile out and back option. Today however, you are cycling to Gate 18.

Walk your bicycle around Gate 12. You are now on Janes Scenic 'Trail' which is blissfully closed to vehicles. The unused road is smooth so is suitable for all types of bicycles. As you cycle the 3.5 miles to the Gate 18 trail head on either side is Cypress strand habitat gradually giving way to Slash Pines and Cabbage Palms then Marl Prairie on the left at Gate 18 distinguished by a yellow blazed post, the number 18 on the gate and bicycle rack.

Before starting your hike take some time to quietly continue to walk along Janes for 100 feet or so where there is a small water hole on your right. You may hear and see roosting birds taking flight at your approach such as Black Crested Night Herons, Common Egrets and Great Blue Herons - or Black Vultures as the case may be. Be on the lookout for the large resident Alligator called Godzilla named for its size and deformities and for the relatively smaller gator. This spot is always a source of speculation - Why are fish continuously jumping? - for example. There is a Geocache behind the weather station opposite the water hole.

The Gate 18 Trail is unique in that it is not a tram trail. Created back in 2009, members of the SW Alligator Amblers Chapter of the Florida Trail Association worked with Park Manager Steve Houseknecht to establish a walking path in the heart of the Fakahatchee that allows people to walk through diverse habitats and to have the option to loop back to Janes in various ways or just to return the way they came after it intersects with Gate 16 Mud Tram. It is a 1.5 mile link trail or a 3.0 mile out and back from Janes which is what you are doing today on your first 'exploration' outing.

The Gate 18 Trail is also unique because of what you see walking 1.5 miles south from Janes. Follow the yellow blazes through Marl Prairie. The savannah like vista draws you down the path to a pocket of Wet Flatwoods dominated by Slash Pine and Pond Cypress. You have walked just 0.22 miles so far. Be sure to look for orange Gulf Fritillary, Skipper and Metalmark butterflies. From here you enter a 5 acre or so Pocket Prairie which is higher than the previous two habitats. It is surrounded by Slash Pines and a denser stand of Cabbage Palms to the north-west. It is a good time to think about fire and the role that grammanoids or grasses, sedges and rushes play. Grammanoids, particularly Sawgrass which is a sedge, fuel low intensity fires. Open pinewood habitats support Bluebirds and endangered Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers. This area had controlled burns in 2015 and 2019 as part of natural community restoration efforts. It is hoped that 'RCWs' will colonize the surrounding Slash Pines just as they have done to the west in the Picayune.

About half way along the trail enter Mixed Hardwood Swamp with Sweet Bay Magnolia, Wax Myrtle and dioecious Dahoon Holly sporting red berries on female trees. False Nettle in the leafy duff covering the karst is the larval host for Red Admiral butterflies. This gives way to Cypress Transition Hammock which is only about 9-18 inches above the water table. Predictably there are water loving canopy species like Pond Cypress, Pop Ash and Swamp Dogwood. Notice species of Tillandsia, the Bromeliad air plant, as well as fern species. Both the prairies and these woody transition hammocks are black bear habitat as is evident by scat filled with undigested palm fruits and Brazilian Pepper berries. A Low Hammock takes you by interesting ferns like large frond Rabbit's Foot Fern, Shoestring Fern and Whisk Fern. The karst and solution holes are exposed here.

The trail skirts 'Swamp Land' as the Amblers like to call it where a few steps to the west is a Cypress Dome which is wet 250-360 days of the year. This is the lowest part of the trail. From here you rise ever so slightly up into a Low Hammock again and into the final part of the trail - the Rockland or Tropical Hardwood Hammock. This area is fire protected by surrounding wetter 'ecotones'. The hammock was home to a camp. Florida native West Indies tropical trees Simpson Stopper, Marlberry, Saffron Plum and Willow Busic are here. A huge Live Oak stands as sentinel at the trail's intersection with Gate 16 Mud Tram.

Take a few minutes to review your map. Facing Mud Tram a left (east) brings you 1.2 miles back to Janes Scenic Trail. Right (west) to the Picayune Forest. Taking a slight left then right leads into Four Stakes Prairie and back to Janes on West Main Tram Gate 7.

Now turn back following the yellow blazes 1.5 miles to Janes, your bicycle and a welcoming picnic table at Gate 18. Before cycling to Gate 12 and to your car consider taking another peak for Godzilla. Bike back SE on Janes (right w/the Gate behind you) to Gate 12.

Please be prepared - Share your plan and the experience with others. Review/bring the map at the Visitor Center and on the Friends www.orchidswamp.org website. Wear long pants for hiking. If it is not dry season or there is rain prior to your outing, the trail will be wet in sections so wear shoes that you can hike in wet and dry. Bring at least 2 quarts of water, snacks, lunch, and a hat for hiking and a helmet. Cell service is intermittent.

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