

THE OTHER GLADES

Secrets to finding good fishing in and around Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.

BY CHRIS DUERKSEN

**Hidden
Gems** 10,000 ISLANDS

Fakahatchee Strand, in Collier County, was one of the last pieces of land added (in 1974) to the preservation roster of Florida Everglades. Redfish, below, are among the fish species relying on the coastal mangrove habitat and seasonal pulses of fresh water.



When I told my fishing buddies where I was headed, I drew blank stares: Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. My friends spend lots of time in the Everglades and surrounding waters chasing snook and tarpon, but none had ever tried fishing in the state park that borders Everglades National Park and the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Indeed, the park's own brochure barely mentions fishing, and I could not find anything online about angling in the preserve.

In reality, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve offers a trifecta of freshwater lakes, brackish canals and ponds, and saltwater tidal creeks with a smorgasbord of fish ranging from lunker largemouth and peacock bass, to snook and tarpon, not to mention outsized oscars and hard-fighting redfish.

Lake Harmon, like two other freshwater lakes (Lake Gloria and Lake Forrest) just inside the entrance near the park headquarters, was carved out of the limestone substrate to provide rock and gravel for area highways before the park was created. The three lakes are all deep—20 to 40 feet—and feature clear water ringed by tall grass

and reeds. Fishing from the banks is possible but challenging as long sections of the shorelines are overgrown. Kayaks and canoes are the ticket to finding the best spots.

After paying the \$3 entrance fee, I launched my pedal kayak and could immediately see big schools of minnows scattering from the shallows. Just beyond the narrow limestone ledge ringing the lake, bass and Mayan cichlids were eyeing their next meal. On my third cast a big Mayan cichlid nailed the baby bass fluke I had mounted on a red 1/8-ounce jighead. Nice start. Minutes later I snagged some of the long tendrils of vegetation growing up from the bottom, or at least that's what I thought until the bottom started to move. A big bass rocketed to the surface, then dove deep as he headed toward the middle of the lake with the kayak in tow. I got him close to the boat for a picture and then enjoyed the shower of cool water he aimed my way as he departed with a big tail slap.

That was the start of a bountiful day full of willing bass and cichlids. It wouldn't be long before the lakes near the park entrance would become my go-to spots to take visitors and friends for a relaxing day of fishing with an ecotour bonus watching all the birds, alligators, and other assorted critters.

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Clockwise from above: Oscar, non-native but familiar catch; kayaking in the mangroves; largemouth bass; versatile jigs in useful colors.

I followed up this auspicious debut the next week by sampling another cluster of lakes near the intersection of Alligator Alley (Interstate 75) and Collier County 29 along Jones Grade Road. There is no entrance fee here, but again I was the only soul around when the park opened at 8 a.m. This time I decided to experiment with my go-to saltwater lure, the D.O.A. gold glitter curly-tail on a 1/8-ounce jig-head. Again, the bass did not disappoint. But this time to my surprise the shimmering little grub was eaten by a feisty, 3-pound peacock bass. That would be the start of another entertaining day catching a couple more peacocks, dozens of largemouth, and the usual assortment of cichlids.

Aside from alligators, egrets, herons, osprey, and my favorites, the swallow-tailed kites, I had the water to myself all day as I hopscotched from lake-to-lake. The conditions here are somewhat different than those at the park headquarters, as they were not dredged as far down into the limestone, only going to a depth of 10 to 15 feet for the most part, with deeper troughs alternating with shallower ridges that the bass enjoy patrolling for food. Shoreline fishing is easier here than at Lake Harmon thanks to trails on dikes around the ponds.

Fakahatchee Strand Preserve offers other distinct fisheries in addition to freshwater lakes. Two of my favorite saltwater tidal creeks, the East and Faka Union rivers, west of Ever-

glades City, are actually within the park's boundaries. So too are the miles of brackish water canals and ponds lining the Tamiami Trail that provide a smorgasbord of saltwater and freshwater fish. Unlike Everglades National Park and the Big Cypress Preserve where park boundaries are clearly signed, only recently at the headwaters of the East River is there any indication you are entering the preserve.

The relative obscurity of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is due in large part to the fact that the park does comparatively little outreach to attract visitors, its primary mission being to preserve the rare environment and its fauna and flora. The park is world-famous for orchids and rare vegetation like bromeliads and tropical epiphytes—plants that grow on other plants for support, but are not parasitic, getting water and food from the air. In fact, the park received global attention following the 1988 publication of the best-selling novel, *The Orchid Thief*. Even today, the park staff must keep a sharp eye out for orchid poachers, assisted by remote video cameras as hidden in key locations.

The park also is home to endangered species like the Florida panther and Everglades mink as well as a host of other critters ranging from scads of shorebirds, ospreys, and hawks to diamondback terrapins, bobcats, river otter, bear, manatees, alligators, and crocodiles.

A skeleton staff of five work hard to protect the park. Mike Owens, the park biologist since 1993, still exudes his enthusiasm over 25 years later. "The amazing biological diversity in the park means that no two days have ever been exactly alike," he said.

Owens and his colleagues are assisted by a remarkable group of volunteers called Friends of the Fakahatchee. The organization is currently collaborating with the park to fund and build an interpretive pavilion on the Tamiami Trail at the Big Cypress Bend and open a visitors center near the park headquarters. In addition to an interpretive display, the pavilion will feature a rain shelter, restrooms, and connections to a rebuilt boardwalk extending out into the preserve.

The history of the park is fascinating, both troubling and

promising. This was one of the last pieces that was put together to protect the Everglades, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas' River of Grass. Everglades National Park was created in 1947, but not until 1974 was land purchased for the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. The property was acquired in response to development pressures and sprawl in Collier County, which rarely turned down any project. Grandiose development plans associated with Golden Gate Estates in Naples and Port of the Islands envisioned residential projects that would house thousands of people with homes on canals carved into the Everglades. As the early phases of these developments proceeded, the devastating impacts on the Everglades became all too clear. The residential canals sucked water out of the Everglades into the Prairie and Faka Union

canals, lowering groundwater levels up to eight feet in some areas, stealing life-giving water from native plants.

Looking at an aerial view of the area today on Google Maps, the leftover scars are plainly visible. The park purchase in 1974 helped stem the assault on Everglades from the west, but much work remains to be done. Today the west end of the state park and those leftover scars are part of a multibillion-dollar, multi-agency effort with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District to plug the Prairie Canal and restore natural water flows through the Everglades to the

Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Area and Gulf.

At over 70,000 acres, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is the state's largest although it hosts only about 100,000 visitors a year, far less than others like Bahia Honda in the Florida Keys which sees over 700,000 annually. The park is 20 miles long north to south and about 10 miles at its widest east to west.

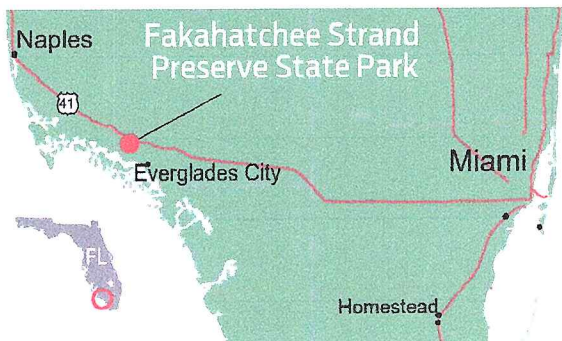
The park has recovered nicely from being heavily logged from 1944 into the 1950s for pine and cypress. Cypress wood is highly water resistant and was in demand during World War II for making aircraft carrier decks and PT boats, among other vessels. The tiny communities of Copeland and Jerome within the park are reminders of those days, having served as home to loggers in that era.

The freshwater lakes where I had tussled with the bass were created in the 1950s and '60s. According to Don Harmon, who worked with his father Forrest, they operated big cranes with buckets to gouge out limestone rocks and gravel for Alligator Alley and other highways. Today, Don lives part time on Lake Harmon, helping the park staff keep an eye on things. If you see Don on his dock, give him a wave.

The canals along the Tamiami Trail were carved out much earlier in the 1920s with big steam-powered dredges to provide fill upon which to build the highway linking the east and west coasts of Florida. Back then the highway was called the Eighth Wonder of the World. The fact that the Fakahatchee Strand recuperated into a reasonably functioning ecosystem after all this poking and prodding is a testament to nature's resilience. Now the question Mike Owens and many others



Snook caught in upper Faka Union River, a tight, mangrove-lined creek best suited for kayaks or canoes. The nearby East River, explained below, is another option.



HOW TO MAKE RESERVATIONS TO FISH THE EAST RIVER

(FROM PARK WEBSITE)

THE EAST RIVER CANOE LAUNCH is tucked away down an unmarked dirt drive off U.S. 41 (the Tamiami Trail), 5 miles west of State Road 29, on the south side of the road. The river is a primarily brackish water and tidal responsive creek that flows southwest to Fakahatchee Bay and the Ten Thousand Islands. It is a beautiful and varied creek, passing through a succession of small lakes and canopied mangrove tunnels before widening into a tidal river. Maps of the river are available at the launch and at the park visitor center. This location can be accessed by appointment only. Appointments can be made the day of or the day before by calling the park 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, at 239-961-1925.

ask is if the park can survive warming climate and sea-level rise as well as the invasion of non-native plants and wildlife like Brazilian pepper and Burmese pythons.

After my two good days on the freshwater lakes, I figured it was time to revisit my old favorites—the East and Faka Union rivers. Both are accessible only by kayak or a small canoe and should be attempted only by experienced paddlers as they require navigating narrow, overgrown mangrove tunnels to reach the lakes that hold the gamefish. A good guide is Jeff Ripple's *Day Paddling Florida's 10,000 Islands and Big Cypress Swamp* which contains route information and highlights for both waters. On the East River, which now has a reservation system to protect bird rookeries and other park flora and fauna, the key is to get down to the third and fourth lakes in the chain that starts just off the Tamiami Trail. [See box on page 38 for details on making a reservation.] On the Faka Union, a long narrow tunnel taking 20 minutes to traverse at the beginning of the trip opens into a series of five lakes that only occasionally see anglers. Fishing can be outstanding in both, best months being November through April.

Today I choose the Faka Union River. The put-in is a rocky launch next to the third bridge on the Tamiami Trail to the east of Port of the Islands. I soon fool a couple of 15-inchers on the gold glitter curly-tail before slithering down the long mangrove tunnel, ducking limbs and spider webs.

I emerge into a shallow lake where the curly-tail does its job, fooling a high-stepping baby tarpon. The 'poon is soon followed by several snook as I probe the nooks and crannies along the shoreline. When the action slows, I slide quietly into the short mangrove tunnel leading to the next lake and throw a back-handed cast with my short 6-foot tunnel rod under some overhanging mangrove roots. The lure sinks and then is rocked by something big. I set the hook, and a big mama snook erupts in the air 20 feet downstream. After a quick picture of the 27-inch beauty, I release her back into the wilderness.

In the early afternoon, my curly-tail fools a nice redfish, completing the Fakahatchee slam. Not wishing to push my luck, I decide

it's time to hightail it back to my SUV and then make tracks to the Island Café in Everglades City to celebrate with one of their famous double-decker cheeseburgers.

If you go, you'll no doubt enjoy the fishing. Just keep in mind the purpose of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is to protect this natural wonder. Mike Owens reminds us to keep a "carry-in, carry-out" mindset, specifically mentioning that this includes monofilament fishing line.

In other words, leave no trace, just take home good memories. And don't forget that the park's lakes don't open till 8 a.m. and you must have a Florida saltwater or freshwater fishing license to sample these productive fisheries. FS