



**The old boardwalk is closed.**

**Questions before visiting the park?**

**Call the park office at 239-961-1925 and check the Park's website.**

**<https://www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/fakahatchee-strand-preserve-state-park>**

## President and Executive Director Letter

We have plenty to share in this newsletter!

A "soft opening" of the new boardwalk site began the week of February 12. This soft opening provides Park staff a period of time to assess the new boardwalk operations and make any necessary adjustments. When you visit the boardwalk keep in mind that more will be added to the Interpretive Pavilion such as interactive kiosks. For the time being the Interpretive Pavilion may seem bare, but this will change.

What was not in the construction blue print of the new boardwalk site is the essential need for volunteers at Boardwalk, especially to welcome and interact with visitors. With that in mind, here is a link to a short documentary created for the Friends by photographer Jay Staton about the Fakahatchee and the new boardwalk site – ([View video on YouTube – https://youtu.be/Rz32inxYb6Q](https://youtu.be/Rz32inxYb6Q) ). We hope this short documentary will inspire many of you to volunteer at the new boardwalk. Please contact us at 239-695-1023 to discuss volunteer opportunities.

We are proud to announce the Friends received a 2023 District 4 Volunteer Appreciation Award. District 4 Bureau Chief BJ Givens and Park Manager Joe Berger presented the Friends with an award for "Extraordinary Contributions in Parks Programs & Construction". You can read more about this event below in the newsletter.

Saturday, March 23 is the date for our Annual Members Meeting and Volunteer Appreciation Picnic. Please see the instructions below in this newsletter for the required registration of this free event to our members and volunteers. Registration is required to evaluate supplies for the buffet.

*Cordially,  
Glen Stacell and Francine Stevens*



## Registration for Annual Meeting and Picnic now open

Join us at the new pole barn Saturday March 23, 2024, 12:30 – 3:30 pm for a special anniversary celebrating 25 years of support for the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. Our picnic features an Italian buffet catered by Palumbo's Pizzeria. This is a free event, but registration is required.

Please register at <http://tinyurl.com/FOF-Annual>.  
Registration is required to evaluate supplies for the buffet.

Questions? Call 239-695-1023.

## News from the Strand

### New Fakahatchee Documentary sponsored by the Friends.



This documentary, created for the Friends by photographer Jay Staton, explores the history of the Fakahatchee and showcases the accomplishments of the Friends of Fakahatchee including the new boardwalk site. ([View video on YouTube – https://youtu.be/Rz32inxYb6Q](https://youtu.be/Rz32inxYb6Q) ).

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### FOF wins Long-term Project Award for District 4

The District 4 Annual Volunteer Appreciation Event was recently held at Myakka River State Park. District 4 Bureau Chief BJ Givens and Park Manager Joe Berger presented the Friends with an award under the category of Long-term Projects.

The long-term project “*Vision of the Boardwalk Expansion*” dates back to 2010. The project was led for many years by former President Tom Maish. Other long-term projects meriting this award were the Wayfinding Kiosks, the pole barn, and the renovation of the Visitor Center. All long-term projects were made possible thanks to the support of our members. **The Friends received this award out of 37 parks in District 4; that makes it a Very Big Deal!**



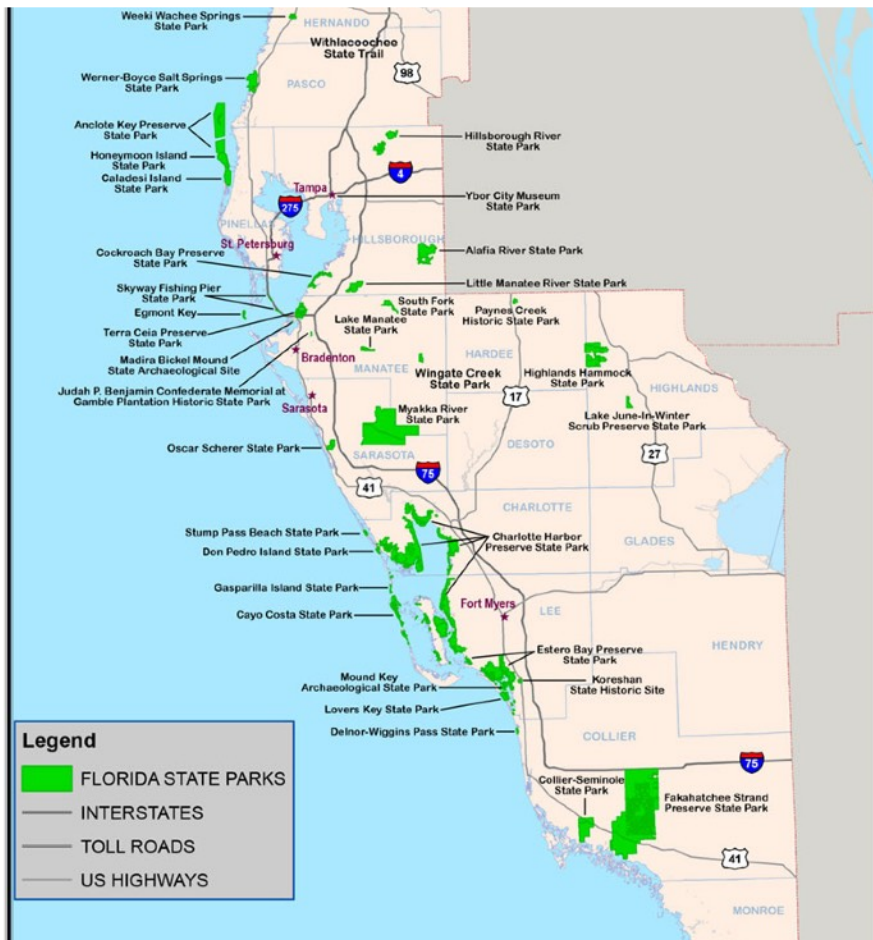
Left: District 4 Bureau Chief BJ Givens. Right: Park Manager Joe Berger. Photos by Francine Stevens.

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Accepting the Award for 2023 Long-Term Project of the Year, left to right: Park Manager Joe Berger, Francine Stevens, Virginia Palmer Skok, Andy Skok, Rudi Ettrich, Tom Maish, Tom Trotta, Debra Taylor, BJ Givens, Alex Gobel. Photo by Debbie Trotta.



This map shows the locations of all 37 Parks in District 4.



The Friends received this award plaque for District 4 Long-term Project of the Year for the Vision of the Boardwalk Expansion Project.

## Volunteers still needed for 2024 Fak Wildlife Blitz



Come out to the beautiful Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park and help gather vital data on wildlife trends. **The remaining dates for data collection are March 13th, April 10th, and May 8th.**

This is a great opportunity to meet like-minded individuals and to learn more about the abundant wildlife that calls Fakahatchee Strand home. The data you collect are important to ongoing research and conservation efforts.

Volunteers at each site will document the following: Date, Time, Animal observed, Direction of animal's travel, and Observer comments – Life stage, size, health, male/female etc. We recommend you bring a chair, compass, binoculars, and a camera. Volunteers will be at their station for 2 hours, so bring plenty of water and snacks.

Volunteers will meet at the Park office (past the gate beside the Visitor Center) by 7:45 am. Data collection starts at 8:30 am. Sites are indicated by distance in miles north of Gate 1 (water treatment facility).

Interested individuals should contact Fakahatchee Strand Volunteer Coordinator Alex Gobel via e-mail at [alex.gobel@floridadep.gov](mailto:alex.gobel@floridadep.gov) or phone 239-359-4927. **Contacting Alex allows him to plan for how many are expected to participate.**

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## Last Introduction to Swamp Walk continues is March 11



**Introduction to Swamp Walk** begins with an interpretive ride on the Friends' Ghost Rider Tram to the site of the swamp walk. From there the guide leads you on a swamp walk lasting approximately 90 minutes. Following the swamp walk, participants board the tram for the return trip.

Executive Director Francine Stevens says, "This offering combines elements of the rolling lecture of our tram tour with an introductory swamp walk to give participants a taste of the real Fakahatchee. The Introduction to Swamp Walk is specially tailored for folks who have been uncertain about going on a swamp walk."

**The last Intro to Swamp Walk is Monday, March 11.** Departure at 9:30 AM. For more information and to purchase tickets please visit the Introduction to Swamp Walk FOF Eventbrite page at <http://tinyurl.com/swampintro>.

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## Tickets still on sale for remaining Spring Tours

The **final** Master Naturalist Swamp Walk conducted by Florida Master Naturalist Gordon Saager will be on Saturday, March 9. Tickets for this last Saturday Swamp Walk are available at <http://tinyurl.com/swamp-walk-mn>.

To view the complete schedule of all remaining tours for this season – and to purchase tickets – please visit the FOF Eventbrite page at <http://tinyurl.com/FOF-tours>. You can also go directly to the FOF Eventbrite page for each tour by clicking on the links for each tour.

**Did you know we can organize a group tram tour for you?** For a group of 12 or more please call the Friends office at 239-695-1023.





Go directly to the FOF Eventbrite page for each tour by clicking on its link below.



Night Sky Experience is relaxing fun – <https://tinyurl.com/night-sky-tour>. Photo by Elizabeth Williams.



Advance Swamp Walk Saturday Tours start January 20 – <https://tinyurl.com/swamp-walk>. Photo by Andy Skok.



Friday Morning Tram Tours tickets are going fast– <https://tinyurl.com/tram-tour> Photo by Francine Stevens.



We were able to add a few more seats for the Moonlit tram tour – <http://tinyurl.com/moon-lit-tour> Photo by Glen Stacell.

## Volunteers still needed for new Visitor Center

We are seeking dedicated volunteers to provide services at the newly renovated Visitor Center off Janes Scenic Drive. Volunteers will be responsible for informing visitors on how to best enjoy their experience in the Park. They will also manage selling merchandise for the Friends of Fakahatchee, raising funds to support the Park, keeping track of the inventory and completing daily paperwork.

Please note that **each volunteer is not required to do all the above**; we can accomplish all this by teaming up volunteers.

Volunteers will be trained (by the Friends) on how to operate the point-of-sale device for credit card sales of the merchandise. *They will also have the opportunity to attend regular outings in the park to gain helpful knowledge to inform visitors.*

*Our new Visitor Center offers a professional yet relaxing atmosphere, and having fun while volunteering is expected!*

Interested individuals can contact Volunteer Manager Alex Gobel at: [Alex.Gobel@FloridaDEP.gov](mailto:Alex.Gobel@FloridaDEP.gov), Office Phone: (239) 359-4927.





## Glades Country Club private Tram Tour



Glades Country Club enjoyed a private tram tour on a beautiful day in January. Photo by Tour Guide Dick Brewer.

## New volunteers off to a great start



This season's new Swamp Walk Guide Elizabeth Lilly – assisted by Jason Brooks, also on his first season volunteering – are each doing a fabulous job! This Tour, which is combined with a tram ride, is one the best offered by the Friends to gently introduce folks to their first swamp walk experience.

## Award for pointing the way to the Fakahatchee

For years the Friends could not understand why there were no directional signs pointing the way to the Fakahatchee Preserve. In late summer of 2021 Andrew took up the assignment, drove around to determine best location for directional signage on Interstate 75, US 29, Collier Boulevard, and San Marco Road. From his research he presented a proposal to the Florida Dept. of Transportation. FDOT took his suggestion seriously in March 2022, and by the end of 2022 the directional signs were installed.

So, when you see a directional sign announcing the Fakahatchee Preserve State Park, say, "Thank you, Andrew!"



President Glen Stacell (right) presents a special award to former Vice President Andrew Tyler. Photo by Francine Stevens.

## Farewell to Greg Toppin



Jerry Winters, former Park Manager Steve Houseknecht and Greg Toppin, Friends 20th Anniversary, Dec. 2018.

Greg Toppin passed away on February 14, 2024. Greg was Park Manager in the late 1990s into 2000. He was instrumental in certifying the Friends of Fakahatchee as a Citizen Support Organization in 1998. We last saw Greg at the Friends 20th Anniversary celebration. If you would like to send condolences, Mrs. JoAnn Toppin's office address is 690 Goodlette-Frank Rd N, Naples FL 34102.

Here is an excerpt about Greg Toppin from Marya Repko's book "A Brief History of the Fakahatchee."

### Former Park manager Greg Toppin sums it up:<sup>64</sup>

When I came to Fakahatchee there was the remnants of a CSO that was combined with Collier-Seminole. The treasurer was the only one left that had anything to do with Fakahatchee. I decided to re-start the CSO at Fakahatchee as a standalone, on its own feet so to speak, in order to specifically benefit Fakahatchee. The early days were short on numbers of people participating, but it was fun. We actually held work days, did canoe trips and swamp walks, and held a couple of picnics. We also had booths at the fair, seafood festival, Big Cypress Anniversary, and sent representatives to the annual volunteer meeting. Volunteers worked on projects such as swamp buggies, data recording, administrative duties, and publicity. We would meet in the office at the park. Briefly, this was the beginning. But I think most importantly it was fun and the Fakahatchee is better for it.



## Seen in the Strand

### Orchids high and low in the Fak

A recent trip to the Fak rewarded photographer Olga Ettrich with views of several orchid species. We are fortunate she shared these photos from her trip. All photos by Olga Ettrich.



Delicate ionopsis (*Inopsis utricularioides*) also called delicate violet orchid, is an epiphytic orchid, native to the warmer parts of the Americas. It is listed as endangered in Florida.



Dingy Flowered Star orchid (*Epidendrum amphotomum*) one of the most common epiphytic orchids in south Florida swamps, is epiphytic on a wide variety of trees in strand swamps.



Shadow Witch orchid (*Ponthieva racemosa*) is a terrestrial that grows among the leaf litter of forest hammocks and swampy areas.

### Wildlife at home in the Fakahatchee

Photos by Olga Ettrich.



This Bobcat (*Lynx rufus floridanus*) was at full attention. Bobcats can climb trees or swim in search of food, and they are often shelter and sun themselves among branches. They are carnivores and will eat whatever they can catch.



Common Snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) like this one have a powerful bite and are not friendly. Its long neck can reach halfway back across its body, so attempting to pick one up is ill-advised. Note also that picking it up by its tail can injure or kill it, so please keep a respectful distance like Olga did.

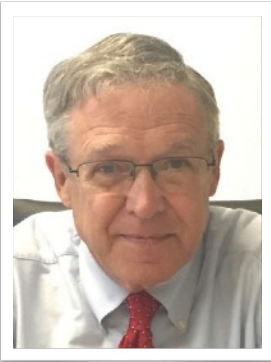


Red Shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) searches for prey while perched on a treetop or soaring over woodlands. Had this fluffy one spied some lunch?



Brown water snakes (*Nerodia taxispilota*) are not dangerous to people nor pets, but they will readily bite to defend themselves if intentionally molested. These snakes are not aggressive and avoid direct contact

## Donation Strategies by Chris Gair



### ***2023 numbers – far better than predictions***

In spite of truly dire predictions for 2023, the U.S. economy remains very strong and the stock market followed suit. For the year, the S&P 500 returned 26.3% including dividends which is far and away above the historic average. **So, for taxpayers who itemize deductions (and even if you don't), gifting appreciated stock is an alternative to consider. Your gift is valued at the current fair market and you eliminate the capital gain tax.**

Now there are no limits on the amount you can gift, but there are limits on the amount you can deduct in any one year. For stocks held more than one year, you can deduct up to thirty percent of your Adjusted Gross Income (AGI). Any "excess" gain you cannot deduct in one year is carried over for up to five years. Not a bad deal at all and what better way to share your success than with Friends.

In previous installments here, I have sung the virtues of using your annual IRA Required Minimum Distribution as a source to consider for gifting. With this technique, the tax benefit is realized whether or not you itemize. But after a year like 2023, it pays to look at your portfolio, talk to your tax advisor and see what's best for this year's contribution. And gifting stocks is easy. We are here to help make the process simple and the result rewarding as we plan for the future of this one-of-a-kind resource.

*Mr. Chris Gair of Fort Myers is providing the FOF with thoughts and ideas in the ever-changing world of charitable giving. Mr. Gair is retired after 48 years as a Trust Officer in Southwest Florida and is a member of the FOF Fundraising Committee.*

***As with all financial matters, always consult with your attorney or tax advisor***

### **"Matching Gift" programs**

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!



You can now donate to FOF via your Fidelity Investment account with a Charitable program called the Fidelity Giving Marketplace. Follow this link for more information: <https://www.fidelitycharitable.org/>

**To Donate via the Friend's website,  
visit [www.Orchidswamp.org](http://www.Orchidswamp.org)**

## Calling all Volunteers!



Alex Gobel welcomes your call or e-mail regarding volunteer opportunities for many kinds of help!

Work such as greeting and orienting visitors – *including helping at the new Boardwalk site* – are needed and can be enjoyed by anyone who prefers less strenuous tasks.

Projects such as clearing trails, wildlife and plant surveys, equipment maintenance and more are always in need of volunteers. Park Staff will provide you with the training to conduct surveys and/or operate equipment safely to work in the field.

You can contact Alex by e-mail at [Alex.gobel@floridadep.gov](mailto:Alex.gobel@floridadep.gov)

or you can phone him at 239-359-4927.



## Membership News

### Members make a difference!

Welcome new members: Jozef Knapik, Steve and Heidi Rowland, Thomas Stanley. *Thank you!*

We have 361 members.

Become a Friend of the Fakahatchee!  
<https://orchidswamp.org/support/memberships/>



Visit the Fakahatchee via  
**FACEBOOK and INSTAGRAM**

**Follow us!**

<https://www.facebook.com/orchidswamp>  
<https://www.instagram.com/friendsoffakahatchee/>

**Share your pictures and stories about your  
visit to the Fakahatchee.**

**E-mail your shots to [connect@orchidswamp.org](mailto:connect@orchidswamp.org)**

Add hashtags to show up in existing collections:

#fakahatcheestrland, #friendsoffakahatchee,  
#fakahatcheestrlandpreservestatepark

#### Board Members

President – Glen Stacell  
Vice Pres. – Virginia Palmer Skok  
Secretary – Tom Trotta  
Treasurer – Phil McGuire

Wally Baldwin  
Rudi Ettrich  
Eric Foht  
John Kaiser  
Debra Tayler

#### Ex-Officio

Bruce Bunch  
Dennis Giardina  
Tom Maish

#### Executive Director

Francine Stevens

#### Board of Directors

##### meeting schedule

March 23, 2024

April 21, 2024

Meetings are scheduled  
for 10:30 AM

Contact the Friends of  
Fakahatchee at [office@fofinc.org](mailto:office@fofinc.org)  
or call 239-695-1023.



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 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](mailto:news@orchidswamp.org), subject line: Ghostwriter.

A COPY OF THE OFFICIAL REGISTRATION AND FINANCIAL INFORMATION FOR THE FRIENDS OF FAKAHATCHEE, A FLORIDA-BASED NONPROFIT CORPORATION (REGISTRATION NO. CH9223), MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE DIVISION OF CONSUMER SERVICES BY CALLING TOLL-FREE 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) WITHIN THE STATE OR VISITING THEIR WEBSITE HERE (<https://csapp.800helpfla.com/>)

**Miss an issue of the Ghostwriter? Visit the archives at <http://orchidswamp.org/about-fof/the-ghost-writer-archives/>.**

**Our mailing address is: Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc., PO Box 35, Everglades City, FL 34139**