



The Ghost Writer

Newsletter of the Friends of Fakahatchee
Visit our website at www.orchidswamp.org

The Ghost Writer – March 2024

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>

Annual Meeting lines up 2024 FOF Leadership

The FOF Annual Organizational Meeting took place as scheduled on March 23rd at the Park's office. The Officers elected by the Board are Virginia Palmer Skok President, Tom Trotta Vice President, Wally Baldwin Secretary, Phil McGuire Treasurer. Directors serving on the Board are Kevin Cunniff, Rudi Ettrich, Eric Foht, John Kaiser, Debra Taylor and Glen Stacell. The Board appointed Bruce Bunch and Tom Maish as ex-officio non-voting members of the Board.



From left to right: Kevin Cunniff, John Kaiser, Rudi Ettrich, Virginia Palmer Skok, Francine Stevens, Debra Taylor, Tom Trotta, Eric Foht, Phil McGuire, Tom Maish. Not in photo: Wally Baldwin and Bruce Bunch. Photo by Debbie-Trotta.

Mel Finn Award presented to John Kaiser

In presenting the Mel Finn Award to Dr. John Kaiser, Executive Director Francine Stevens summarized his impressive accomplishments:

John Kaiser joined the Board in 2012 at a time when the Board was testing a Tram Tour Program with a borrowed tram from Lovers Key. Board meeting minutes dated March 2013 record that John Kaiser motioned to purchase a tram.

Because Francine still had all the Tour schedules from 2015, she knew for sure John started by driving a few Tours led by Glen Stacell and Patrick Higgins in 2015.

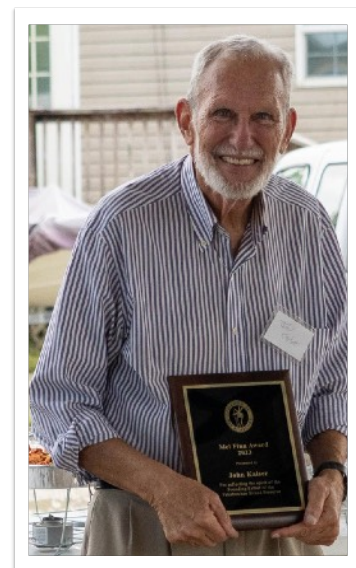
Eventually John felt ready to guide and was scheduled on his first Morning Tram Tour December 6, 2016. The Moonrise Tour was added to the program and John's first guided Moon Tour was on March 12, 2017.

In 2021 when the pandemic had somewhat subsided, John offered to guide the tours in order to generate some revenue. He guided 8 out of the 9 scheduled Moon Tours and all 7 Morning Tram Tours.

In 2023 John guided all the Tours except those in December.

From December 2017 to April 2024 John guided 55 Morning Tram Tours, and from November 2017 to April 2024 John guided 37 Moon Tours of 45 tours! Making that a remarkable total of 107 of 173 Tours – more than half!

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John Kaiser continued...

With an average of 16 people per tour, John educated 1,712 who had never before visited the Fakahatchee. He always ended his tours by promoting the Friends' mission to support the Park.

John guided more Tours than any other guides – and John's Tours generated \$42,800 to support the Park!

Francine saluted Dr. John Kaiser as the recipient of the 2023 Mel Finn award for surpassing everyone's expectation (perhaps even his own!).

25th Anniversary Summary of Accomplishments

By John Kaiser and Tom Maish



FOF's earliest days of fundraising and interpretation were sales of T-Shirts at the old Boardwalk by volunteers Signe Backus and Jerry Winters and Swamp Walks led by the late Bill Mesce along with John Elting and PJ Marinelli.

That and a small pipe Iron Ranger at the Boardwalk asking for donations.

Records show that \$2,540 was raised by the 31 members in the first year of Friend of Fakahatchee's mission in 1998.

The Boardwalk was maintained by FOF Volunteers Nelson and Caryl Nelson, Bud Scott and others from 2001; Dick Hughes and Edite Verdins added their efforts during the past few years. The Volunteers had completely rebuilt sections of the deteriorating Boardwalk to keep it open for the 80,000 yearly visitors from all over the world until Hurricane Ian shut it down in 2022.

Canoe Tours along the East River were added to Swamp Walks for income and interpretation.

2005 – An updated Iron Ranger was installed at the Boardwalk; that increased donations from a few thousand per year to an average of \$25,000 per year until the Boardwalk was closed.

2007 – CSO/Friends Goal established the need for a Visitors Pavilion, restrooms and parking to be included in the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk Expansion Project.

2008 – The Friends participated in the Partnership in Parks Program with an initial allocation of \$50,000; that was soon increased to \$100,000

2009 – Scouted out by John Elting, the first Boat Cruise to Fakahatchee Island was inaugurated.

2010 – Meeting was held with Senior Park Officials who promised the Friends a 3 for 1 match, leveraging our \$100,000 PIP allocation into \$300,000 to start the planning process for our Boardwalk Vision. Later, five Bureau Chiefs came to the Park to determine the best location for the new Boardwalk site and approved the Friends' choice of location where the Pavilion is now established.

2010 – Our first major fundraising event – the Fakahatchee Safari. In 2011 our 2nd Safari was even more successful, raising over \$5000.

The FakaHackers organized to provide a steady source of volunteers to keep the trails open.

2012 – The Cigar Orchid Restoration Project was commenced with 1000 Cigar orchids propagated in conjunction with the Atlanta Botanical Garden and re-introduced in the Park.

2012 – Members attended a Fundraising School and launched the Friends' first Annual Appeal. To date \$127,198 has been raised to support the Park!

2013 – The Ghost Orchid Tram Tours championed by Glen Stacell were started. That has proven to be the Friends' most successful fund raising and interpretation program.

2014 – A Kids Fishing Event was organized for children who had never been out side of the City of Naples.

2014 – The Friends were made custodians of a 300+ acres parcel in the park with \$300,000 in a Trust to help defray the expense to manage the parcel. Monies available only from the interest, have been used for the purchase of an Airboat to aid the Park Staff in managing the natural resources of the parcel, such as prescribe burns and exotic removal.

2015 – The Friends funded the first exploratory trip to Cuba to locate orchids missing from the Fakahatchee that were once native to the Park. Another trip was funded in 2016 from proceeds by the successful Cuba Connection fundraiser hosted by Jimene Rinehart.

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2016 – The Boardwalk Vision Project was stalled by lack of funding by the State. Then-Parks Director, Donald Forgione suggested the Friends work with local legislators to request a Specific Budget Appropriation. The Friends invited Commissioner Donna Fiala to the Park to gain her support. Commissioner Fiala introduced us to Senator Kathleen Passidomo who agreed to sponsor legislation requesting funds for the new Interpretive Pavilion. Commissioner Fiala also introduced us to Representative Bob Rommel who sponsored a companion legislation in the Florida House.

The result was \$1.31 MILLION in 2017 to kick start the Boardwalk Vision with respect to the Boardwalk Expansion Project.

2017 – A pivotal change in the Friends organization: our workload had increased far beyond the capacity of volunteers. The Board appointed Francine Stevens as the Executive Director.

2017 – The Naples Garden Club awarded the FOF a grant of \$13,000 to build a Chickee Hut at the entrance of the old Boardwalk.

2018 – The Friends approached the Collier Tourism Bureau requesting funds for Wayfinding Kiosks in the Park. \$47,000 was granted by the Bureau and the Friends funded \$27,000 for the installation of five Kiosks in the Park.

2018 – Seeing that the repaving of US 41 was in the works, the Friends met with Carman Monroy, Secretary of FDOT to request adding a turn lane into the new Boardwalk site entrance, but we were told funds were not available in the repaving project. Then magically, there appeared a Safety Turn Lane into for the new Boardwalk parking entrance!

2018 – Members of the Friends attended the Collier Legislation Delegation public forum to advocate for an increase in pay for Park employees.

2018 – The Friends hosted a ground-breaking ceremony at the future Boardwalk site. Guests included Parks Director Eric Draper, Senator Kathleen Passidomo and Commissioner Donna Fiala, District Four Parks personnel.

2019 – A new fundraising experience was planned with local artist Paul Arsenault. The Five Faces of Fakahatchee was chaired by Mrs. Lavern Gaynor, daughter of Lester Norris (who build the old Boardwalk on the 640 acres he purchased in 1957 to save it from logging). The fundraiser generated \$25,000.



*25th Anniversary presentation by John Kaiser and Tom Maish.
Photo by Phil McGuire.*

2022 – The Pole Barn completion funded at \$102,000, to protect equipment and vehicles essential to manage the natural resources of the Fakahatchee.

2022 – The Friends worked with FDOT and Collier County to design and install a total of 12 directional signs to the Fakahatchee along I-75, US 41 and SR 29. Finally, Visitors could easily locate the Park!

2024 – The complete renovation of the old Janes Scenic Drive Visitor's Center was completed at a cost of almost \$107,000. It is now in service for our Visitors; had it not been for FOF the Visitor Center would have been torn down.

2024 – An impressive documentary by Jay Staton funded by the FOF was completed. It records the historic construction of the new Boardwalk site and will be shown on loop at both the Visitor's Center and the Interpretive Pavilion. It will also be used for FOF speaker engagements in surrounding communities.

After 16 years of dedicated effort the new Boardwalk site opened to the public in February 2024! To date the Friends have invested \$260,000, toward the estimated \$8 million project.

Over the years Executive Director Francine Stevens, along with Board members, applied for various grants, receiving a total of \$100,000.

New Interpretive Night SkyTours hosted by Phil McGuire, Moonlit Tram Tours narrated by Dr. John Kaiser, along with improved Swamp Walk Experiences have added ever more interest. To date the Friends Interpretive Tours Program have raised \$329,553.

BRAVO TO THE FRIENDS OF FAKAHATCHEE WHO HAVE COME A LONG WAY IN 25 YEARS to fulfill its mission to educate the public about the importance of the Fakahatchee within the Western Everglades ecosystem and to support the Park by raising funds.

Annual Members Meeting and 25th Anniversary Celebration



Volunteer Coordinator Alex Gobel (left) and Park Manager Joe Berger (right) congratulate the Friends and express gratitude for the invaluable impact that all the volunteers have provided throughout the years.



President Virginia Palmer Skok shows auction item donated by Artist JoAnn Sanborn.



Park Biologist Cole Luttrell with private Swamp Walk winner Elizabeth and Elias Lilly.



Edite Verdins and Richard Hughes – 2019 Mel Finn Award recipients.



Debbie Trotta with auction winners Charlie and Darla Egli.



John DaSilva and former FOF Treasurer Kathy DaSilva



Andy Skok and Eric Foht.



Debra Taylor happily busy with buffet service.



Left to right: John Kaiser, Bruce Bunch, and Andy Padla.

25th Anniversary merchandise sales continue



The limited edition 25th Anniversary merchandise sales will continue in the Visitor Center.

Get yours while they last!

Left to Right: Virginia Palmer Skok, Olga Ettrich , Debbie Trotta.
Photo by Andy Skok.

News from the Strand

Enjoy 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>).

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 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 or phone 239-359-4927. **Contacting Alex allows him to plan for how many are expected to participate.**

Last Tours of the Season

You can purchase tickets directly at the FOF Eventbrite page by clicking on the links for each tour. Thanks to our fabulous Volunteers, the Friends Tours program has been an unqualified success.

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.



This season's final [Night Sky Tour Experience will be Saturday, April 27](#). Photo by Elizabeth Williams.



This season's final [Friday Morning Tram Tour will be April 12](#). Photo by Francine Stevens.

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, Office Phone: (239) 359-4927.



FOF represented at Panther Refuge Event

Tom and Debbie Trotta represented FOF at the Annual Panther Refuge event on Saturday, March 16. Photo by Debra Taylor. Bravo!

Seen in the Strand

Two birds of the Fakahatchee



Great Egret headshot. Photo by Andy Padla.



Green Heron at the new Boardwalk site. Photo by Debra Taylor.

Snake identification correction



In last month's Ghostwriter this Cottonmouth snake was incorrectly identified as a water snake. Our apologies!



Calling all Volunteers!

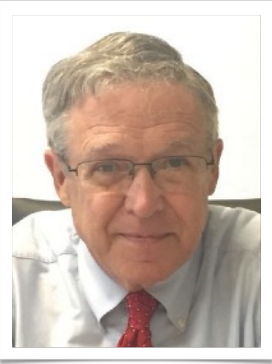
Alex Gobel welcomes your call or e-mail regarding volunteer opportunities for many kinds of help!

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

Donation Strategies by Chris Gair



Old life insurance policy no longer relevant?

When my grandmother was well into her nineties, the mail man quite unexpectedly delivered a check or a long forgotten whole life insurance policy. What happened? The cash value of the policy grew to equal the death benefit: The policy endowed and the company took it off the books. While most whole life policies are structured to endow when the insured reaches age 100, my grandmother's endowed a few years before.

An unusual situation to be sure, but an "old" fully paid whole life policy is not at all uncommon. And it's a great candidate for a gift to Friends. Donating a life insurance policy is a simple way to leverage your charitable gifting. In the financial life of a family, there are times when insuring the breadwinner is a necessity. With time, the need typically goes away but the policy remains. So,

let's consider the following:

You can name Friends as the primary or contingent beneficiary of the policy. It's a simple process wherein you retain ownership and control of the policy.

Or, you can transfer ownership of the policy to Friends who in turn can surrender the policy for the cash value and put the funds toward their ongoing projects. If you are itemizing your tax deductions, transferring ownership gives you an immediate income tax charitable deduction. Professional tax guidance here is essential.

If you have a paid up (sometimes referred to as a permanent life policy), you may be receiving dividends. If so, that is one more source to fund your gift.

With this form of charitable gifting, you are in most cases minimizing the impact on your investments and primary sources of income. Life insurance policies can outlive their intended purpose and therefore should be seen as a source to fulfill a better purpose. And what better than the treasure of the Fakahatchee Strand.

Talk to your tax advisor about how best to give new life to an asset that no longer fits your family's needs.

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**

Membership News

Members make a difference!

Welcome new members: Elizabeth Adkins, John Dalton, Jeff Kremer, Stacey Lloyd, and Stanley Thomas. *Thank you!*

We have 361 members.

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



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

E-mail your shots to
connect@orchidswamp.org

Board Members

Virginia Palmer Skok,
President
Tom Trotta, Vice
President
Wally Baldwin,
Secretary
Phil McGuire, Treasurer
Kevin Cunniff
Rudi Ettrich
Eric Foht
John Kaiser
Glen Stacell
Debra Taylor
Bruce Bunch Ex-Officio
Tom Maish Ex officio
Executive Director
Francine Stevens

Board of Directors meeting schedule

April 21, 2024
May 19, 2024
June 16, 2024
July 21, 2024
September 15, 2024
October 20, 2024
November 17, 2024
December 2024
Meetings are scheduled
for 10:30 AM

Contact the Friends of
Fakahatchee at



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, 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