



# The Ghost Writer

Newsletter of the Friends of Fakahatchee  
Visit our website at [www.orchidswamp.org](http://www.orchidswamp.org)  
Email the Friends at [Office@FOFinc.org](mailto:Office@FOFinc.org)

The Ghost Writer – February 2025

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's Message

by Virginia "Ginny" Palmer Skok

Dear Members,

As I will soon finish my term as your president, I pause to reflect on several things. It has been an honor and a privilege to lead this valuable not-for-profit organization that contributes so significantly to the preservation of the Fakahatchee.

I am deeply thankful for the opportunity to serve and for the trust you placed in me. This beautiful place has been a source of inspiration and solace, and I feel truly blessed to be a part of it.

Volunteerism is essential to the support and success of our preserve. It is the heartbeat of our community, and it is through the selfless contributions of time and effort that we can achieve our goals. Recently, I was deeply moved when our Volunteer Coordinator surprised me with a 3,000-hour pin during a swamp walk. This recognition is not just a personal accolade but a testament to the collective spirit of dedication that permeates our organization.

There are many opportunities to volunteer and make a difference. Whether it's participating in a Bio Blitz, giving money-generating tours, becoming a "Fakahacker", serving on the board, working in the visitor center, or providing interpretation on the boardwalk, each role is vital to our mission. Together, we can all contribute to help protect and preserve this beautiful place.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the upcoming volunteer recognition event in March. This event will be a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the contributions of our volunteers and to acknowledge the incredible work that has been done.

I carry with me a heart full of gratitude and memories of the remarkable achievements we have accomplished together. I am confident that with continued support and dedication, our organization will thrive and continue to make a positive impact.

Thank you for the privilege of serving as your president, and for all that you do to support our mission. Let us continue to work together to protect and cherish this extraordinary preserve.

*With heartfelt thanks and best wishes,,  
Virginia "Ginny" Palmer-Skok, President*



### FOF Board Election 2025

Watch for an email to all members the first week of March containing the slate of Nominees to serve on the Board.



**Save the Date! Saturday, March 29  
Members' Annual Meeting and Volunteer Appreciation Picnic**



MEMBER'S ANNUAL MEETING & Volunteer Appreciation picnic



At the park's pole barn  
**Saturday March 29th 12:30 - 3:30 pm**  
REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED

Register directly at Eventbrite with this link  
<https://www.eventbrite.com/ievent?eid=1255102919619>  
Registration required no later than the 26th March.  
Questions? Call 239.695.1023

Enjoy a delicious Italian buffet catered by Palumbo's Pizzeria



Tickets are available on the FOF Eventbrite page:

<https://tinyurl.com/polebarn-picnic>

Below is a preview of some one-of-a-kind items that were generously donated to the Friends to be auctioned at the Picnic. Proceeds from the auction will support the Preserve.



Left: Original acrylic painting on canvas by Jo-Ann Sanborn. Right: Handmade quilt depicting Seminole iconography, 72 X 63 inches.

**There's still time to contribute to the Annual Appeal**

*Dear Friends of Fakahatchee,*

Like-minded people like you become members to support the preservation of the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park and to educate the public about its importance. The adjoining mission report illustrates some of the many projects that "the Friends" have supported financially.

The tours program helps immensely with our mission to raise funds. In over a decade our volunteers have introduced over 6,000 visitors to the Fakahatchee helping them get the "Faka habit" and making the tram tours our largest source of revenue to support the park.

As our group of volunteers will soon dedicate their time to our 11th interpretive tour season, I am asking for your help to complete some unfinished business. Last year, we told you that we needed to replace the old 2013 truck that pulls our Ghost Rider tram. You responded generously to the Annual Appeal with \$15,000 in donations. We need additional support to reach the \$38,000 target needed for a new truck that will pay dividends for years to come.

Your help is essential to our success. Let us end on a high note so we can start our next tour season with a new truck.

*Sincerely,*  
*"Ginny" Virginia Palmer-Shak, President*

 Mission: provide financial and volunteer support to preserve the unique ecology and cultural heritage of the Fakahatchee Strand preserve State Park and educate the public about its importance.	
MISSION:	STATUS:
<b>Opening of the Renovated Visitor Center</b>	<b>Mission accomplished!</b> With grants from LCEC & the Florida Parks Foundation, furniture was purchased, assembled and installed by the Friends. The visitor center was ready for 2024! 
<b>Opening of the new Boardwalk site</b>	<b>Vision accomplished!</b> In a span of 15 years, the Friends invested \$300,000 for site survey, architectural design and the exhibit master plan, all part of the Friends' vision for the new boardwalk. The Boardwalk opened in January 2024! 
<b>Tours &amp; Education</b>	<b>Raising funds by education since 2013.</b> Interpretive tours continue to serve both the Friends' mission to educate the public about the importance of the Fakahatchee's ecosystem and raise funds to support needs identified by the park manager. 
<b>Natural Resource management</b>	<b>Support the Park biologists in need of equipment to monitor hydrology, track wildlife, imperil and invasive species.</b> With the Old Well Road Trust Fund facilitate aerial surveys to plan for exotic removal and prescribe burns. 

For questions about the Annual Appeal, please contact Executive Director Francine Stevens at (239) 695-1023 or email [office@FOFinc.org](mailto:office@FOFinc.org). We remind you to explore your options with an attorney, financial advisor, or estate planner for the types of gifts that may have tax benefits for you such as: stock and bond gifts, IRA distribution gifts, donor advised fund gifts, insurance gifts, charitable remainder trust gifts, and legacy gifts.

## Tickets still available for 2025 Friends Tour Program

Thanks to the commitment of our tour volunteers, tickets continue to be on sale on Eventbrite. To view the complete schedule of tours through April 2025 and to purchase tickets, please visit the Friends' Eventbrite page at <https://tinyurl.com/FOFtours>. To read a full description of each tour visit the Friends' Official FOF Tours and Events webpage at <https://orchidswamp.org/adventures/>.



The Night Sky sessions offer limited access to the Fakahatchee after park hours to observe interesting formation of planets and stars. Night Sky sessions are offered monthly through April 2025. Use this link <https://tinyurl.com/FOF-nightsky> to see dates and purchase tickets. Photo by Elizabeth William.



Interpretive Tram Tours are scheduled for each Friday morning through April. Visit this link <https://tinyurl.com/FOF-interpretive-tram> to purchase tickets. Photo by Francine Stevens.



Park Biologist Cole Luttrell is conducting Swamp Walks for the Friends through March 2025. To see dates and purchase tickets visit <https://tinyurl.com/biologist-swamp-walk>. Photo by Rita Bauer.



For scheduled Moonlit Tram Tours through April 2025, visit visit <https://tinyurl.com/FOF-moonlit-tram>. Photo by Glen Stacell.

## Documentary showcases the Fakahatchee and Friends

This documentary, funded by the Friends and created 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 at <https://youtu.be/Rz32inxYb6Q>).



## Volunteering for Friends takes many forms

Do you love the Fakahatchee? Do you enjoy talking with people? Whether you prefer mornings, afternoons, or evenings, there are many ways to help. Even a few hours each week can benefit the Friends (and benefit you, too). For more information regarding the Friends volunteer opportunities, please contact Francine Stevens at 239-695-1023 or e-mail at [Office@FOFinc.org](mailto:Office@FOFinc.org).

### Guides for the Friends Tour Program

**Swamp Walk guides.** Swamp Walks require guides with specific skills and knowledge to accommodate the demand we receive for Swamp Walks.

### Volunteer at the renovated Visitor Center off Janes Scenic Drive

Volunteer to process the sale of Friends merchandise to raise funds to support the park. The Friends will train volunteers on how to operate the credit card point sales device. Additionally, volunteers will welcome and provide visitors with information to better experience their visit to the park.

### Friends of Fakahatchee Representatives at the Boardwalk

For this volunteer opportunity our main objective is to have a Friends of Fakahatchee presence at the new Boardwalk site. The Friends presence will help promote membership, donations, and volunteerism. Without our presence what the Friends organization does for the park is a secret. The Friends will provide training.

- Volunteers can be stationed at a table to welcome visitors.
- Volunteer to guide tours on the Boardwalk.
- Volunteer to roam the Boardwalk, answer questions, point out interesting things to visitors.

**For more information regarding the Friends volunteer opportunities, please contact Francine Stevens at 239-695-1023 or e-mail at [Office@FOFinc.org](mailto:Office@FOFinc.org).**

## News from the Strand

### Yet another sold-out Biologist Swamp Walk!

by Virginia Palmer Skok



*Two visitors from Spain and two from the Scottish Orchid Society (SOS) attended. Prior to the walk, Katy the secretary of the SOS asked Virginia Palmer Skok (top right corner), if she would see any orchids. She was very pleased. Photos by Andy Skok*



*Biologist Cole Luttrell points to a cluster of orchids.*

### Couple earns recognition for 5000 Volunteer hours

### District 4 Volunteer Appreciation Swamp Walk



L to R: Volunteer Coordinator Alex Gobel presents the Volunteer Recognition Pin to Andy Skok for 2,000 hours and Virginia Palmer Skok for 3,000 hours. **Congratulations and our sincere appreciation for volunteering your valuable time and expertise!**

Dedicated volunteers from Myakka River State Park were rewarded with a Swamp Walk conducted by Volunteer Coordinator Alex Gobel, along with Virginia Palmer Skok and Andy Skok. Photo by Andy Skok.

## Seen in the Strand

### Prescribed burn helps protect the Fakahatchee



While guiding a tram tour, Carol Spagnolo captured a photo of this scene at the prescribed burn site.

Continued >>



*This burning palm will recover because it is fire-adapted. Photo by Debra Taylor.*



*Volunteer Coordinator Alex Gobel monitoring the prescribed burn. Photo by Carol Spagnolo.*

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## Another successful Night Sky in the Fakahatchee



*Phil McGuire's Night Sky on Feb 15 was another success with 17 participating. The clear sky was illuminated with millions of stars. The group even stayed late to observe the moon rise on the horizon. Photos by Phil McGuire.*

## The Fakahatchee is for the birds

All photos by Phil McGuire



*This Snowy Egret (Egretta thula), with 'golden slippers' and wispy plumage posed nicely for the camera.*



*Adult Great Blue Herons (Ardea herodias) are 3-4 feet tall and live, breed, and nest year-round in South Florida.*



*A juvenile Black Crown Night Heron (Nycticorax nycticorax) seems to watch the photographer. They are medium-sized herons found over a large part of the world.*



*Another juvenile in the Fak. White Ibis (Eudocimus albus) are found from the southern half of the US East Coast, along the Gulf Coast states, the Caribbean, and Central America.*

## Volunteer to assist Park Staff

### Still time to help – 2024/2025 Fakahatchee Strand Bio Blitz

**Bio Blitz Dates**  
March 19th  
April 16th

Join us out in the beautiful Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park and help gather vital data on wildlife trends. This year the Bio Blitz will be held on Wednesdays from November, 2024 through May, 2025.

Volunteers will meet Alex Gobel at the Park office (past the gate beside the visitor center) by 7:45am. Data collection starts at 8:30am. Observation sites will be indicated by distance in miles north of Gate 1 (water treatment facility). Each site will document the following:

- Date & Time
- Animal observed
- Direction of animal's travel
- Observer comments about the wildlife (life stage, size, health, male/female etc.)

We recommend you bring a chair, compass, binoculars, and a camera.

You will be at your station for 2 hours, so bring plenty of water and snacks.

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



**Park staff also need your help to clear trails, tend the butterfly garden, help with repairs and general maintenance, and much more.**

Individuals interested in helping Park staff should contact Alex Gobel, Fakahatchee Volunteer Coordinator.

Email: alex.gobel@floridadep.gov or Call: (239)-961-1925

## History Corner: Fifth Installment

By Francine Stevens, Executive Director, Friends of Fakahatchee

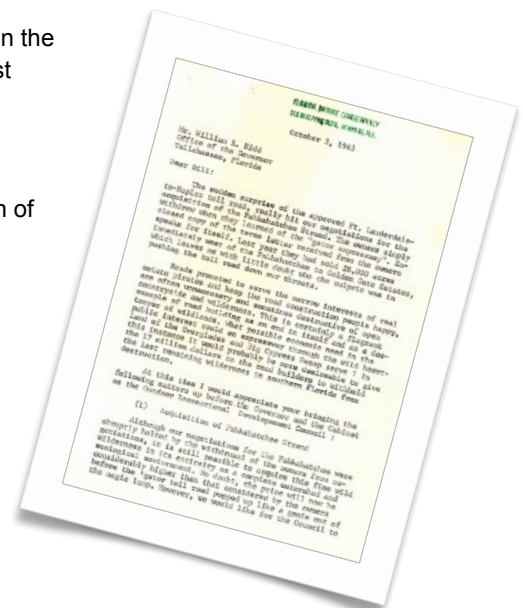
In the summer of 2023 Franklin Adams gave me two boxes of fragile historical documents: his documents and Mel Finn's documents. Newspaper and magazine articles along with correspondence dating back to 1959 detail their pursuit to save the Fakahatchee from real estate development. Jane Parks also turned over documents she had kept since the 1960's when she too was involved in saving the Fakahatchee.

Over 800 documents were scanned by Andrew Tyler and myself. These are now saved in the Friends' "Cloud" archives for safe keeping. This is the fifth installment of sharing the most interesting documents recording their efforts, set backs, and progress.

### Document 11 – October 3, 1963 – Letter from Mel Finn to William R. Kidd

Mel Finn requests that consideration of the approved toll road be brought to the attention of the Florida Outdoor Recreational Development Council, the Governor, and Cabinet. The letter requests two issues be presented – the acquisition of the Fakahatchee by the Outdoor Recreational Development Council and that road planning and construction be coordinated with and cleared by the Council.

*Continued >>*





FLORIDA NATURE CONSERVANCY  
310 BISCAYNE BLDG., MIAMI 32, FLA.

October 3, 1963

Mr. William R. Kidd  
Office of the Governor  
Tallahassee, Florida

Dear Bill:

The sudden surprise of the approved Ft. Lauderdale-to-Naples toll road, really hit our negotiations for the acquisition of the Fahkahatchee Strand. The owners simply withdrew when they learned of the "gator expressway". Enclosed copy of the terse letter received from the owners speaks for itself. Last year they had sold 28,000 acres immediately west of the Fahkahatchee to Golden Gate Estates, which leaves me with little doubt who the culprit was in pushing the toll road down our throats.

Roads promoted to serve the narrow interests of real estate pirates and keep the road construction people happy, are often unnecessary and sometimes destructive of open countryside and wilderness. This is certainly a flagrant example of road building as an end in itself and as a destroyer of wildlands. What possible economic need in the public interest could an expressway through the wild heartland of the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp serve? In this instance it would probably be more desirable to give the 17 million dollars to the road builders to withhold the last remaining wilderness in southern Florida from destruction.

At this time I would appreciate your bringing the following matters up before the Governor and the Cabinet as the Outdoor Recreational Development Council:

(1) Acquisition of Fahkahatchee Strand

Although our negotiations for the Fahkahatchee were abruptly halted by the withdrawal of the owners from negotiations, it is still possible to acquire this fine wild wilderness in its entirety as a complete watershed and ecological environment. No doubt, the price will now be considerably higher than that considered by the owners before the 'gator toll road popped up like a genie out of the magic lamp. However, we would like for the Council to

give such project high priority. Our biological studies have convinced us that the Fahkahatchee is in many ways the most valuable wilderness remaining in the eastern United States. We feel that the possibilities of acquiring this area has been pushed out of our grasp and that the Outdoor Recreational Council is the only hope of saving this magnificent wilderness.

(2) Coordination of Road Planning With the Outdoor Recreational Planning Committee.

Since road planning is vital to the planning of the best use of outdoor resources for recreation and conservation, it seems absolutely necessary that proposed road construction be cleared with the Outdoor Recreational Development Council. Roads are no longer the playtoys of road builders, real estate promoters and the road department. There are vital interests that are never considered by the road promoters. It is in the general public interests that all road planning receive wider participation, not for the purpose of impeding the plucking of the multi-million dollar road plums, but solely to protect open spaces and wilderness from unnecessary disturbance by road construction. The premise is that roads and open spaces are not compatible.

Governor Bryant has suggested that I bring these matters to the attention of the Committee, and such is the purpose of this letter.

Very truly yours

*Melvin Finn*  
MELVIN FINN

MF maf

Document 12 – November 6, 1963 – Memo from Mel Finn to author Frank C. Craighead

Mel requests all available information on the Fahkahatchee to prepare an imminent presentation to the Outdoor Recreational Development Council in December concerning their possible acquisition of the Fahkahatchee.

Speed Message For Chapter and Project Communications



To Dr. Frank C. Craighead Date Nov 6, 1963  
Box 825, Homestead, Fla.  
From \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Fahkahatchee Strand

MESSAGE

I have been invited to Tallahassee to make a presentation of the Fahkahatchee Strand project to the Outdoor Recreational Council for possible acquisition under the Outdoor Recreation Act and the bond issue passed yesterday. I will need all the information I can get about it including photographs, maps, lists of flora and fauna, etc. If you can help out with preparation of a detailed prospectus, it would be appreciated. I would like to go properly prepared. The time will be probably be in mid-December.

Before Warren Hamilton left he introduced me to the new superintendent of Everglades Park, who expressed a willingness to fly us over the Fahkahatchee. If you have the opportunity, would you arrange a flight for us if possible some Saturday as soon as possible. I would like to have you go with me to Tallahassee for the presentation if you can make it. I will be notified of the exact soon.

Sincerely Mel

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

ORIGINATOR DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE

REPLY ON ORIGINAL RETAIN DUPLICATE FOR YOUR FILES

REPLY HERE

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Membership News

### Members make a difference!

Welcome new members: John & Lynn Charlton, Val Hauze, Linda Hayes, Cathy Miller, Thomas Phillips, and JB Schuetz.

We have 327 members.

**Many thanks to Val Hauze for joining with a Life Membership.**

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



### Visit the Fakahatchee via FACEBOOK and INSTAGRAM

<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:  
[#fakahatcheestrand](#), [#friendsoffakahatchee](#),  
[#fakahatcheestrandpreservestatepark](#)



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/>

#### Board Members

President – Virginia Palmer Skok  
Vice President – Tom Trotta  
Secretary – Wally Baldwin  
Treasurer – Phil McGuire  
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

March 29, 2025\*  
April 27, 2025\*  
May 18, 2025  
June 15, 2025  
No meeting in July  
August 17, 2025  
September 21, 2025  
October 19, 2025  
November 16, 2025  
December 20, 2025  
\*Date change

*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](http://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.

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 or write to us at [Office@FOFinc.org](mailto:Office@FOFinc.org).