



The Ghost Writer

Newsletter of the Friends of Fakahatchee
Visit our website at www.orchidswamp.org
Email the Friends at Office@FOFinc.org

The Ghost Writer – September – October 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 and Exec Director Message

At this time of the year, we are very busy preparing for the upcoming season. Thanks to the commitment of our tour program volunteers, tickets for this season's interpretive tours are now for sale on Eventbrite at <https://tinyurl.com/FOF-tours>.

A special thanks to Phil McGuire who kicked off the season with his first Night Sky session on Saturday the 11th of October. The sky was clear, and 12 participants were able to see a new comet, C/2025 R2 (SWAN), a long-period comet just discovered on September 11, 2025 by Vladimir Bezugly through SWAN imagery.

Park Biologist Cole Luttrell will launch the swamp walk season on Saturday the 8th of November.

Carol Spagnolo will guide the first Moonlit tram tour on Thursday the 4th of December assisted by Norma Gordon. And Ted DeGroot will guide the first Friday morning tram tour of the season on Friday, December 4th, assisted by Norma Gordon.

Our annual Welcome Back Luncheon Picnic in the Park is scheduled for Saturday, December 20. We will be sending a special memo to our members next month with more details. Mark your calendars!

This edition of the Ghost Writer highlights a special article authored by Deborah Jansen, who became a Board member last March. After a distinguished career as a National Parks Service Wildlife Biologist, Deborah has recently retired and will share her expertise with our readers regarding the challenges faced by panthers in Florida.

Cordially,

Glen Stacell and Francine Stevens



Uncollared panther identified via microchip

On Friday August 29, 2025, a resident of Copeland contacted the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission about a Florida panther that had been seen in the community. They responded and found an injured uncollared female panther in vegetation near Janes Scenic Drive outside Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.

They tranquilized her and took her to Naples for initial examination and then took her to ZooTampa for care and further diagnosis. Initially, it appeared that she had a laceration on her forehead and could lift her head to eat but what was concerning was her inability to stand. An x-ray showed that she had a fractured vertebrae in her neck. She died before further evaluation of her condition could be completed.



K408 was located in vegetation in Copeland August 29, 2025.

Continued next page >>

So, who was she? Where did she come from? The invaluable microchip that had been inserted under her skin as a kitten not only revealed who she was and how old she was but also unveiled her family tree.

She was K408, given that name because she was the 408th Florida panther kitten found and micro-chipped since handling kittens at dens began in 1994. On March 13, 2014, several Big Cypress National Preserve biologists and former Fakahatchee Manager Dennis Giardina found K408 in her den when she was 3 weeks old and



K408 as a kitten March 13, 2014. Photo by Ralph Arwood.

We were able to trace K408's family tree all the way back to a female puma (the western name for a panther) from Texas released into eastern Big Cypress in 1995. TX107 was K408's great grandmother. In 2006, her grandmother was collared and named FP93 (the 93rd panther collared in South Florida). In 2013, her mom was collared and became FP220. They all spent most of their lives in eastern Big Cypress. And, Athena, the Florida panther who lives at the Naples Zoo, is K408's younger sister born in 2017.



Athena, K480, at den in June 2017, K408's younger sister.



weighed 4 pounds, 6 ounces. Her mom, FP220, was away hunting. K408 was snuggled next to her brother, K407, and her sister, K406. Their fates today are unknown. This den was only 5 miles from Janes Scenic Drive so it is possible that K408 lived all these years in the vicinity of Fakahatchee and western Big Cypress. Her mammary glands also indicated that she had nursed many kittens during those year



So, 30 years later, we continue to document the benefits of the Florida panther genetic restoration program and how it has improved prospects for panther recovery in our wildlands in South Florida.

*Deborah Jansen
FOF Board Member*

**Important! The Friends postal address has changed to:
PO Box 54, Bonita Springs FL 34133**

Tickets now on sale for 2025-26 Friends Tours

Thanks to the commitment of our tour volunteers, tickets are now for sale on Eventbrite. To read details and see the complete schedule of this season's Tours, and to purchase tickets, please visit the Friends Eventbrite page, <https://tinyurl.com/FOF-tours>.



Enjoying the night sky beneath a blanket of stars offers a peaceful experience. More details and tickets for Night Sky Experience at Eventbrite, <https://tinyurl.com/sky-experience>. Photo by Elizabeth William.



Early reservations are recommended for our popular Moonlit Tram Tours. Tickets sell out rapidly; get your tickets and more information at Eventbrite, <https://tinyurl.com/moonlight-tram> Photo Charlie Egli.



Participating in a Swamp Walk led by Park Biologist Cole Luttrell in the heart of the Fakahatchee Preserve is truly an unforgettable adventure. For details and tickets visit the Swamp Walk Eventbrite page <https://tinyurl.com/biologists-swamp-walk>. Photo by Rita Bauer



More than 1,000 people have experienced the Fakahatchee on our enjoyable Friday Morning Interpretive Tram Tours. Tickets and details at Eventbrite, <https://tinyurl.com/FOF-tram-tour> . Photo by Francine Stevens.



Annual Welcome Back Luncheon Picnic – Dec. 20

The Annual Welcome Back Luncheon Picnic will take place in the Park on Saturday, December 20. Watch your inbox for further information to be communicated to our members via a special e-bulletin next month.

News from the Strand

Fakahatchee Preserve Bio Blitz 2025/2026 schedule

We invite everyone to help park staff gather vital data on wildlife trends. This year the Bio Blitz will be held from November 2025 through April of 2026. Please arrive by 7:30 AM at the Park Office to register for the Blitz each day you are observing. At the Park Office you will receive instruction regarding the observation sites that will be indicated by distance in miles north of gate 1. You will complete your observations at 10:30 AM.

At each site you will document the following for each sighting of each animal: Date, Time, Animal observed, Direction of animal travel, and Observer comments (Life stage, size, health, Male/Female etc.)

You will need a chair, compass, binoculars, and camera for the Blitz. Since you'll spend two hours at your observation spot, remember to bring enough snacks and plenty of water. You will want to dress for outdoor conditions, and choose sturdy footwear suitable for walking along the rough and uneven Janes Scenic Drive.

The park's Bio Blitz is an excellent chance to connect with others who share your interests and to discover more about the diverse wildlife protected within the Fakahatchee Preserve.

All observations collected will provide valuable data to support the Park Biologist's ongoing research. Contact Steven Bass, Park Specialist and Volunteer Coordinator, if you are interested in volunteering or if you have questions about volunteering for the Bio Blitz.

Email: steven.Bass@FloridaDEP.gov

Phone: (239)-253-6374

The monthly dates are as follows:

November 12th
December 10th
January 14th
February 11th
March 11th
April 15th

Volunteer to assist Park Staff

Park Specialist Steven Bass is the Volunteer Coordinator



Steven Bass is also a "Burn Boss." He is a certified professional who plans, organizes and oversees prescribed burns.

Projects managed by Steven present various volunteer opportunities to work with and assist Park Staff, such as clearing trails, tending the butterfly garden, helping with repairs and general maintenance, and much more.

Steven will train volunteers to ensure safe operation of park equipment for trail clearing and maintenance projects. Additionally, lighter work is available on the Boardwalk to maintain its condition for our visitors.

If you are interested in volunteering to help the Park Staff, you can e-mail Steven at:

steven.bass@floridadep.gov or call him at (239) 253 6374.

Volunteering for the Friends programs 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.

Guides for the Friends Tour program

Swamp Walk Guides. Swamp Walks require guides with specific skills and knowledge to meet the public's demand.

Interpretive Tram Tour. We need guides for our popular Tram Tour. **Guides and drivers for the Interpretive Tram Tour, extraordinary skills are not required, training will be provided.**

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 and answer visitors' questions.
- 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.

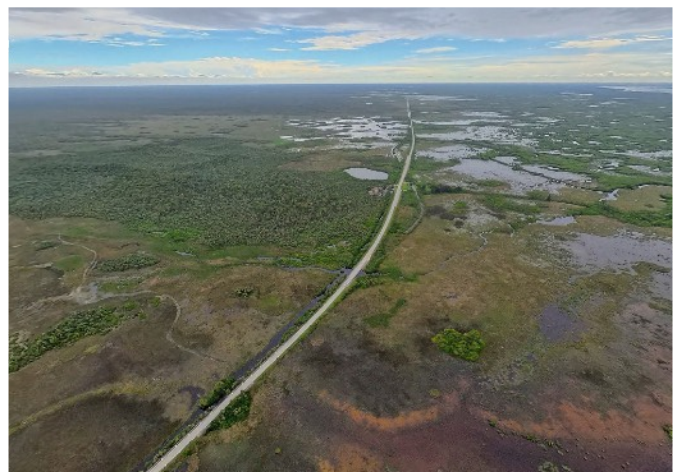
Seen in the Strand

Spectacular aerial views of the Fakahatchee

In September, aerial photographer and pilot Ralph Arwood provided Board member Deborah Jansen with an aerial tour over the Boardwalk. Both photographs also include glimpses of the River of Grass. Heartfelt thanks to Ralph for sharing these gorgeous views!



South-east view of the Fakahatchee Strand, Green Heron Lake, and the Boardwalk.



Looking east at the area around and beyond the Boardwalk.

Donation Strategies by Chris Gair

It is time to consider a QCD.

No matter how you slice it, in my humble opinion, the QCD or Qualified Charitable Distribution is the single best tax efficient way to donate to Friends.

If you are over 70 ½ you can transfer up to \$108,000 to a qualified charity this year. The good news is that your gift never appears on your form 1040 and if you're taking Required Minimum Distributions, this amount is reduced dollar for dollar thereby lowering your AGI (Adjusted Gross Income).

And it is easy to do. Simply contact your IRA custodian with the details of your gift and in most cases, they will send you a check ready to deliver to the charity. Let your tax preparer know and that is all there is to it. Simple by design.

For 2026, the limit is estimated be \$111,000 as indexed annually by inflation.

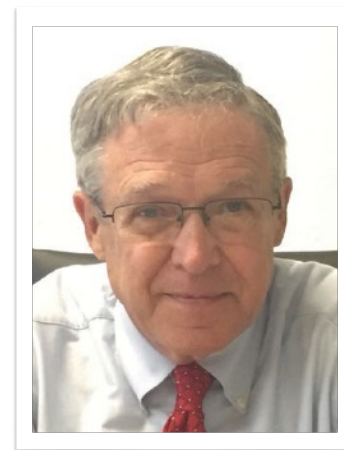
In spite of all the hype and rhetoric about the Big Beautiful Bill, the immediate and total tax benefit of a QCD looks to me to be your best bet. And of course, your gift is destined to go toward the wonderful cause we all share.

For those of you that have followed my writings, first let me say thank you and also you will know I have touched on this before. That said, with many of the people I help, QCDs is a subject that all too often is overlooked.

Questions: Just call Francine Stevens and she will, as always, be only too glad to help.

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.



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/>

Membership News

Members make a difference!

Welcome new member Howard Bernd and Andreas & Monika Schomburg.

We have 336 members.

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

Add hashtags to show up in existing collections:

#fakahatcheestrand, #friendsoffakahatchee,
#fakahatcheestrandpreservestatepark

Officers

Glen Stacell, President
Debra Taylor, Vice President
Carol Spagnolo, Secretary
Phil McGuire, Treasurer

Directors

Kevin Cunniff
Rudi Ettrich
Deborah Jansen
Maria Sentmanat
Tom Trotta
Bruce Bunch, Ex-Officio
Tom Maish, Ex-Officio
Francine Stevens, Executive Director

Board of Directors meeting schedule

November 16, 2025

December 20, 2025

Meetings are scheduled
for 10:30 AM

Contact the Friends of Fakahatchee
at 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, subject line: Ghostwriter.

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

Please note our new mailing address at: Friends of Fakahatchee, Inc., PO Box 54, Bonita Springs FL 34133 or write to us at Office@FOFinc.org.