



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 – December 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

Annual Appeal

While the Annual Appeal is currently underway (visit <https://orchidswamp.org/support/>), we extend special thanks to our members for their generosity to fund the construction of a chickee hut on Janes Scenic Drive at Gate 12 parking area. We are pleased to see that many of our members are taking advantage of the Qualified Charity Distribution (QCD), a donation strategy often explained by Chris Gair in this newsletter.

Linked boardwalks

Since Hurricane Ian forced the closure of the over 60-year-old boardwalk, we have all been anxiously waiting the completion of reconstruction of the boardwalk on the same footprint. The long wait is finally over; in mid-November the State was able to link the two boardwalks for our visitors. In the near future, we will install benches along the path that links the two boardwalks and also install benches on the reconstructed boardwalk.

In November, an updated Citizen Support Organization (CSO) Agreement was signed by the Friends and DEP. We encourage our members to review this Agreement on our website, as it outlines the responsibilities of the Friends as a CSO. Visit <https://orchidswamp.org/about-fof/> and click on the FOF CSO-DEP Agreement button.

Time to brag about our accomplishments

As we near the end of 2025, the Friends can proudly highlight their accomplishments in their mission to support the Park. Our revenue to support the Park is generated by your membership dues, the Annual Appeal, general donations, and the popular Friends Interpretive Tours program.

The Friends provided funding exceeding \$30,000.00 to support the Park in response to the Park Manager's request.

The largest expenses went for the repair of a Park Polaris, the purchase of a rotary bush cutter for the Park's tractor to clear trails, and the fabrication of a new gate on Janes Scenic Drive. A little over \$7,500 for supplies fulfilled the request by the Park Biologist for his research and surveys in the Preserve.

Additionally, the Friends commissioned two panther sculptures. One was installed at the Boardwalk Pavilion and another at the Visitor Center off Janes Scenic Drive.

The Friends retrofitted the Tours truck with benches for future field trips and small group tours and wrapped the truck with a beautiful panther picture.

In July, we implemented a new Donor Management software. A little over 350 membership records were uploaded into the system. That data was verified and corrected where necessary, and we initiated a transition to a monthly membership renewal sequence rather than quarterly.

In October, we launched the Annual Appeal for the installation of the Chickee Hut at Gate 12 parking area.

In November, we held a special ceremony with Franklin Adams, his family and friends. Park Manager Jeremy Sweeney officially named Gate 2 the Reed and Adams Trail and revealed the installation of the new trail sign.

These accomplishments represent only a very small portion of a productive and successful year made possible through the support and contributions of our members, donors, and volunteers.

*Best wishes for the Holidays season,
Glen Stacell and Francine Stevens*



Vice President Debra Taylor launches Friends Volunteer Program at the Boardwalk



Debra Taylor (left) and volunteer Gordon Saager on the new Boardwalk.

Tuesdays from 10 AM to 3 PM
Meet me at 10:00 AM next to the panther sculpture in the Pavilion.

Please bring your lunch and water, and binoculars if you have them. And a notebook. You will learn about the different volunteering opportunities such as simply greeting and orienting visitors, roaming the boardwalk to point out interesting things, and – for those who are willing – guiding future tours. We will walk the Boardwalk in the afternoon and inevitably interact with visitors.

Participation in my mentoring sessions will enable you to make an informed decision regarding volunteering at the boardwalk. Once prepared to volunteer independently, you will select days and time frame that suit your availability.

Note that volunteers will be required to be members of the Friends of Fakahatchee and to register as a volunteer with the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. I will assist you with these formalities.

Please contact Francine Stevens to let her know the date you plan to meet me at the boardwalk by calling 239-695-1023 or you can e-mail Francine at Office@FOFinc.org

Thank you and see you later alligator!

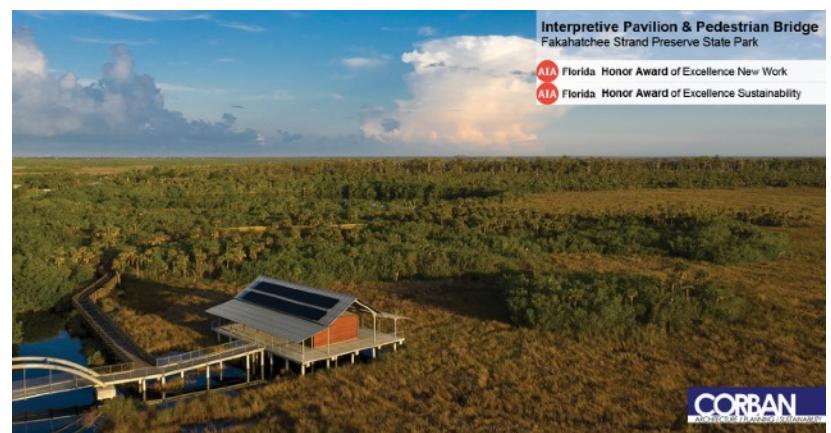
Debra Taylor
FOF Vice President

I invite you to join the Friends of Fakahatchee volunteer team, composed of both novices and Master Naturalists. As we commence our second season following the opening of the new boardwalk site and Interpretive Pavilion, this opportunity will allow you to learn about the Friends organization, the Fakahatchee Preserve, and the unique natural environment surrounding the Pavilion and Boardwalk, with the aim of equipping you to effectively share this knowledge with visitors interested in understanding their destination and the experiences that await them.

Visitation was high last year, and we expect popularity to increase exponentially now that the reconstructed "old" Boardwalk is opened.

I am inviting you to meet me at the Boardwalk as I will dedicate my time on the following Tuesdays in January to mentoring volunteers on the boardwalk. January the 6th, the 13th, the 20th and 27th the volunteer program.

Boardwalk location: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/4m4f3LceXx8W7NWc7>



The award winning new Boardwalk and Pavilion. Photo by David Corban.

Annual Appeal funds Chickee for Park (donate online at [orchid swamp.org](http://orchidswamp.org))

For questions about the Annual Appeal, please contact Executive Director Francine Steven's at (239) 695-1023 or email 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 thus gifts, and legacy gifts.



FRIENDS OF FAKAHATCHEE, INC.

A 501(c)(3) not-for-profit Citizen Support Organization that provides financial and volunteer support to preserve the unique ecology and cultural heritage of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park and educates the public about its importance.

website: www.orchidswamp.org
P.O. Box 54, Bonita Springs FL 34133

October 2025

Dear Friend of the Fakahatchee,

This year, our annual appeal from the Board of Directors and the Park Manager is centered on enhancing the visitor experience at the park. We are excited to announce plans for a traditional Chickee Hut to be installed in the parking area of Gate 12 East Main Trail.

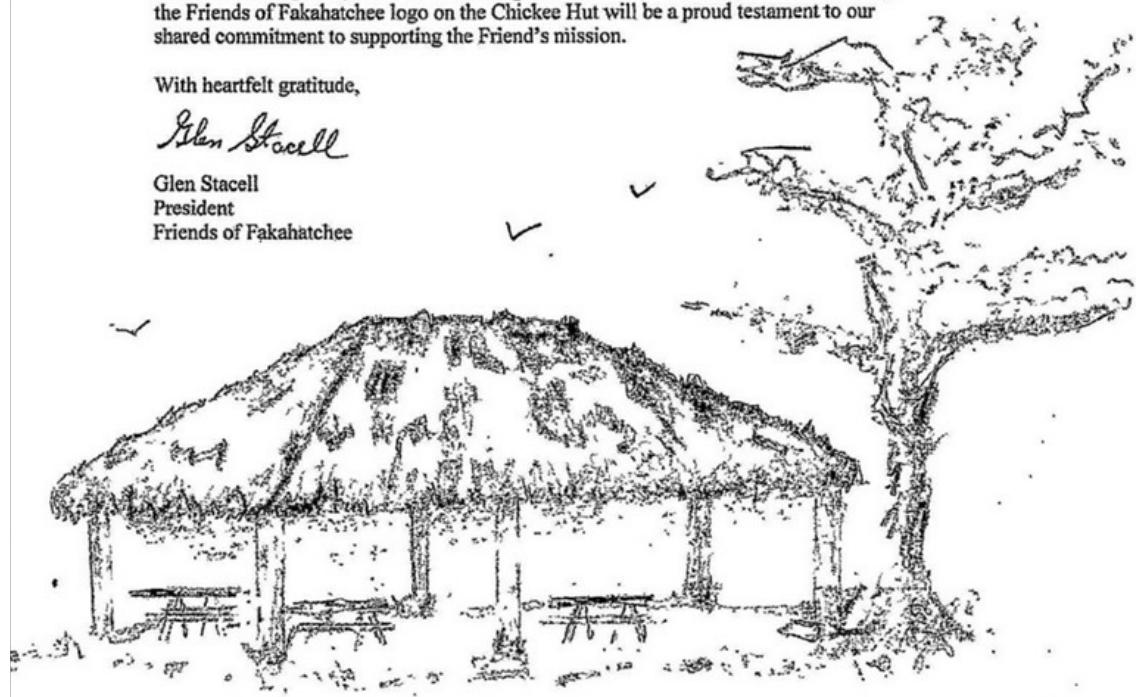
Beyond providing a welcoming spot for our guests, the Chickee Hut will also offer much-needed shelter for Park staff and our dedicated volunteers as they carry out their important work in the field.

As always, I am grateful for your continued generosity and support, which plays a vital role in benefiting everyone who visits the park. I believe you will agree that displaying the Friends of Fakahatchee logo on the Chickee Hut will be a proud testament to our shared commitment to supporting the Friend's mission.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Glen Stacell

Glen Stacell
President
Friends of Fakahatchee



Tickets going fast for 2025-26 Friends Tours

Thanks to the commitment of our tour volunteers, tickets are selling quickly 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>. **Remember, tickets make great gifts!**



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.

Members Welcome Back Picnic enjoyed by all

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President Glen Stacell and Park Manager Jeremy Sweeney. Photo by Debra Taylor.



Park Specialist Steven Bass, Francine Stevens, and Jeremy Sweeney. Photo by Debra Taylor.



Thanks to Bruce Bunch and Debra Taylor for doing the food service. Photo by Phil McGuire.



Carol Spagnolo, Norma Gordon, Andrew Tyler, Karen Tyler, Cathy DaSilva, and John DaSilva. Photo by Phil McGuire.



Debra Taylor, Ted DeGroot, Laura Stacell, Glen Stacell, Jeanette Atkinson, and Bruce Bunch. Photo by Phil McGuire.



Durland Fish, Ted Lock, Judith Henzler, and Deborah Jansen. Photo by Phil McGuire.



Tom Trotta, Terry Trottier, Jeremy Sweeney, Paul Eason, and Steven Bass. Photo by Phil McGuire.

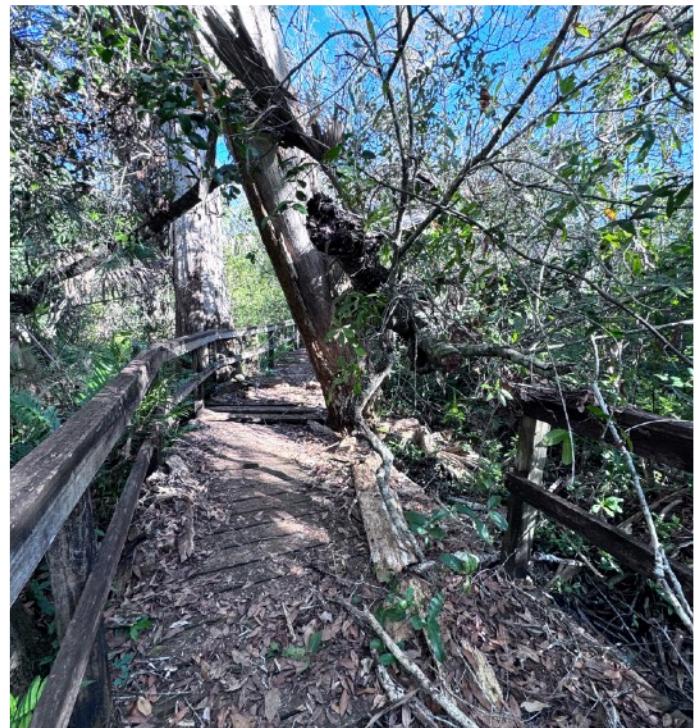


Ernest Perterson, Mike Peppe, Francine Stevens, and Andy Padda. Photo by Phil McGuire.

60 year old boardwalk's destruction by Hurricane Ian

All photos by Rita Bauer

After Hurricane Ian tore through the Park, our own Rita Bauer recorded the devastation to the old Boardwalk. We share these photos as a reminder of what was repaired and replaced. Thanks, Rita!



Reconstructed Boardwalk is a joy to behold

All photos by Phil McGuire

Thanks to Phil McGuire for these photos of the newly reconstructed Boardwalk. You may want to plan a visit soon to experience it in person, especially with the completed connection to the New Boardwalk!



Entrance to the reconstructed Boardwalk.



Boardwalk volunteer program off to a great start



Debra Taylor begins her new Boardwalk volunteer program.



Left to right: Ted Lock, Judith Henzler, Debra Taylor, Beth Courtright, and Jeanette Atkins continue the instruction.

Volunteers make the Tours go 'round



Norma Gordon drives for the tram tour.



Carol Spagnolo narrates the tram tour. Photos by Steven Bass.



Moon rise over the Fakahatchee. Photo by Carol Spagnolo.

FOF at Big Cypress Swamp Heritage Festival



692 visitors attending the Festival had a chance to learn about the FOF thanks to Debra Taylor and this informative display. Photo by Francine Stevens.

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:

January 14th
February 11th
March 11th
April 15th

Seen in the Strand

Avian visitors and residents of the Strand

All photos by Phil McGuire



Tiny Palm Warblers are winter visitors to the Park.



Tri-colored Herons and Snowy Egrets are year-round residents of Florida.



Black-crowned Night-Herons and Great Blue Herons also call Florida home full time.

Comet C2025 AC Lemmon seen at Night Sky Tour

Christopher Zeitler, who attended the November 15 Night Sky Tour, captured this photo of the comet and generously shared it with us.



Christopher Zeitler
C 2025 A6 Lemmon

Donation Strategies by Chris Gair

It is time to consider a QCD.

For the Friends Annual Appeal, it is worth repeating the value of a QCD from an IRA – a donation strategy several of our donors are taking advantage of.

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 70½ 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/>

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.

Membership News

Members make a difference!

Welcome new member Amy Chinea, Art Cullman, and Sam Skostag.

We have 308 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

BOD meeting schedule

January 18
February 15
March 28

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.