



# 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 – January 2026

## 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

**Ribbon cutting ceremony on Saturday, February 21st.** The Department of Environmental Protection Division of Recreation and Parks, in partnership with the Friends of Fakahatchee, will host a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Boardwalk site. This event marks the official opening of the entire boardwalk, extending from the new section opened in February 2024 to the reconstructed original boardwalk completed in mid-November 2025.

The event, scheduled from 10:00 AM to 11:30 AM, will formally acknowledge the principal contributors to this outstanding project. Members are encouraged to RSVP no later than the 18th of February. You can RSVP on Eventbrite by clicking here: <https://tinyurl.com/FOF-ribbon-cutting>.

The 2026 Election to serve on the Board of Directors is approaching once again. A "Call for Nominees" will be sent to our members during the last week of January via a special bulletin.

**Park Manager Jeremy Sweeney is seeking volunteers to assist with Boardwalk maintenance.** Ideal candidates for ongoing maintenance will possess skills in board replacement, trimming, hammering nails, and general upkeep. Please contact Volunteer Coordinator Steven Bass via email at [steven.bass@floridadep.gov](mailto:steven.bass@floridadep.gov) or call the Park office at 239-961-1925

*Cordially,*

*Glen Stacell and Francine Stevens*



## Franklin Adams Talk 2 PM on February 27 at the Boardwalk Pavilion

Franklin Adams, whose conservation career spans seventy years, will recount his role in protecting the Fakahatchee from development. The event at the Boardwalk Pavilion is free, open to everyone, and hosted by the Fakahatchee Park staff – *no RSVP needed.*



## 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](mailto:Office@FOFinc.org)**

*Thank you and see you later alligator!*

*Debra Taylor*  
**FOF Vice President**

**You are invited to join the Friends of Fakahatchee volunteer team, composed of both novices and Master Naturalists.** This program aims to equip volunteers to effectively welcome and inform visitors interested in understanding their destination and the experiences that await them. Volunteers will learn about the Friends organization, the Fakahatchee Preserve, and the unique natural environment surrounding the Pavilion and Boardwalk.

**I am inviting you to meet me at the Boardwalk when I dedicate my time on the following Tuesdays in February to mentoring volunteers on the boardwalk.**

### February Schedule

**February 3rd, February 10th, February 17th, and February 24th.**

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



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



## Annual Appeal funds Chickee for Park (donate online at orchidswamp.org)

For questions about the Annual Appeal, please contact Executive Director Francine Stevens 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](http://www.orchidswamp.org)  
P.O. Box 54, Bonita Springs FL 34133

October 2025

Dear Friend of the Fakahatchee,

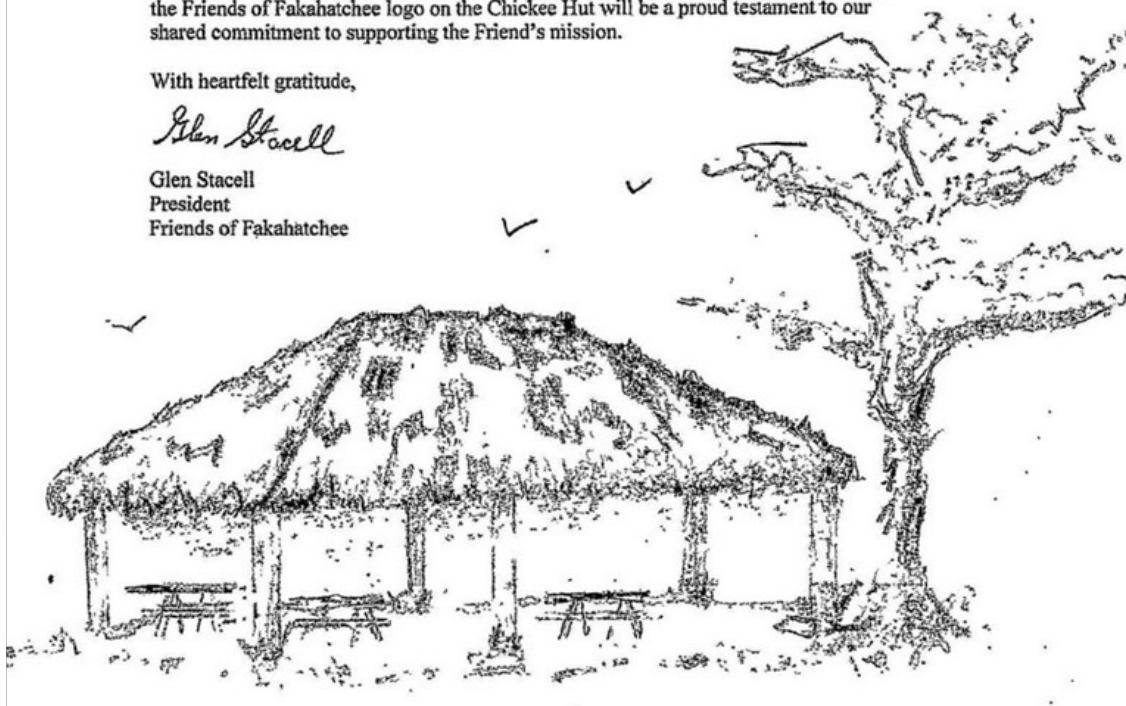
This year, our annual appeal from the Board of Directors and the Park Manager is centered on enhancing the visitor experience at the park. We are excited to announce plans for a traditional Chickee Hut to be installed in the parking area of Gate 12 East Main Trail.

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  
President  
Friends of Fakahatchee



## Tickets still available for 2026 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>.



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.



## The Connection of Boardwalks at Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park

By Andrew Tyler

In my April 2024 Ghost Writer newsletter article describing the completion of the new boardwalk at Big Cypress Bend, I concluded with the following: *“Hopefully, eventual restoration of the old boardwalk, which was severely damaged during Hurricane Ian, will allow for completion of the original vision, extending the new pathway to encompass both boardwalks and thereby completing a magnificent facility that provides a complete representation of the diverse landscapes that make up the Fakahatchee Preserve.”*

During a recent conversation, our Executive Director informed me that Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) and Florida State Parks had now completed the reconstruction of the old boardwalk, and the two boardwalks were now linked. Propelled by this wonderful news, I ventured forth early in the morning during the last weekend of 2025 to enjoy the results of this long-anticipated project.

A quick note on the history of the boardwalk property for more recent Friends' members, the boardwalk system is constructed on a one-mile square plot that was brought into conservation in the late 1950s by the philanthropic efforts of the Norris family of Naples. Legend has it that this plot contained the final stand of old growth cypress trees in this part of Florida, and the Norris purchase saved this remaining fragment of what had been, prior to logging, approximately 100 square miles of primarily cypress swamp. This is the only remaining old growth Cypress between here and Corkscrew Swamp sanctuary, which had been purchased by National Audubon in the mid-1950s. The “Norris’s property” was incorporated into the State Park in 1974.

For long-time Friends, please be aware that parking for visiting the old boardwalk, located on US-41 in front of the Miccosukee village, is no longer permitted. One must park in the new off-road paved parking area constructed along with the new boardwalk, since this now serves as the parking lot and entrance of the entire boardwalk.

The boardwalk is signed as open from 8 AM-dusk, as all state parks, so I arrived on a bright, sunny morning with a few traces of mist lying across the savannah that surround much of the “new” Boardwalk. The birds that enjoy a perch from which they can survey the landscape for an early breakfast opportunity were in evidence, and I received the beady stare of a Red-shouldered Hawk.



The trail winds around the east and south sides of Green Heron Lake and a short path then connects to the start of the reconstructed “old” boardwalk trail. Visitors with a particular interest in birds will be happy to find that the wading birds that previously enjoyed the canal on the right-hand side of the entrance are still doing so. This Tri-colored Heron (left), was not disturbed by my presence.



Other than the reconstructed boardwalk, little has changed since the 2022 closure following hurricane Ian. The Cypress trees are largely needle-less at this time of year, so the epiphytic bromeliads, high up in the Cypress trees, are easy to see. I was glad to see that the iconic Strangler Fig (shown next page), a distinctive tree on the left side on the outward-bound trail is still there, despite its great age.

Then finally, at the end of the trail, the alligator pond was reasonably full, despite the far-below-average rainfall for the Naples area in 2025. Always a haunt for wading birds,

many took off upon my failed attempt at a discrete arrival, but this Little Blue heron (right), was unfazed by my presence.



No alligators were in evidence, but perhaps this is unsurprising on an early chilly morning. It was a real joy to return along the trail to the audio accompaniment of multiple woodpeckers, migrant cardinals and hawks. *Continued >>>*



>>> *Connection of Boardwalks continued from page 5*

The FDEP has done a splendid job with the boardwalk restoration. All new wood planks and handrails make for a very even hiking experience and the handrails have been made compliant for those enjoying the trail in wheelchairs. For example, see the viewing location and the reflective view of the alligator pond (below), taken from that visual access point.



*This viewing location (left) and reflective view (right) from that access point of the alligator pond.*



A few restoration tasks remain to be done. I understand the addition of boardwalk seating is in the works, as some updated signage. Finally, a gated fence will be installed shortly to isolate the connection between the two boardwalk sections from US-41, while the gate will allow Miccosukee residents to access their village.

Signage updates are in the works to inform visitors of the entire length of the linked boardwalks and trail. In terms of total distance, my watch indicated around 2 miles for the round trip.

In summary, I would encourage visitors to do the complete trail at their earliest opportunity. Water levels are very low compared with an average January, and the boardwalk is sure to get busy (and noisy) as the season progresses. The old boardwalk has been a 'wildlife only' section for about three years and some of the creatures were skittish today, so go while things are quiet. The extended boardwalk now encompasses a savannah/prairie habitat in the first section and the wooded wetlands in the second part. It's a great encapsulation of many of Fakahatchee habitats in a walk accessible to all levels of ability and mobility. Well done, Florida Parks Service!



## News from the Strand



### What a great Swamp Walk!

*Men's Cultural Alliance thoroughly enjoyed their Swamp Walk guided by Gordon Saager and assisted by Debra Taylor. Photo by Debra Taylor.*

Message from Bob Agrast:

*"Wow, what a swamp walk we had! We were impressed by Gordon's knowledge, and Debra was great. We had a magnificent experience; my group had a blast!"*

### Volunteers preserve panther wrap

*Thank you to Norma Gordon for hosing down the truck after a tram tour. A new habit our guides are adopting to keep the beautiful panther wrap in good shape! Photo by Carol Spagnolo.*





## Transport to Swamp Walk with the Friends' truck

Biologist Cole Luttrell, assisted by Maria Sentmanat, started something new for the Swamp Walk. We are now transporting swamp walkers on the Friends' truck for more time for interaction with the Biologist. *Photos by Maria Sentmanat.*



*Swamp walkers load up into the back of the Friends' truck for a more immersive experience.*



*It's a beauty!*



*Park Biologist Cole Luttrell interprets the nature of the Fakahatchee in the truck and in the swamp.*



## Seen in the Strand

### Rare and exciting wildlife in the Fakahatchee



*An exciting image of a threatened Everglades mink with a meal of a crayfish. Photo by Jacob Askin.*

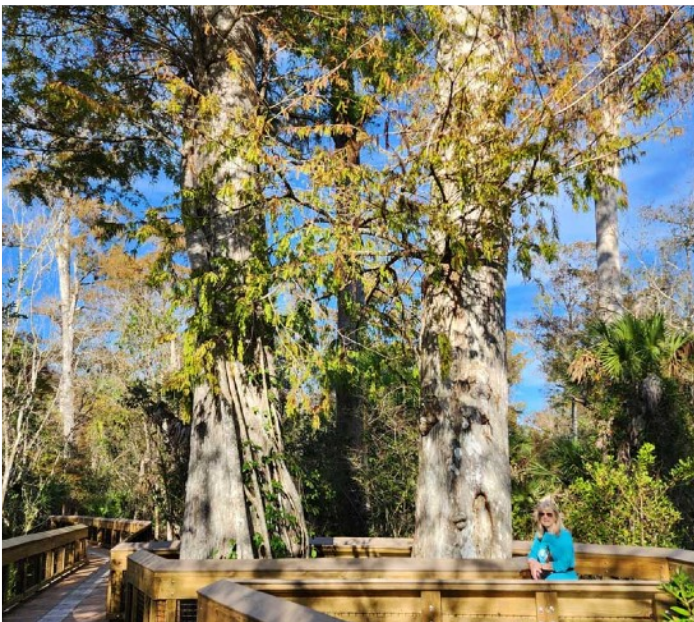


*Cotton mouths may be found in every county in Florida – if you go looking! Photo by Christopher Zeitler.*



*This beautiful Clam Shell orchid is a state-listed endangered species. Photo by Carol Spagnolo.*

### Friends on the Boardwalk



*Francine Stevens by the iconic twin cypress trees. Photo by Debra Taylor.*



*Debra Taylor led new volunteers on the boardwalk this fine Winter's day. Photographer unknown.*



## Donation Strategies by Chris Gair

### The Friends make it easy.

The Internal Revenue Code in no way makes it easy to select the best, most tax-efficient way to help the charity of your choice. In addition, the charity itself will have rules and perhaps restrictions on what it receives.

Should I make a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) from my IRA? Or perhaps a gift of stock that has appreciated a great deal is the optimum method. Your resources at *Friends* working with your tax advisor will chart the right course to cover all the bases.

All too often in my career have I seen folks make quick uninformed decisions about their charitable gifting only to regret it later. Yes, it sounds simple, but it is not. Take advantage of time, expertise and dedication of the good folks at *Friends* to work with you and explore all the options you have available. I am confident you will be pleased and come away confident that you covered the waterfront and got your gift to the right place in best way possible.

*Mistakes to be avoided in charitable gifting: Here are some of the biggest mistakes I have seen people make over the years as they plan their gifting. Take a minute if you would to see how a little time and patience will serve to get you the best result.*

**Slow down and start early** – There is absolutely no hurry to make your decision. Plan at the beginning of the year to review all your options.

**Consider the source of your gift** – IRA's, publicly traded securities, mutual funds, cash or even life insurance policies are candidates and each has its own characteristics when it comes to gifting.

**Restrictions** – It is common for people to have their own ideas and objectives when supporting a charity. Of course, the charity would prefer an Unrestricted Gift so that they may select the best use. Somewhere "in the middle" is the answer to satisfy both parties. Make the effort to work with the charity and together find a solution. My experience with *Friends* along this line has been exemplary; they are good at what they do.

**Keep records** – I know we are all inundated with "tax-time" paperwork, but please make it a point to keep all the details about your gift. If ever questioned by the IRS, and the records are not there, it can be a nightmare to reconstruct.

**Acknowledgement of your gift** – Never an issue with *Friends*. A cancelled check is not enough, so please make sure you receive a formal receipt from your charity.

*Sounds simple I know, but paying attention to the above can save a lot of effort and frustration.*

*As always, thanks for listening and for your commitment to our great organization.*

*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

### 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 started November 2025 and continues through April 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](mailto:steven.Bass@FloridaDEP.gov)

Phone: (239)-253-6374

**The monthly dates  
are as follows:**

February 11th

March 11th

April 15th

### 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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto:Office@FOFinc.org).***



## Membership News

### Members make a difference!

Welcome new member Hebe Dennis, Henry Loeser, and Martin Strasmore.

We have 304 members.

*Thanks to Deborah Jansen for converting to 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:

#fakahatcheestrland, #friendsoffakahatchee,  
#fakahatcheestrlandpreservestatepark

### Officers

Glen Stacell, President

Debra Taylor, Vice President

Carol Spagnolo, Secretary

Phil McGuire, Treasurer

### Directors

Kevin Cuniff

Rudi Ettrich

Deborah Jansen

Maria Sentmanat

Tom Trotta

Bruce Bunch, Ex-Officio

Tom Maish, Ex-Officio

Francine Stevens, Executive Director

### BOD meeting schedule

February 15

March 28

April 19

*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/>.

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](mailto:Office@FOFinc.org).