

Woodpeckers, Weevils, and Whirligigs



Virtual critter experiences garner kudos at groundbreaking Brooker Creek Environmental Center

Above: Visitors to the preserve step from bustling metropolis into the serenity of Old Florida.

by Chelle Koster Walton

If they gave out Emmy's for Best Hands-on Center in a Nature-Supporting Role, the new Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center near Tarpon Springs would win hands down.

Some other categories in which it would nab the golden statue:

Best Sound Track: For the insulated quiet of its approach boardwalk, broken abruptly by what amounts to a crash in

the relative silence, but turns out merely to be two chasing squirrels.

Best Set: The super-sized gopher tortoise burrow inside the center, through which you can crawl.

Most Creative Use of Video: Big-screen films mixing animation and nature footage, a Viewmaster-style video of a mosquito's life cycle, a film of a hatching alligator, and more.

Best Special Effects: The holographic and magical imaging of an historical

PHOTO BY SKIP HOLMES

film about the creek and human impact on it.

Best Starring Roles: The frog, mosquito, fish, whirligig, crayfish, and garfish in the blockbuster production *Fall*.

Best Costumes: Kids can dress up like the rancher, pioneer child, and golfer who appear in the historical film.

The experience begins with your sudden escape from Pinellas County commercialism. As you head north along Highway 19 through St. Petersburg and Clearwater in one of western Florida's most heavily developed counties, metropolis gives way to small town. At Tarpon Springs, you turn east on Tarpon Avenue and begin your journey into the land, watershed, and crucial habitat the county saved from imminent development—more than eight thousand acres at the western boundary of Tampa's Hillsborough County and the northern boundary of Pasco County.

As you stroll the boardwalk from parking lot to learning center, a striking archway sculpture visually makes the transition from metropolitan sophistication to back-country wilderness, its steel girders abstractly suggesting vines and tangled growth. The boardwalk passes the environmental center to an overlook, your first glimpse of the creek, a picture of serenity and Old Florida. The Friends Trail continues for a nearly two-mile loop through pine flatwoods and a swamp under restoration, but it's best to visit the environmental center first for a proper introduction.

Art again imitates nature at the dramatic entrance. Two craftily designed rooms are so engaging that even adults cannot keep their hands off of the exhibits. Begin in "Brooker's Barn," a state-of-the-art theater that features a

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hunter, pioneer, surveyor, golfer, real-estate salesman, and other characters who have impacted the environment through the decades.

Front and center, the Water Works exhibit explains complex concepts such as recharge, evaporation, percolation, and condensation so that even a nonscientific mind (like mine) can understand them.

A Year in Florida is more my speed. Divided into the four seasons, it features videos and interactive displays that take visitors from summer through winter with the creek's favorite critters. Whirl a whirligig. Hear a catbird meow and the American goldfinch ask for a potato chip. Step on an ephemeral leafy projection. Peak at live aquarium specimens. This room is a work in progress; upcoming exhibits include one about pileated woodpeckers, called The Original Headbanger, and another about water management, titled the Sophisticated Drinker.

The second large room replicates the



Top: Educational murals cleverly contain multimedia and interactive elements. Bottom: An artistic archway graces the boardwalk leading to the learning center.

creek's habitat, with levers and other forms of manipulation for exploring hidden creatures. Maneuver a larger-than-life millipede through leaf litter, help a weevil crawl out of a rotting log, and move an ant lion through its funnel-

shaped lair. A huge-scale model addresses "smart development," but the kids will be drawn to the gopher tortoise burrow. They start to plunge in, but then hear a faint rattling and notice a sign about "surprises," cautioning them to be

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aware of what else they may encounter in the burrow. As they make their way through the tunnel (five times the size of a true gopher tortoise habitat), they lift doors and read signs to learn about eggs, rattlesnakes, and other natural encounters they might experience on the crawl.

Parents are drawn to crawl through too. If they choose not to, they can relax in rocking chairs by the picture windows looking out onto the woods. Here, identification charts help them recognize local birds, raccoons, snakes, and other critters. Once everyone has learned about "looking for traces in all the right places" (identifying tracks, scat, and skins), it's time to hit the trails.

The one-and-three-quarter-mile, self-interpretative (ask for a guide inside) Friends Trail takes in an observation tower, crosses a footbridge, and intersects with the preserve's fourteen-mile equestrian trail. A series of trails within a four-mile loop venture deeper into wilderness, exploring cypress domes, swamps, oak hammocks, and pine flatwoods.

As you learned earlier in the education center, you must look closely to recognize the treasures saved from development: epiphytes, Catesby's lilies, dung beetles, zebra longwing butterflies, five-lined skinks, gopher frogs, red-billed woodpeckers, green herons, and white-tailed deer.

No visit to the preserve is complete without a stop in the Nature Store. With its stock of everything from chocolate-dipped insects and tarantula puppets to butterfly nets and spotting scopes, it's a shoo-in for Best Eco Gift Shop. Find out more about Brooker Creek Preserve by calling 727-453-6900 or visiting www.brookercreek.org.

Chelle Koster Walton is travel editor for Times of the Islands. She also writes for Miami Herald, Caribbean Travel & Life, St. Petersburg Times, National Geographic, and other publications.

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