



ANIMAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SHELL FACTORY; PLAYGROUND PHOTO COURTESY OF LOVERS KEY CARL E. JOHNSON STATE PARK

The Shell Factory's Nature Park & Botanical Garden (left and top) is home to animals from around the world; Lovers Key's new Bayside Park (above) features two playgrounds as well as picnic tables and volleyball courts.

Housing developments and shopping centers aren't the only new things popping up in Lee County. Over the past year or so, new exhibits and trails have appeared on the scene, offering locals and visitors different ways to explore the area.

Natural Wonders

At the southwest end of the Shell Factory complex, the new Nature Park & Botanical Garden is home to animals from around the world, everything from iguanas and alligators to prairie dogs and camels. In the petting zoo, visitors can get up close and personal with llamas, goats, lambs, and a baby bull. But they may not want to get too close to the corn snakes, anacondas, and pythons found in the Eco Lab. Also on site: a botanical trail with butterfly-attracting plants and a seven-thousand-square-foot free-flight aviary. For more information about the Shell Factory's Nature Park & Botanical Garden, call 239/995-2141 or visit www.shellfactory.com.

In March, Lovers Key Carl E. Johnson State Park opened its new Bayside Park just south of Big Carlos Pass. A prime spot for families, it features picnic pavilions with grills, a volleyball court, and two playgrounds (one for toddlers, one for bigger kids). Some time this summer, Lovers Key plans to open a second portion of its Black Island Trail, adding one and a half miles to the existing two-and-a-half-mile trail frequented by hikers and bikers. The park has also partnered with a new concessionaire, Nature Recreation Management. The company runs a gift shop and a bayside bait and tackle shop; rents canoes, kayaks, bikes, and beach chairs; offers shelling and sunset cruises;

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE RANDELL RESEARCH CENTER

and manages weddings and other special events at the park. For more information about Lovers Key Carl E. Johnson State Park, call 239/463-4588 or visit www.floridastateparks.org/loverskey.



On Pine Island, the Calusa Heritage Trail provides information on the Calusa Indian village that was located there for more than 1,500 years.

Marsh Loop Trail to the Oak Hammock. A 660-foot boardwalk along the edge of the site's saw-grass marsh leads to the new trail,

which travels through mixed pine/oak habitat and into a cabbage palm/oak hammock. A second boardwalk spans the popash slough, and burl-covered oak trees line the final portion of the trail. "It's absolutely beautiful and adds a whole new dimension to the visitor's experience at CREW," said CREW's executive director, Ellen Lindblad, at the trail's opening. For more information about the new trail and CREW, call 239/657-2253 or visit www.crewtrust.org.

The second portion of the Great Calusa Blueway paddling trail also

atop the site's tallest shell mound offers sweeping views of Pine Island Sound. For more information about the Calusa Heritage Trail, call 239/283-2062 or visit www.flmnh.ufl.edu/rrc.

Estero's CREW Land & Water Trust is a nonprofit conservation organization that works to preserve natural resources in and around the sixty-thousand-acre Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed, which straddles Lee and Collier counties and is accessible for public recreational use. In January, CREW opened the half-mile-long Popash Slough Trail connecting the existing

Trail Mix

Part of the Randell Research Center, which studies the archaeology, history, and ecology of Southwest Florida, the new Calusa Heritage Trail on Pine Island tells the story of the Calusa Indian village that was located at Pineland for more than 1,500 years. Opened in December, the 3,700-foot interpretive walkway winds past shell mounds and remnants of a one-thousand-year-old canal. Thirteen illustrated signs along the trail provide information on Calusa Indian culture, the history of Pineland, and the area's native flora and fauna. An observation platform



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE IMAGINARIUM HANDS-ON MUSEUM

Kids can learn about food and nutrition at the Sweetbay Supermarket Exhibit at the Imaginarium Hands-On Museum.

made its debut this year. While the trail's original forty-mile stretch leads canoeists and kayakers through Estero Bay, the new, thirty-five-mile section travels through Pine Island Sound, past the islands of Sanibel, Captiva, Cabbage Key, and Useppa. "It looks much like it did when the Calusa [Indians] were here," says Nancy MacPhee, recreation supervisor for Lee County Parks and Recreation. "It is just a great experience." Folks who want to explore the Great Calusa Blueway can either go it alone or take a guided tour of the area. For more information about the Great Calusa Blueway, call 239/461-7400 or visit www.greatcalusablueway.com.

On Display

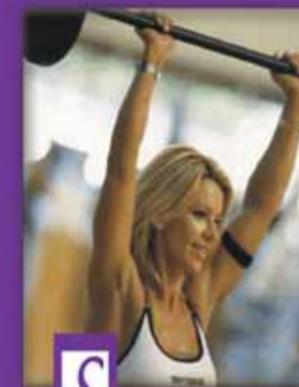
Sweetbay Supermarket has not only opened several new stores in Southwest Florida but also created the Sweetbay Supermarket Exhibit at Ft. Myers's Imaginarium Hands-On Museum. Designed to teach kids about food, nutrition, and consumer sciences, the new, permanent display also helps develop skills like counting and shape recognition. Pint-sized "shoppers" at the museum can weigh produce, make sandwiches in the deli area, and check out their purchases in the grocery aisle, just like mom and dad. For more information about the Imaginarium Hands-On Museum's Sweetbay Supermarket Exhibit, call 239/337-3332 or visit www.cityftmyers.com/imaginariu.

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