

The Refreshing Beauty of Walking

Not your typical walk in the park, visitors to the Fakahatchee Strand



by Janina Birtolo

Swamps haven't always had the best reputation. For generations, people viewed them as fairly worthless areas, filled with dangerous creatures and hordes of mosquitoes. Happily, thanks to the findings of scientists, we've come to understand just how vital swamps are in maintaining the quality and quantity of fresh water and the delicate balance of the environment. And

the general public is discovering that, while the mosquitoes can still be abundant (especially during the summer), swamps are, literally, a cool place to explore.

Even better news for those who live in or visit Southwest Florida is that it is home to one of the most inviting swamps. Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, a nineteen-mile-long forested swamp winding through the Everglades, is the

largest strand swamp in the world.

An elongated channel that runs three to five miles wide and approximately three feet deep, the Fakahatchee boasts a list of superlatives. "It's the orchid capital of the world," says park biologist Mike Owen. "With approximately thirty-five species, we have the largest number of species of native orchids in the U.S. We're also the bromeliad capital, with fourteen different native species. There

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN ELTING; INSET BY RICK CRUZ PHOTOGRAPHY.COM

in a Swamp

Preserve get knee-deep in the wilderness



John Elting (second from left) leads swamp walkers on a unique adventure into the depths of "Florida's Amazon." Inset: A naturalist's dream, the preserve is home to an abundance of native plants and wildlife.

are only sixteen species in all of Florida. And we're the fern capital, too. We have thirty-five species of native ferns. We also have the largest population of royal palms in the U.S., somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000."

Obviously, that varying flora makes the Fakahatchee a plant-lover's paradise. But animal lovers will be well satisfied, too. The swamp and the surrounding prairies and flatwoods are home to the

Florida panther and black bear, the Everglades mink, wood storks and various other wading birds, alligators, a few crocodiles, cottonmouth snakes, bobcats, and mangrove fox squirrels. "Mammal-wise, the only native species we're missing is the red wolf," Owen says. "And outreach goes a long way toward helping us protect what we have."

That outreach is most evident and effective in the opportunities the park

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In addition to interacting with the environment, hikers also learn about the swamp's history and hydrology.

offers for exploration. Janes Scenic Drive, an eleven-mile unpaved, gravel road, winds through a portion of the preserve and provides glimpses of the bounty within. A 2,000-foot-long boardwalk at the Big Cypress Bend allows visitors to get a closer look at a 215-acre, old-growth cypress forest. The best way to experience the Fakahatchee is to take the plunge and go on a swamp walk guided by Owen or a member of the Friends of Fakahatchee citizens' support organization.

"We get people out for a long time and cover a lot of species," explains Owen. "People are immersed, literally, and their attention can go a lot longer when they're actually hiking through the swamp."

Adds John Elting, president of the Friends and a wilderness search and rescue technician, "It's a wonderful, educational outing. You can expect to get a very comprehensive overview of the swamp."

Immersion is an apt description of the swamp walks, as Elting and Owen take their groups (usually limited to about fifteen people) into sometimes thigh-high water. Long pants that can get wet are obviously recommended. So are lace-up shoes, since they're less likely to slip off in the muck that covers the bottom of the swamp. And a sturdy walking stick is a must, both to help keep balance on the uneven surface and to minimize a hiker's need to grab hold of trees for safety and stability. (Owen keeps a supply on hand

for hikers who don't bring their own.)

And what can the swamp walkers expect to see? That depends, due to the seasonal nature of the swamp. A host of bromeliads, ferns, and other plants are always plentiful. Elting reports that half a dozen or more orchids are likely to be blooming during the winter. "We've been seeing more and more mink the last three years," he adds. "We might also see wild hogs, deer, and bobcat.

"Every person arrives with his or her own individual interests, and they run the gamut from butterflies to orchids to snakes," he continues. "I take a bottom-up approach. Some people are reticent, and they're the ones I like to approach. I want to make certain their experience is a good one. I want people to want to come back and to care about the swamp."

Like Elting, Owen tailors his walks to the interests of his hikers. Both also spend a good deal of time explaining the history and hydrology of the swamp, how the water cools the area and encourages the abundant greenery and wildlife. "Everything here relies on seasonally fluctuating water levels," Owen explains. "Nature isn't totally predictable, but there is a general pattern."

That pattern helps the guides keep their hikers safe. Alligators and cottonmouths do live in the swamp, but knowing their habits makes them easier to avoid and to deal with when they are

encountered. "Gators are solar-powered," Owen quips. "In the winter, they might be out in the sun on the side of the road in the morning, so they're not in the swamp. And our number-one safety rule is to do everything slowly."

The slow pace makes the swamp walks a day-long adventure, beginning at 10 a.m. and lasting until mid- or late afternoon, but it also affords the time necessary to experience the swamp fully. The Fakahatchee is like no place else—Florida's Amazon is what Owen calls it. Journeying through its swamp is akin to a walking meditation, a chance to experience the wild and let it speak to and soothe the soul.

Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, located west of Copeland, Florida, on State Road 29, offers biologist-led swamp walks once a month, from November through February. The Friends of Fakahatchee provide guided swamp walks about three times a month, from October through April or May. Groups may arrange additional walks. Although there is no set fee, a \$40 donation to the Friends is requested. For a schedule, reservations, more information about the Fakahatchee, or membership in the Friends, call the park office at 239-695-4593. 🌿

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