

FLORIDA'S STATE PARKS Talk before Collier Legislative Delegation 12.8.2021

We are Park Volunteers who appreciate the opportunity to speak.
Francine Stevens, Andrew Tyler my name is Tom Maish

Florida is ranked #5 in the US with 175 Parks and Trails.
drawing 25 million Visitors each year
with Economic Impact of \$2.2 BILLION
generating \$150 million in Sales Tax receipts

Florida's Parks have been awarded the prestigious GOLD MEDAL (4) times by the National Recreation and Parks Commission; more than any other state!

There was testimony before the Legislature that Florida's economy was rebounding better than pre Covid. VISIT FLORIDA efforts are outperforming the national average in hotels, traveler spending beating out New York, Hawaii, and Las Vegas with the Everglades a top draw.

Florida CFO; Jimmy Patronis stated 900 people are moving to Florida DAILY! The Document Tax fund should be flush at \$1.0 billion.

This good news will increase the number of Visitors to our State Parks.

Yet, Florida ranks 48th in average Park salaries according to ZipRequirer.
48 th lowest!

Current starting pay for a DEP Ranger is \$13.15 per hour while Collier Parks pay \$15.75.
The low pay is contributing to the 100+ vacancies in State parks personnel.

Please request the Appropriations Committee, at a minimum, increase pay to \$15.75 hourly.

As Volunteers in the Fakahatchee we wish to express our THANK YOU for the \$7.0 Boardwalk Visitor Facilities now under construction where no facilities previously existed.
The photos show progress in building the Visitor's Pavilion, restrooms and parking lot.
The Visitor's Pavilion with its creative interpretative kiosks will become a major environmental attraction in Collier.

One hurdle remains!

The Fakahatchee is Florida's largest Preserve State Park, yet there are only (5) staff including the Park Manager to maintain the Park's 120 square miles.

DEP has no provision for personnel to staff, maintain and protect the Pavilion.

Current plan is to open the Pavilion without any supervision.

If one vandal decides to trash the \$1.0 million building then all could be lost!

We are requesting the Delegation ask Legislature to create positions of Assistant Park Manager and Park Specialist for the new Boardwalk facilities in the Fakahatchee to supervise, maintain and provide safety for our Visitors.

THANK YOU

FAKAHATCHEE BOARDWALK PAVILION

PARKING LOT



RESTROOMS →



VISITOR'S PAVILION





FAKAHATCHEE STRAND PRESERVE
VIEW OF INTERPRETIVE PAVILION



Fakahatchee Strand Interpretive Center: Exhibit Gallery View 1
Interpretive Exhibits Design Concept - The Acorn Group - May 31, 2015



Fakahatchee Strand Interpretive Center: Exhibit Gallery View 2
Interpretive Exhibits Design Concept - The Acorn Group - May 31, 2015

RIGHT NOW

REFRESHING



A rendering of the planned suspension bridge

Adding Polish to This Eco-gem

ENHANCEMENTS ARE UNDERWAY AT FAKAHATCHEE STRAND PRESERVE STATE PARK TO MAKE THIS BOTANICAL MARVEL EVEN MORE VISITOR-FRIENDLY. **BY JENNIFER REED**

THE FAKAHATCHEE Strand Preserve State Park is one of the world's most botanically abundant and diverse places—the royal palm capital of the United States, the orchid capital of the United States, the bromeliad capital of the United States, the peperomia capital of the United States and the keeper of the state's last remaining virgin cypress trees, to name a few of its distinctions.

Pulling up to the visitor entrance, you'd never suspect you've stumbled upon such an ecological gem.

An easily missed brown sign on the Tamiami Trail announces that you are entering the Fakahatchee. The best landmark is the Indian village located near the boardwalk's entrance. This is deceptive, because it's private property and not affiliated with the park.

Parking? Nearly nonexistent. Visitors cram their vehicles into a couple of spaces in a haphazard dirt lot, or line their cars on the

eastbound shoulder of the Tamiami Trail and dash across the roadway.

"We've got pictures—you can see whole families running back and forth," says Friends of Fakahatchee President Patrick Higgins. Talk about safety hazards.

There are no restrooms, just portable toilets near the parking area.

And the boardwalk itself: It is a 2,300-foot-long stroll through dense vegetation that lures some 88,000 people a year from all over the world. Guides can bring the place to life—

COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF FAKAHATCHEE

The 'Amazon of North America' could be Florida's best-kept secret

Will McGough, CNN • Published 5th July 2021



(CNN) — Seeing a panther in the wild is one of the most-coveted experiences an adventurer in South Florida can pursue.

It's also one of the least likely to occur.

The Florida panther is among the most endangered species in the [United States](#), found only in South Florida, with an estimated population of less than 130. Its habitat, which includes swamps, marshlands and thick jungles, makes it extremely difficult to track.

So when a Florida man named Ezra Van saw five panthers in one day this past January -- including capturing a family of four on video -- it naturally went viral in Miami.

Van, a former search and rescue patroller, spent five meticulous years manifesting his encounter, keeping detailed notes of his explorations that included tracks, evidence of recent kills and local migration patterns.

Ultimately, it led him to being in the right place at the right time in the [Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park](#) on January 13.

What makes the story so interesting is not just the amount of effort Van put into tracking the panthers or the unthinkable odds of seeing five of them in the wild, but where the sightings took place.

The Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, though small in comparison with federally managed wilderness areas in South Florida, seems to have a knack for flying under the radar, then suddenly making big, out-of-the-blue headlines.

It is part of the [Florida Wildlife Corridor](#), which just received recognition in the form of legislation that allocates around \$400 million to protect millions of acres of the state's precious green space.



Ezra Van had a rare encounter with Florida panthers in January at Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.
Ezra Van

'Orchid Thief' fame

Created in 1974, not much limelight surrounded the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve until 1994, when poachers were caught exiting the area with "bags" of its most precious orchid species.

The story caught the public eye and went on to become the subject of the best-selling book, "The Orchid Thief" by Susan Orlean, and later the 2002 movie, "Adaptation," starring Nicolas Cage and Meryl Streep.

Visitation to the park spiked slightly afterward, but with no long-lasting effects. Despite being Florida's largest state park, Fakahatchee is one of the least-visited in South Florida today.

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[The Florida Wildlife Corridor is nearly 18 million acres of natural wonder. The state just took a significant step to keep it alive](#)

While nearby destinations such as the Everglades and Big Cypress each draw more than a million visitors a year, the Fakahatchee sees less than 100,000. Known as the "Amazon of North America" and the "Orchid Capital of North America," Fakahatchee could very well be South Florida's best-kept outdoor secret, full of complicated history; diverse, exotic species; educational programming; hikes, and, of course, high-profile incidents.



An endangered ghost orchid blooms for only the second time in the Fakahatchee swamp in 2016.
Rhona Wise/AFP/Getty Images

An environment unlike any other

The first thing that visitors to Fakahatchee's main entrance will notice is its lack of fanfare. There's no hoopla to speak of, just a small sign and a shack that serves as the visitor's center.

According to the [Friends of Fakahatchee](#), a nonprofit group that supports the park, the inconspicuous nature of the Strand's infrastructure is by design, a way of protecting its fragile environment, which is unlike any other in the United States.

"The primary objective of Fakahatchee is not recreational, it's preservation and education," said Francine Stevens, executive director of Friends of Fakahatchee.

"Our mission is to educate the public about the importance of the Fakahatchee as a preserve."

Mike Owen, the park biologist at Fakahatchee for 27 years running, came up with the moniker "Amazon of North America" after doing extensive research on the park's orchids and other tropical epiphytes (plants that grow on other plants for physical support).

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"I kept seeing that, as you check the range maps of where different plants [in Fakahatchee] are from, that they cover the Amazon, the tropics of Central America, the Caribbean, and then right up into South Florida," Owen said.

"That's why I started calling Fakahatchee the 'Amazon of North America,' because it's the extreme northern end of the range of many of these tropical epiphytes."

Fakahatchee is also referred to as the "Orchid Capital of North America" because of its myriad of species -- 47 in total, headlined by the infamous ghost orchid, which was the main subject of "The Orchid Thief" and "Adaptation."

"The ghost orchid is the holy grail," Owen said, crediting the book and movie. "Everyone wants to find it."



Endangered Florida panthers are sometimes spotted in the park.
Alamy

Close encounters with orchids

The tiny, "ghostly white" species grows to about 3 inches long and 2 inches wide. When not in bloom, it's nothing more than a set of green roots clinging to a tree and is extremely difficult to find.

But in bloom, it's a spectacular display of nature's beautiful, delicate design.

In 1977, an anomalous frost decimated much of the ghost orchid population in South Florida, with poachers picking their fair share along the way.

Since 1993, about 500 ghost orchids have been found in the Strand, Owen said. Each orchid can take up to 20 years to bloom, and some produce multiple flowers. Scientists are still working to understand the full life cycle of the ghost orchid.

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The Strand's short list of offerings -- which include swamp walks and tram tours -- are based around introducing visitors to its orchid and plant population, with close and personal looks at many varieties.

But don't expect to be taken to a ghost orchid. Poaching is still a concern in the Strand because of the orchids' commercial value, so much care is taken to protect their locations.



Alligators inhabit the park's swamps.
Jeff Greenberg/Universal Images Group Editorial/Getty Images

Made possible by 'the beaver' of the Everglades

As elusive panthers and mystical ghost orchids steal the show, Owen likes to explain to visitors the significance of another animal, one you are more likely to see on your visit to Fakahatchee: the alligator.

The Fakahatchee Strand is a shallow, linear channel, approximately 5 miles long, 19 miles wide, and, most importantly, 2 to 5 feet deep, which allows water to flow and collect during the rainy summer season.

It is the movement of water through the area -- known as "sheet flow" -- that saturates the land and creates its unique ecosystem, allowing its exotic plants to thrive.

Though most visitors to Florida see the land as "flat," Owen explains on his swamp tours how small, unperceivable differences in elevation make the ecosystem possible.

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"Relative ground elevation is everything," Owen said. "You would think, 'Well, the Everglades is flat, so topography must be meaningless,' but it's the exact opposite. Because the region is so flat, a few inches up or down is a big deal."

Though often misunderstood, the alligator plays an irreplaceable part in the process, Owen said.

Every spring, alligators wallow in swamp lakes, using the mud and water to keep cool and ward off mosquitoes. Their movement and maintenance deepen the lakes, typically by about a foot or two, allowing it to collect more water.

This activity prolongs the area's hydroperiod, or number of days the ground is saturated. That determines the kind of plants that can grow and creates additional habitats for creatures of all kinds, including various bird species.

"The alligator of the Everglades is like the beaver up north," Owen said. "It's the engineer that creates those minor topography differences of ground elevation."



The park is home to barred owls and many other birds.
Shutterstock

A walk through the 'wood eternal'

If you go on a hike in Fakahatchee, you will notice that the trails are extremely straight and wide, like long hallways. They are called "trams" instead of "trails." They are actually leftover rail tracks from the logging days.

Logging took place in modern-day Fakahatchee during the 1940s through 1954. The old growth cypress found in the Strand is known as the "wood eternal" for its fine grains and tight rings that make it extremely resistant to decay under wet conditions -- perfect not only for South Florida's climate but for such military endeavors as the decks of aircraft carriers.

At first, the logging was mostly in relation to World War II, but later, the wood was coveted by the private sector for other projects.

"The largest strand in the world of old growth cypress [was liquidated] for pickle barrels, stadium seats, shingles and coffins," Owen said with a sigh.

All is not lost, however; part of the Strand was spared from logging, in the area now known as the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk.

Located at the Strand's southern border (a 10-minute drive from the main entrance), the half-mile-long boardwalk showcases a mix of old-growth cypress trees, approximately 200 years old and more than 100 feet tall, alongside Royal Palm trees.

It's rare to see such a mix, Owen said, and bald eagles, ospreys, red-shouldered hawks and barred owls all nest in the canopy.

The boardwalk is family-friendly and accessible any time of year, especially during the spring, summer and fall, when the land is saturated and lush.



The unpaved Janes Scenic Highway runs through Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.
Shutterstock

A wild drive

It's also the optimal time of year to experience Janes Scenic Drive, an 11-mile unpaved road that's akin to your own private safari.

Janes Scenic Drive is perhaps the best place to see Florida black bears and panthers -- morning or evening give you the best odds -- and it presents wonderful birding opportunities, especially in March, April and May.

From November to February, when the weather is cooler and there's less water overall, the swamp walks and tram tours operate multiple times a week, and all proceeds to go Friends of Fakahatchee's preservation efforts. Keep an eye out for other specialty events throughout the year, such as moonlight kayak tours.

Though it will still (intentionally) lack the development of other parks, the visitor experience is primed to improve at Fakahatchee.

This summer, construction will start on a boardwalk project that will expand access into the old-growth cypress forest and create an interpretive pavilion. The entrance fee to the park is \$3 a vehicle.

The hope is that the Strand can find a balance between public visitation, education and wilderness protection so that panthers, ghost orchids and everything in between will continue to call it home.

"The more we educate the public about preservation, the more wildlife we can expect in the Fakahatchee," Stevens said.

CNN's Scottie Andrew contributed to this report.