

Welcome Back Students

By Dr. Cherie Allison

I want to personally welcome everyone back to the 2025-2026 school year. We are excited for a few new and returning faces! New to us this year are Ms. Flannery in Kinder and Ms. Christmas in fifth grade. We also welcome Mrs. Bryan to our third grade class. Mrs. Whitcomb is our new media specialist and the library looks incredible! Returning to us this year is Mrs. Byers as our reading coach. We are so excited for the new year and our initiative, the belief in the power of yet! The Power of Yet is a growth mindset that if you believe that you can eventually do something, then you will ...maybe just not yet.

It is going to be a fabulous year and our EVG kids are incredible....some of them just don't know it YET!



Our EVG News Crew preparing for our first news show. We are so grateful for all the talent we have at EVG.



Submitted Photos



Middle School students learned team building and the importance of effective communication. Teams had to build the tallest tower using only a rubber band and string. It got very competitive!



Nothing says Welcome to School better than some sea creatures and a friendly gator greeting you at the door! Thank you Mrs. Whitcomb, our media specialist, for creating this fun opportunity for parent drop off on our first day.

- Mullet Rapper Sponsors | Thank You! -





Calendar

	Monday, September 1st CCPS No School	Tuesday, September 2nd City Council Meeting 7:00 PM - 8:00 PM	Wednesday, September 3th Food Pantry 9:30 AM - 12:00 PM	Thursday, September 4th Ladies Coffee 8:30 AM - 10:00 AM.	Friday, September 5th Fresh Market 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM	Saturday, September 6th
Sunday, September 7th	Monday, September 8th	Tuesday, September 9th Regular School Board Meeting 3:00 PM - 6:00 PM MLK Admin Final Budget Hearing 5:05 to 6:05 MLK Admin	Wednesday, September 10th Food Pantry 9:30 AM - 12:00 PM	Thursday, September 11th Ladies Coffee 8:30 AM - 10:00 AM.	Friday, September 12th Fresh Market 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM	Saturday, September 13th
Sunday, September 14th	Monday, September 15th	Tuesday, September 16th	Wednesday, September 17th Food Pantry 9:30 AM - 12:00 PM	Thursday, September 18th 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM Third Thursday Talk at Museum of Everglades: Ted Smallwood	Friday, September 19th Fresh Market 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM	Saturday, September 20th
Sunday, September 21st	Monday, September 22nd CCPS No School.	Tuesday, September 23rd	Wednesday, September 24th Food Pantry 9:30 AM - 12:00 PM	Thursday, September 25th Ladies Coffee 8:30 AM - 10:00 AM.	Friday, September 26th Fresh Market 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM	Saturday, September 27th 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM Annual Blessing of the Stone Crab Fleet
Sunday, September 28th	Monday, September 29th	Tuesday, September 30th				

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Chili Cook-Off

Submitted

It's time to line up your spices and get ready for the Chili Cook-Off on October 11th at McLeod Park, brought to you by the Women's Ministry of Chokoloskee Family Church of God. Some like it spicy and some like it mild; you are the "Chief Chili Chef," so your secret recipe can be spiced however you like it.

The event will feature our talented local chili connoisseurs in friendly competition. Contestants must arrive by 10:00 AM; judging is between 10:30 AM and 11:00 AM. First place wins a medal, \$100, and the ultimate bragging rights, while second and third place receive medals.



Submitted Photo

Besides a delicious array of chili, the event also includes raffles and lots of fun.

If you are interested in competing, the entry fee is just \$25 and must be submitted by September 19th. For entry forms and details, contact Hazel at 239-719-0368 or Angela at 239-269-7593.

Mark your calendar for October 11th and get your taste buds ready for a chili culinary delight!



Blessing of the Stone Crab Fleet Date Change

By Holly Dudley

The annual 2025 Blessing of the Stone Crab Fleet date has changed! The Florida Stone Crabbers Association (FLSCA) sponsored event will now be held on September 27th at Camellia Street Grill, starting at 10:00 AM, with the boats docking at 10:30 AM. Once the boats arrive, we'll bless them along with the hardworking crabbers, their families, and friends.

The event features free food, drinks, and admission; live entertainment by Charlie Pace and Gator Nate; a mullet toss contest for the kids; a Coconut Guava cake contest (anyone can participate!); and FLSCA merchandise and craft booths.

Don't miss this wonderful community event - come support our local commercial fishermen and celebrate their hard work! Mark your calendars for September 27th and bring your friends.



Photo Courtesy of Holly Dudley

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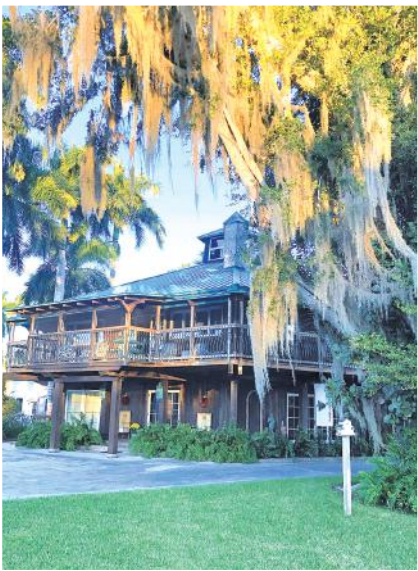
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"There are no other Everglades in the world. They are, they have always been, one of the unique regions of the earth; remote, never wholly known. Nothing anywhere else is like them."
~ Marjory Stoneman Douglas

Friends of Big Cypress National Preserve: A New Nonprofit

By Matea Denisen

Over 20 years ago, renowned landscape photographer Clyde Butcher set out to protect the very muse that brought him fame. However, fame was far from what he was looking for; he'd rather share the bountiful harmony of Florida's wilderness that brought him peace of mind. Butcher believed there was a way to advocate for Big Cypress beyond his signature black and white photos. An idea was formed, a website was made, but trials and tribulations blocked the vision from coming to full fruition.

With help from his daughter Jackie Obendorf, longtime friend and collaborator Susan Jones, and philanthropist Sheila Harris-Schutz, Clyde's prospects finally came to life. Friends of Big Cypress National Preserve officially partnered with the National Park Service and Big Cypress in May 2025, marking the continued reverence for one of Florida's most important wild spaces.

"Big Cypress is a hidden gem," Jones said. "It's the wild backyard of Collier County, yet so many people here don't even know it exists."

Spanning over 700,000 acres - roughly the size of Rhode Island - Big Cypress is home to freshwater swamps, endangered panthers, ghost orchids, and some of the clearest water Jones says she's ever seen. Despite its ecological value and accessibility from Naples, it receives far less attention and funding than its more famous neighbor, Everglades National Park.

"There's this misconception that national parks are fully funded by the government," Jones explained. "But the reality is, most rely heavily on their nonprofit partners."

For years, Big Cypress lacked such a support group. That gap left critical education programs, invasive species management, and even trail maintenance underfunded.



Photos by Clyde Butcher

Clyde Butcher found solace within Big Cypress National Preserve, later building his home right near the swamps for him and his wife.



Photos by Scott Randolph

The nonprofit raises funds to support programs that federal budgets can't always cover, from critical habitat restoration projects to school-based environmental learning. Their efforts also aim to increase public awareness about the importance of Big Cypress, encouraging deeper appreciation and stewardship among residents and visitors alike.

The three founding women, with support from Clyde and a small but growing board, handled everything from filing articles of incorporation to building an upgraded website. Most administrative costs have been covered out-of-pocket by board members, underscoring the labor of love behind the effort.

Big Cypress National Preserve is known for its International Dark Sky Park designation, a certification of its responsible lighting policies and education.

At its core, Friends of Big Cypress National Preserve exists to uplift and support the preserve's mission through fundraising, advocacy, and community engagement. The organization works



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hand-in-hand with the National Park Service to enhance visitor experience, expand environmental education, and protect the land and its inhabitants.

“People think swamps are dark and dirty, but Big Cypress is stunning. Once you see it up close, you realize what a treasure it is,” said Jones.

Despite its proximity to Naples and critical role in regional resilience, Big Cypress has long been overshadowed by more famous parks. Many people don’t realize that its freshwater wetlands nourish the Everglades to the south and replenish the Biscayne Aquifer, the source of drinking water for millions. In fact, Big Cypress plays a crucial role in filtering and storing water, regulating seasonal flows, and protecting against saltwater intrusion.

“This beautiful place exists, and even if you don’t enjoy it, you should understand the importance of it,” said Jones.

Beyond dollars and logistics, Friends of Big Cypress is about connection between people and place, science and storytelling, and generations past and future. Through events, outreach, and volunteerism, the nonprofit offers meaningful ways for individuals to contribute to the long-term protection of one of Florida’s last wild frontiers.

Their first major fundraising and awareness event, Swamp Wander, is set

for Saturday, November 1, at the Big Cypress Gallery. Hosted in partnership with the Butcher family, the event offers guests a rare opportunity to explore Clyde and Niki’s private 13-acre property behind the gallery.

Attendees can enjoy stunning photography, meet local artists, and participate in interactive educational stations led by rangers, biologists, and volunteers. For those seeking an elevated experience, VIP tickets grant access to Clyde’s air-conditioned swamp cottage, a guided swamp walk, and exclusive gifts, all benefiting the preserve’s education programs.

Tickets are only required for the Guided Swamp Walk Tours. Choose a gentle Shallow Walk, an adventurous Deep Walk, or the VIP Experience, which includes access to Clyde’s private air-conditioned swamp cottage, a guided walk, and exclusive gifts.

Proceeds will help fund the beloved Swamp Water And Me Program, which brings every sixth grader in Collier County out to the preserve for hands-on science education.

“If you get sixth graders out there, you kind of get them for life,” Jones said. “They’ll never forget walking through that pristine water.”

For tickets, visit friendsofbigcypress.org or call 239-695-2428.



Currently run entirely by volunteers, Friends of Big Cypress is actively seeking new board members, especially those with diverse skills and a passion for conservation. Jones envisions building an endowment to protect core programs into perpetuity and eventually hiring staff to manage operations.

As Clyde said best, “Through my photography, I have spent decades capturing the soul of Big Cypress, hoping to inspire a love and respect for this hidden gem. As the wild backyard

of Collier County, Big Cypress remains a treasure that many have yet to discover. Friends of Big Cypress is dedicated to changing that...”

How to Get Involved

From guided swamp walks to future fundraisers, Friends of Big Cypress offers plenty of opportunities to support their mission.

To learn more, donate, or inquire about board service, visit friendsofbigcypress.org or email info@friendsofbigcypress.org.

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Back to School Bash

Chokoloskee Family Church hosted a back-to-school bash Saturday in Everglades City.

With free food by Native Food With A Twist, and Gator Island Inflatable Rentals provided Snow Cones, a Foam Party, and Water Slides!



Photos by Pastor Jesse Wilson

History of the Bank of Everglades Building

by Patty Huff

The Bank of Everglades became the first bank in Collier County in 1923 and served the community until 1962 when the county seat moved to Naples and the bank’s charter moved to Immokalee. For the next 63 years, several businesses occupied the Bank Building. The Everglades Society for Historic Preservation will write an article each month in *The Mullet Rapper*, highlighting the owners of this historic site who were not only stewards but also a part of the history of this building.

Joe and Reba (Rusty) Rupsis purchased the Bank Building in 1979. Everglades City had not had a local newspaper since the county seat moved to Naples in 1962. Rusty had always wanted to own her own business, so she started *The Everglades Echo*, operating out of the Bank Building. She was the sole

proprietor, editor, publisher, reporter, photographer, and even the janitor (as she would like to say). Rusty was born in Kentucky, in 1914, joined the Women’s Army Corps in 1943 and served in Reims, France, until the end of the war. She and Joe enjoyed living in small towns, including Albany, Kentucky, with a population of 1,891, and Clewiston and LaBelle before settling in Everglades City. Rusty was featured in the Fort Myers *News-Press* when she decided to sell her newspaper in 1988 to Tuff Publications which continued to operate the paper until 2004.* Rusty served on the Everglades City Council and was 74 when she retired as owner and publisher. She passed away in August of 2002 at the age of 88 in Punta Gorda. We honor Rusty not only for bringing back a local newspaper to Everglades City but also for her commitment to keep the Bank Building open. It’s one of the few original buildings remaining that is part of Barron Collier’s legacy and one that ESHP is committed not only to restore but also to be a beacon for the community.

*Note: *The Mullet Rapper* started publication in 2001 and continues to serve the local community.



Submitted Photo

Rusty Rupsis literally putting together the paper by pasting everything on boards that would then be printed.



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STORIES FROM THE HEART

Pastor Jesse Wilson

When It All Comes Together

Growing up in the eighties was an adventure. We didn’t have cell phones or tablets to keep us busy, we had our bikes, our friends, and an adventurous spirit. Whether it was playing out in the woods behind our house on East Mitchell street in Northern Michigan or spending a few weeks during the summer at my grandma’s farm, we had fun and didn’t need anything artificial to help us or give us ideas.

I mean, on my grandma’s farm I didn’t need YouTube videos to encourage me to tease the mean bull my grandma had in the barn. And when he had grown tired of my taunting and teasing and decided to kick the stall door in and come out, well let’s just say, had an NFL scout seen how fast I could run, I would have been signed to a long term contract! My grandma had watched me and my friend come

running out of the barn at full speed, with a thousand pound plus bull in hot pursuit! She said she had never seen two boys clear a seven foot fence with such ease as we did. Thankfully, we made a sharp turn towards the iron gate once over the fence because that crazy eyed bull leapt over that fence right behind us, taking the top boards with him.

Thus began my history of close calls and wild adventures! Oh boy, I love when a plan comes together! One of my favorite shows was the A-Team. The opening monologue was moving enough to make a one eyed bull frog happy. “Ten years ago, a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn’t commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum-security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire the A-Team.” When that show came out, it wasn’t long before I had all the action figures, B.A. Baracus, Face Man, Mad Dog Murdock, and Colonel John ‘Hannibal’ Smith. I had their van, the gyrocopter, and the corvette. One of my favorite lines was from their leader, Hannibal, who at the end of a successful mission, would smile



Our miracle baby, Jessica Morgan.



Me standing next to my older brother, ready for the next adventure!

considered high risk and so throughout the pregnancy, she received almost weekly sonograms to monitor the baby. We got to watch that little baby grow on a weekly basis. I love when a plan comes together.

At age thirty-two my wife found herself on dialysis and a year later, through what can only be described as a miracle, a young lady in our church and only in her early twenties, was a perfect match, closer than my wife’s own siblings. What inspired her to donate? A dream she had had in which she had donated her kidney. When she came to church and said God wanted her to donate a kidney because of her dream, there was some skepticism, knowing that the chances of a match were low. But after the tests came back, the doctors at LifeLink were amazed - she was perfect. I love when a plan comes together.

We celebrated thirty-four years of marriage this summer. The ups and downs of life, deep valleys, impossible mountains, highs and lows, laughter and tears, we’ve experienced it all. And as we look back, we can say as well as many of you can, “I love when a plan comes together!”

Jesse currently pastors Chokoloskee Family Church on Chokoloskee Island along with his wife Charity. They are beginning their seventh year and have overseen the construction of a new 160 seat church that is scheduled to open in August of this year. Their growing congregation keeps them busy with local outreaches and community events. They have two grandkids that live in the area who also attends their church along with their daughter and son in-law.



Photos Courtesy of Jesse Wilson

My wife Charity on the left with her donor friend, Crystal.




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FISHING THE EVERGLADES

Capt. Mike Merritt

September In The Ten Thousand Islands

September has always been a great month here in the Islands! From catching Snook and Tarpon, to Reds and Trout, they should all be cooperating this month. In past years the large schools of Redfish would show up at the beginning of September. It was common to see schools of Reds in the hundreds. We have not seen this in quite a few years and it is definitely not a common sight anymore. Why? We must ask ourselves what has changed to prevent this? Water quality? Bait? Grasses? Too much tannin? Hopefully we see this again in my lifetime. I tell the younger guides about it and they all say how they wished they could have seen it. It is a good month to catch them and you can still have a decent day with 10-15 Reds, but days of catching 100 Reds here seems to be over. And it isn't because we harvested them, because plenty of days we would not keep any. We thought it would never end, but it has. But we still get excited to catch them even if it is fewer fish.

Snook season is still closed this month, but this is the month they quit spawning and actually start feeding aggressively again! The biggest Snook I have ever caught have been caught in September. I used to tell my clients, if you want a 40" fish, come in September. It is a great month for big fish. Again, I tend to think about how it used to be and how many more fish we had inshore. It seems like the offshore Snook fishing has gotten better and they don't move inshore as much. This makes me believe there is



something not quite right inshore. We still catch good fish and some days you might catch 30 or more, but the days of catching 100 snook which used to be common are over. I do hope this changes and the next generation gets to experience this. I know there are exceptions to this every once in a while but it used to be common. This all being said, make sure you get in some days this month and catch your biggest Snook ever!

Of course Tarpon are still around and their numbers should increase again this month. The Mullet run should start up this month and the big Tarpon will be feasting on them as they come inshore. Let's all hope for a good Mullet run this year! I am already seeing a lot more finger Mullet on the beaches, and this makes for some exciting action. This time of year it is best to catch the incoming tide. We will get an inflow of saltier water and cooler water with the tide. This will help fire up the bite in the Islands. Whatever you decide to do this month it is one of my all time favorites for lots of action and big fish! So have fun this month and enjoy the action! Good luck fishing!

Captain Mike Merritt was born in Coral Gables, Florida, lived in Australia as a child, and then moved back to Everglades City, Florida where he graduated from Everglades City High School. He caught his first snook at the age of eight and has been catching them ever since.

He is a third-generation fisherman and has been guiding in the Everglades National Park for over 30 years. While the glades are his primary fishing grounds, he also owns The Amazon Prime Ecolodge and has been fishing in Brazil's Amazon for the last 12 years.

Ted Smallwood: The Man Behind the Store

Mullet Rapper Staff

The Museum of the Everglades will take on C.S. "Ted" Smallwood on September 18th for their Third Thursday Talk Series. You will hear Museum Assistant Mathew Anderson relate how Smallwood came to the 10,000 Islands, those early pioneer settler days, and becoming the proprietor of the iconic general store,

post office, and trading post. Today, the Smallwood Store operates as a museum and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. You'll also learn about Smallwood's relationship with the Indigenous people of the region and his role in the community. An added bonus to the talk will be when Anderson talks about his own personal connection to this founding family.

It's all happening at the Museum of the Everglades Thursday, September 18, from 2:00 PM to 3:00 PM, 105 Broadway Ave W., Everglades City, Florida. For more information, call 239-252-5026.

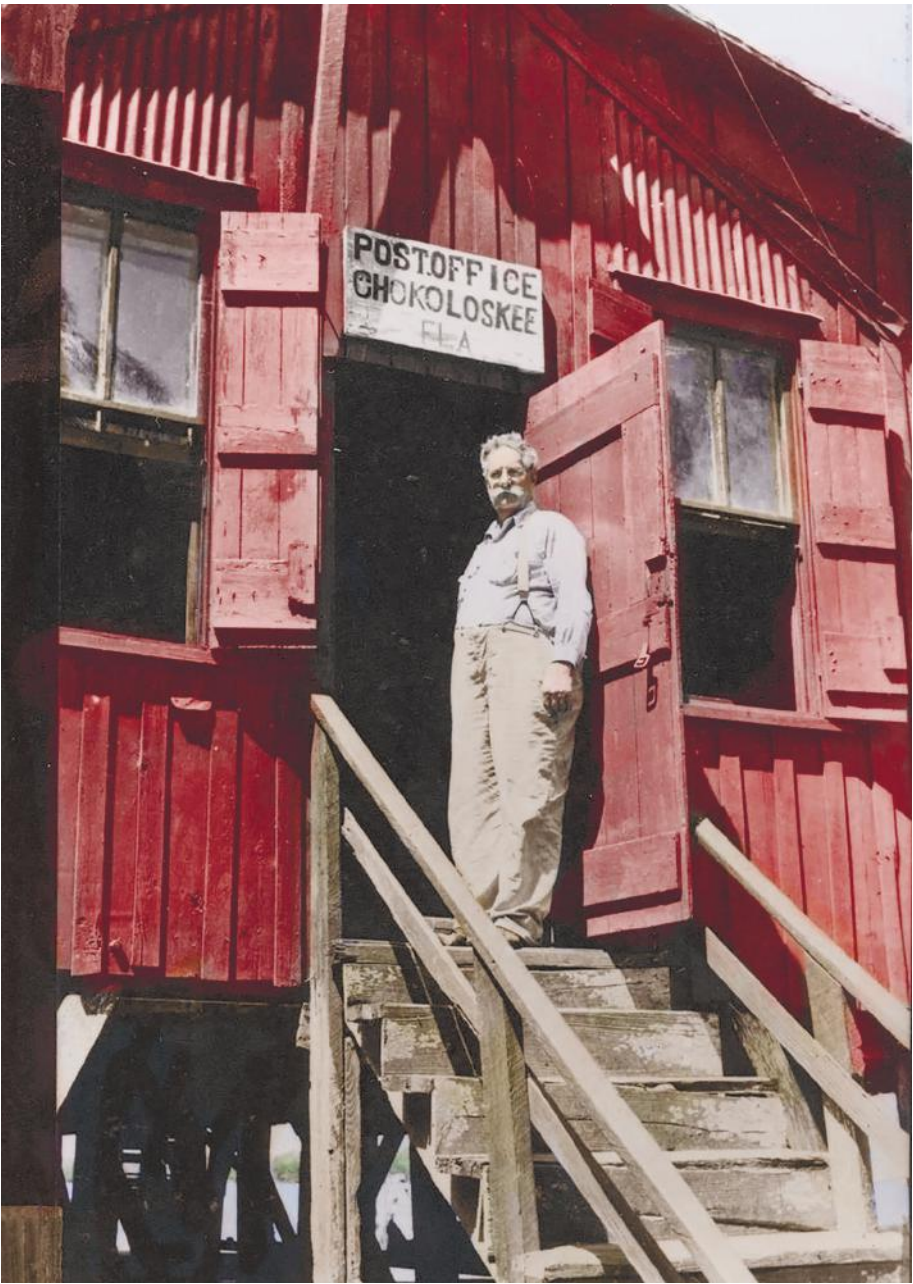


Photo Courtesy of Collier County Museum

Angels of the Swamp

by Cindy Duarte

Carla Marsh of Everglades City and her Trash Talkers have been nominated as our next Swamp Angels. Carla recruits friends and neighbors to pick up trash, fishing line, discarded clothing, etc., from the Chokoloskee causeway (mostly around the bridge) into Everglades City, as far north as the Everglades City welcome sign.

Sometimes by car, sometimes on foot, sometimes she begs use of a golf cart. There have been occasions where there were so many bags full of trash at the causeway, she contacted Collier County to go pick them up!

The Trash Talkers are iterations of friends, seasonal residents, grandchildren, or anyone she can recruit willing to help clean up the place we call home.



The Trash Talkers taking care of business: Marlene, Gina, Carla, and Andi.

Submitted Photos

Cycling Around Old Florida

by Patty Huff

For the past 26 summers, my husband and I have spent our vacation biking. This year, we chose to drive and bike around old Florida, stopping in as many trail towns as possible. After attending the Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation and the Office of Greenways and Trails Council meetings this summer in Sanford, I decided this recently designated trail town would be a great place to start. We found an Airbnb in the historic district for three nights as we explored the area. On the first day we cycled 35 miles, starting at the downtown Riverwalk west to DeBary (another Trail Town), out to Green Springs, back to Gemini Springs, and a return to Sanford along shady pathways. The Springs were incredibly beautiful with lots of foliage. At the Sanford Visitor Center, housed in the original post office, I picked up my first Trail Town sticker. The following day, we cycled to the Cross Seminole Trail and over I-4 to the Seminole Wekiva Trail, 38 miles round trip. Beautiful sunny days for cycling with our evenings spent walking around town, enjoying delicious dinners at Hollerbach’s, The District, and the Old Jailhouse.

The next town on our itinerary was

three and a half hours northwest to White Springs on the banks of the Suwannee River and home of the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park. We spent a few hours touring the museum, the bell tower, and cycling around the state park. The next day we biked to Big Shoals State Park, where we had access via the Little Shoals entrance to the 6.8-mile round-trip paved Woodpecker trail through the forest. It is difficult to imagine that this sleepy little town was the first major tourist destination in Florida. Grand hotels greeted thousands of visitors from all over the world who came in the 1800s and 1900s for the healing powers of the local mineral springs. After the 1911 fire that swept through town, only one hotel (the Telford) survived; today it is a private residence. The Visitor Center is now closed (due to lack of staff we were told), but the 1885 Suwannee Hardware and Feed Store has lots of information and the place to get a Trail Town sticker. We stayed at the historic White Springs B&B, owned and operated by Judith for the last 19 years, hosting long-distance cyclists. Her floral artwork is displayed inside, outside, and throughout her home.

A quick drive through Jasper, the county seat, then just two hours by car to the historic fishing village of St. Marks. The cycling options are many:



Photos by Patty Huff

Green Springs Park biking from Sanford along the East Central Regional Rail Trail.

bike 32 miles round-trip on the historic railroad trail to Tallahassee, or miles and miles along the Big Bend Scenic Byway Coastal Trail on Hwy 98, or the 28-mile round-trip to St. Marks Lighthouse, which we did. If you go, be sure to check out the lighthouse living quarters and talk to the keeper of the lighthouse. Also, along this route is the San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park, where you will learn about the Muscogee Tribe, the 17th century Spanish Florida occupation, and the Civil War period. Dinner was enjoyed at the Riverside Café listening to a local

band. The Sweet Magnolia B&B was unavailable, so we found comfortable accommodation at the nearby Shell Island Fish Camp. During our stay, we took a quick side-trip to Sopchoppy to meet friends for dinner at the Civic Brewery Company for a great pizza and beer. We first discovered Sopchoppy about 15 years ago when we cycled there from Tallahassee on our way to St. George’s Island. Thankfully, it hasn’t changed much but is recognized now as a Florida State Trail Town and has several new businesses.

see Cycling on pg 10

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see Cycling from pg 9

Our next stop along the coast was the Old Carrabelle Hotel in the historic district of Carrabelle. The bike shop there had recently closed, but we found a lot of information and history at the museum across the street in the original City Hall. The museum housed artifacts from centuries ago and memorabilia up to the present time – treasures from old Florida. We enjoyed a delicious lunch at the Fisherman’s Wife restaurant, dinner at Evenin’ Bite, and breakfast the next morning at the historic Carabelle Junction Café.

Time to move along the coast to San Blas and Port St. Joe (delaying a stop in Apalachicola until our way back). San Blas is out on the St. Joseph Peninsula and has been developed with stilt houses until you reach the state park at the end of the road. It was wonderful to bike through this secluded area, stopping at the wide white sandy beaches where there were few visitors during the week at this time of year. We then drove to Port St. Joe and stayed overnight at The Port Inn and Cottages, conveniently located across from Reid Avenue in the historic business district, where we found The Brick Wall Sports Bar and Grill and the Provisions Restaurant, both excellent. Sunset at the Lighthouse across the highway on the Gulf was spectacular. Our cycling time was spent exploring quiet neighborhoods along rural roads.

After driving through Mexico Beach, Panama City, and west along Highway 98, we arrived in Milton (another Trail Town), just northeast of Pensacola. We visited a bicycle shop along the Blackwater Heritage Trail who advised us to stop at the Visitor Center not far up the Trail to get a sticker and information. Unfortunately, it was closed when we arrived around 3:30 PM and with a thunderstorm developing, we thought we would stay the night and bike early the next morning. However, the only lodging we could find was close to I-10 interstate with not a lot of options for a good dinner. Instead, we made the decision to drive to Navarre for the night, enjoying a good meal at the Emerald Waterfront Bar and Grill.

Rather than returning to Milton, we drove three and a half hours east back to Apalachicola, where we had stayed many years ago at the Riverwood Suites, conveniently located on Ave F and just a few blocks from Up the Creek Raw Bar. We had a wonderful dinner on the deck with the best view of Apalachicola Bay. There are several eateries in town that offer wonderful seafood, coffee, desserts, etc. Biking again was through the quiet neighborhoods; it’s a beautiful town that appreciates historic preservation – the old Florida we continue to seek, and sometimes find.

Three hours southeast we stopped in High Springs, a small town known for its many antique shops. They have two visitor centers, one (located on Main Street) with information about the nearby Springs and the Chamber of Commerce which is housed in the



Sopchoppy old Depot Museum and Welcome Center.

old depot building. The only bike shop, we were told, is now closed. Lodging was limited to two small motels just north of downtown but close enough to bike the area. We stayed just one night before heading to Clermont, located along the Coast-to-Coast Trail.

Historic Clermont, situated on the south end of Lake Minneola, is another Trail Town with cycling opportunities. The Hancock Trail intersects with the South Lake Trail which connects to the West Orange Trail, forming a 36-mile continuous pathway. We stopped by City Hall and a local bike shop before picking up our Trail Town sticker at the Arts and Recreation Center at 3710 South Hwy 27 on our way out of town.

After 11 days on the road, it was time to head home to Everglades City, our last Trail Town. We had accomplished what we set out to do – visit the Florida Trail Towns that we had not been to before and experience old Florida by bike. For all the years of cycling in Florida, we have experienced 18 out of the 21 designated Trail Towns (the last three – Malabar, Vilano Beach, and Deltona – we plan to do on our next journey). The Office of Greenways and Trails has distributed little booklets titled “Explore Florida Trail Towns,” which are available in every Trail Town, encouraging visitors to get a “sticker” from each town. At our Welcome Center in Everglades City, we keep these booklets out on our desk along with a map of the Trail Towns, letting tourists know that it’s a great way to see the small towns throughout our wonderful state. That’s what they find when they come to Everglades City, and they are excited to learn about the opportunities to see more of old Florida.

To learn more about the Trail Town Program, visit www.floridadep.gov/parks/ogt/content/trail-town-program.



Breakfast at the Historic Carabelle Junction Café, built around 1893 when the town was first incorporated.



Sunset in Port St. Joe overlooking the historic Cape San Blas Lighthouse built in 1885.

FWC Announces 2025 Florida Python Challenge™ Results Submitted

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and partners announced the final results and winners of the 2025 Florida Python Challenge™. During this year’s 10-day competition, 934 participants from 30 states and Canada helped support Everglades conservation by collectively removing a record 294 invasive Burmese pythons from south Florida.

The intent of the Florida Python Challenge is to increase awareness about invasive species and the threats they pose to Florida’s ecology, while offering the public a way to get directly involved in Everglades conservation through removal of invasive Burmese pythons. This year’s event included the exciting addition of Everglades National Park as one of eight official competition locations.

“The record number of invasive pythons removed from the Everglades during this year’s competition is a big win for native wildlife. With over 1,400 pythons removed during all Florida Python Challenge events to date and over 16,000 pythons removed by FWC and South Florida Water Management District contractors since 2017, collective efforts are the key to continue addressing the threats Burmese pythons pose to Florida’s native wildlife and ecosystems,” said Rodney Barreto, FWC Chairman.

“We applaud the dedication displayed by all participants in this year’s Florida Python Challenge” said **Pedro Ramos, superintendent of Everglades National Park**. “The record number of pythons removed highlights the importance of citizen engagement as we tackle one of the toughest conservation challenges of our time, invasive exotic species of animals and plants. By collaborating closely with our partners at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the South Florida Water Management District, we are making meaningful progress toward preserving the Everglades and its diverse wildlife for generations to come.”

Burmese pythons are not native to Florida and negatively impact native species. They are found primarily in and around the Everglades ecosystem in south Florida, where they prey on birds, mammals and other reptiles. A female Burmese python can lay 50 to 100 eggs at a time. Since the year 2000, more than 23,000 wild Burmese pythons have been removed from the state of Florida and reported to the FWC.

The winners of the 2025 Florida Python Challenge were announced at



Photo Courtesy of FWC

Taylor Stanberry, The Python Challenge™ Grand Prize Winner.

the FWC’s Commission Meeting held in Havana, Florida. The Ultimate Grand Prize winner was Taylor Stanberry, who removed 60 Burmese pythons, winning \$10,000.

Winners and prizes for longest pythons and most pythons removed in the novice, professional, and military categories were:

Ultimate Grand Prize

Awarded to the participant who removes the most pythons as part of the competition.

\$10,000
Taylor Stanberry
60 pythons

Professional

Most Pythons Prize
\$2,500
Donna Kalil
56 pythons
Most Pythons Runner-Up Prize
\$1,500
Hannah Gray
22 pythons
Longest Python Prize
\$1,000
Kennith Chamberland
9 feet, 8 inches

Novice

Most Pythons Prize
\$2,500
Krista Hoekstra
14 pythons
Most Pythons Runner-Up Prize
\$1,500
Kymberly Clark
7 pythons
Longest Python Prize
\$1,000
Michael Marousky
15 feet, 11 inches

Military – Active Duty and Veteran

Most Pythons Prize
\$2,500
John Southworth - US Army
5 pythons
Most Pythons Runner-Up Prize
\$1,500
Matthew Jamison - US Air Force

3 pythons
Longest Python Prize
\$1,000
Jonathan Miller – US Air Force
11 feet, 2 inches

In addition to the Florida Python Challenge, there are other ways people can continue to help control nonnative species such as Burmese pythons. Anyone may remove and humanely kill pythons and other nonnative reptiles at any time on private lands with landowner permission and on 32

FWC-managed lands throughout south Florida.

The public can also help control invasive species by reporting nonnative snakes, tegus and monitor lizards to the FWC’s Invasive Species Hotline at 888-IVE-GOT1 (888-483-4681), and by reporting sightings of other nonnative fish and wildlife online at IveGot1.org or by downloading the free IveGot1 smartphone app. For more information, visit MyFWC.com/Nonnatives.





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