FOOTPRINT
Summer 2016 Volume 33 Issue 3

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: DON MOCK SANDHILL CHAPTER

Sunshine and TrailMix's Grand Adventure
Reflections of Two Florida Thru-Hikers

Honoring the Past. Blazing the Future.

Across Deseret Florida Trail History

In Search of Lightning Bugs
In Withlacoochee State Forest

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FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION
5415 SW 13th Street
Gainesville, FL 32608
Toll-Free: 877-HIKE-FLA
Tel: 352-378-8823
e-mail: fta@floridatrail.org
website: Floridatrail.org
Facebook.com/FloridaTrailAssociation
Digital Magazine: Issuu.com/FlaTraill

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Volunteer Program Coordinator: Karl Borton • 570-574-3240
North Regional Representative: Jeff Glenn • 352-514-1455
Central/South Regional Representative: Kelly Wiener • 518-369-9057

FLORIDA TRAIL FOOTPRINT
Editor: Alex Stigliano
Layout: Sean Lucas
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OUR GOAL
To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association business; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS
Contributors are welcome to submit items for our various departments as well as trail and association-related news. Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

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Deadline for articles for the Fall issue of The Footprint is October 20, 2016.
Honoring the Past. Blazing the Future.

Here's something exciting. The Florida Trail Association is officially celebrating its 50th Anniversary this October 20-23 at the Sanborn Activity and Event Center in DeLand. Over three nights, we’ll be “Honoring the Past. Blazing the Future” as we hold a conference, party like it’s 1966, and get pumped up about the years ahead. Speakers and guests will be there to reflect on FTA’s past, highlight our partnerships and friendships, and inspire future leaders. Some of them include:

Fran Mainella – Former Director, National Park Service and Florida State Parks
Tinelle Bustam – Assistant Director, Recreation, Tourism, and Public Services, US Forest Service
Jim Kern – Founder, FTA and Big City Mountaineers; Cofounder, American Hiking Society
Sean Gobin – Founder, Warrior Hikes
Sandra Friend & John Keatley – Publishers, FloridaHikes.com
Phil Phelan – Long-distance Speed Hiker

Elam and Nic Stoltzfus, as well as representatives from the Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition, will be on hand as we screen some beautiful nature films. Attendees will learn about the history and future plans of FTA, as well as membership and volunteer opportunities. REI will hold a program on outdoor skills. We’ll showcase the Florida Historical Marker commemorating the “Birth of the Florida Trail.” This will be a great time to meet representatives of FTA’s partners and supporters, as well as old and new friends.

The Sanborn Center is right next door to the charming campus of Stetson University and the great restaurants and shops of historic DeLand—known to many as “The Athens, Georgia of Florida.” Also nearby are all the natural features and outdoor recreational amenities of Volusia and Lake Counties. Join us as we celebrate Florida Trail at Fifty!

Okay, and here are a couple of random thoughts on the Florida Trail and FTA at its Fiftieth Anniversary, from someone who spends too much time thinking about this:

1. It is important to celebrate the past and the contributions of the many people who poured energy, sweat and dedication into this long-term project. The most interesting question, however, is this: What’s next? What will follow all the energy and toil expended for a half century by a cadre of dedicated volunteers? It’s tempting to reply that more of the same is needed, just with more and newer people. But this begs other questions. Does the future require the same tactics and behaviors as the past? And how will we convince new comrades to join the effort? The answers to these last two questions are “No,” and “We’re not 100% sure what will work best, for every situation, but we better get on with it.”

2. There’s a moderately amusing sketch in a Saturday Night Live episode from way back in 1979 called “¡¿Quien Es Mas Macho?! (Who Is More Macho?)” in which Bill Murray hosts a faux-Mexican game show in mangled Spanish, one in which the two contestants try to figure out the most macho, or overtly masculine, celebrity. The first question pits actors Fernando Lamas and Ricardo Montalban against each other, and the second question compares the testosterone levels of David Janssen, Lloyd Bridges, and Jack Lord. (Spoiler alert: Fernando Lamas and Lloyd Bridges win out. Naturally the photo of Bridges features him looking manly in his Sea Hunt dive gear.) It’s a silly conceit for a comedy sketch, but it’s true that comparing people for specific virtues is a common sport.

So who is most “Florida Trail?” Nobody actually asks this question out loud… probably. But there are many people who feel they could answer it. And there are many who feel it’s a valid question, a measuring stick of devotion or years of service or miles hiked or maintained. (Some of the complaints and resentments that have been expressed over the years are, at heart, a variation of this very question.) Is someone more “Florida Trail” if they rant more angrily about the perceived threats to their original vision of the Trail? Or are they truer...
to the spirit of the Trail if they embrace partners and new supporters and dissenting views? Are thru-hikers more Florida Trail than weekend hikers? Are trail maintainers more Florida Trail than hikers? Is chafing about new land manager safety rules a sign that you’re True Blue Florida Trail, or just proof that you’re being inflexible? For that matter, who is most Florida Trail: FTA members, FTA staff, the Forest Service FNST administrator, or the Office of Greenways and Trails guy who has written excellent articles for the FTA magazine?

The problem is that the question “Who is most Florida Trail?” aims for exclusivity of influence, for a pecking order, and for a reckoning of purity. This is bad enough, silly, even. But it’s worse than that. The question is counterproductive to the Trail we claim to steward. It drives people away. You want to make sure that this National Scenic Trail rolls on after you’re gone, that it gets full support and protection despite the future challenges of more urban development, increasing user pressures, and climate change? Stop asking this question. Stop using mental math to gauge how much somebody belongs in the great effort to complete the Florida National Scenic Trail. Stop weighing Trail Maintainer X versus Activity Leader Y.

Instead, ask: “Who should also be part of the Florida Trail community?” Or “How can they become a bigger part of the Florida Trail?” For the Florida Trail community, you need a big tent.

Hope to see you in DeLand, or elsewhere along the Trail.

Carlos Schomaker
FTA President

February 2018
Hiking History
by Sandra Friend

While putting together recollections of places along the Florida Trail that we no longer have access to, I came across an old journal with my recollections of hiking the section of FNST that used to cross the Deseret Citrus and Cattle Ranch, which is owned by the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). The loss of this section is one that I still mourn, because it was so rich with wildlife. It closed to hikers around 2002. Long-time Tosohatchee section leader Doug Spahr shared why. “It is a corporate decision at a very high level in Salt Lake City not to allow trail access to the roads off SR 520 (or anywhere else on Deseret). No one at the Ranch has any say about this,” said Doug.

Many speculate that the LDS church was warned that people associated with the Florida Trail were seeking to establish a “prescriptive easement.” A prescriptive easement would require the Deseret Ranch to allow user access, a right they were not willing to cede.

Original access across Deseret Ranch was accomplished with letter writing and personal contacts by Tom Montoya and Wiley Dykes, Sr. during the late 1970s. “I was on Wiley’s team for the Deseret trail routing,” said Doug Sphar. “Most of it was straightforward as it ran on the top of L-71 levee, which was kept clear by grazing cattle. There were some routing issues at Pennywash Creek and Wolf Creek where there are breeches in the levee and trail had to be threaded through forested wetland.”

Once the trail was established, it was always under a private agreement between FTA and Deseret Ranch, but never officially certified as FNST. You had to contact the FTA office in Gainesville for permission to hike across it.

I hiked it just a year after I discovered the Florida Trail. I’d not yet walked around Lake Okeechobee, nor had I set foot on any of the levees along the Kissimmee River. As a child of the Appalachians, it was the first place I had hiked on a levee, and the first time I’d been on a ranch. To my surprise, it was a memorable experience, shared with a friend who section hiked Central Florida with me. The following is excerpted from a journal I shared online afterwards.
It was what I expected, but it was not what I expected.

Ever since coming up to the northern gate into Deseret last November, the very day hunting season opened, I had a picture in my mind: dry, hot, shadeless. A desert.

Under the blistering heat of Memorial Day weekend, it was all that. But it was more. I didn’t expect the levee walk, forgot about Taylor Creek Reservoir. Remembered only the stop sign with the addendum: “Do not enter. Private property.”

Old Taylor Creek Road: a bone-white limestone road, the old route to St. Cloud, bypassed by SR 520. No sign of a creek, but plenty of bleached fossils, especially whelk shells, added texture underfoot. Deer tracks led through rain-swollen puddles, tracks laid in soft white mud. Over here, the ridge-like track of a gopher tortoise. Over there, the mincing footprints of a hare.

To our right lay the ranch, long flat expanses of weak grassland punctuated by water holes and cypress domes. Cattle browsed in the distance. A scrubby thin oak forest, looking tired and mean after years of drought. Amber crystals sparkle in the white road, catching my eye, beautiful calcite crystals encrusting fossils.

A black shape crosses the road. Back and forth, until we draw close. Gopher tortoise? Crashing through the underbrush, a doe leaps the ranch fence to slip into the woods. Moments later, a wobbly-legged fawn, dappled with white spots, follows. I am one footstep shy of stepping on a thin green snake, which coils in anger in response.

There are gates. More gates. Fences and gates. So rare is the lone stile at a crossing. Up and over. Down and under. Skin rips on barbed wire. After hours afoot, the fence crossings become exhausting. But the first set? A treat. The trail leads west, away from the white ribbon of road to the levee.

Through the cows. They watch in bemusement until we draw close. Then consternation rules. They form mock battle lines, mooving in tones from bugle to foghorn. They stamp and sway, bluwing. And then they flee, breaking formation, scattering to the winds. The presence of cattle is ubiquitous. We dance amongst the cow patties, fresh and dried, littering the trail, filling the air with pungent odors.

The levee. Who knew? Clambering to its top, finding the view. Big sky. Big water. A whopping panorama unheard of in Florida. Taylor Creek Reservoir an endless lake, a swamp, the drowned lands, where dead cypress stretch their whitening bones skyward. Where osprey nest. Where sandhill cranes roam, calling out their mournful cries. Where fishermen sweat in the noonday sun, swatting mosquitos from their punts. A view of forever.

And thus it was for the next twenty miles. Although the reservoir ended a mile or two down the trail, the views went on and on. Who knew? The levee a grassy lane nearly a hundred feet wide, partnered by a canal edged with lively growth along its banks.

The wildlife. Vultures scarcely feet away in the tangle of a chain link fence, seeking to pounce on stunned and dead fish falling through the flood-control spillway. Gopher tortoises using the cant of the levee to stake out their domain, great furrows into the earth. A black widow spider, beautiful but deadly, guarding an abandoned hole. The vanishing form of a fox, slipping under a distance fence. The rumbling cackle
and cry of a thousand cattle egrets in a crowded rookery.

The sun. Relentless. Not a speck of shade on the levee north of the road to St. Cloud. Even after 4 PM, heat rises steadily from the cracked ground. The levee ceases to be a friend, its weary frame eroded by rain, trails worn deep by a thousand cows, bitter weeds choking the path with thorns. Undulating ever southward, but broken in places. A fence to climb every mile.

Wolf Creek a surprise, as a pine forest swarms over the levee, providing desperately needed shade. Rising tall, the levee ends abruptly, sliced by the creek. The trails winds steeply downhill to use the highway bridge as a crossing. Amazing how bountiful the water is here, considering the drought.

Steep ascent back up the levee on the south side of the creek into more slash pine. On a bed of pine needles, the trailside camp appears -- a picnic table, a fire ring, and a privy! The first privy I’ve seen on the FT. We peek inside. Is this for real? Yup! The appropriate hole – and a novel, “Left Behind.” Funny how these creature comforts appear when we don’t need them. A gopher tortoise ambles towards us, making a beeline for the privy. Maybe he does.

Rising high again, the levee leaves the pine forest behind. Back to our commanding full-sun view of thousands of acres of ranch. Distant cows moo. We pass a lake where sandhill cranes chatter on the shore. Now and again perfectly rounded oaks provide a spot of shade to sit and sip a drink, to tend to weary blistering feet. More deep erosion evokes scenes of the Southwest, red canyons in miniature carved by violent cloudbursts. The fences still come every mile. Few have stiles. A few, now, have open gates. Was someone expecting us?

Blackberries! My thorn-scratched shorts make me look down and realize that thousands of blackberry bushes fill the gap between the top of the levee and the edge of the canal. They’re in their full glory, ripe with plump juicy fruit. We pause and pick, feasting on fruit on and off over the next few miles.

Mixed forest returns to shade us briefly where a blue blaze leads off to water at the rodeo grounds. Water is everywhere along this trail, so unlike our other hikes-- but befouled by cows. It evokes my friend’s tales of hiking through New Mexico on the Continental Divide Trail, where the only water sources were often troughs or wallows used by cattle.

It seems like the levee will never end. We grow tired of the ceaseless sunshine, but not of the expansive views. Nor the blackberries. We come across another abrupt ending at a stream, but the orange blazes aren’t there to guide us. We scout. Will we need to wade across? It’s too far from the highway to use the highway bridge. Eventually I spy a sheet of pressboard across the narrows. That’ll do. Struggling through the underbrush to it, we spy blazes. Only two, old and peeling. I step on the board, partially sink it, and have to jump forward and land face-down in weeds to avoid falling in the creek.

Miles pass. We see the levee come to another abrupt end, but no creek this time, just a blatant cut, undermined by erosion. Blackberries all around. We can see the cars on US 192. Not much further! The next section of levee, weed-choked, curves to the highway. Time for a break. We jump in the car and cruise to Holopaw for subs and cold drinks. There are many advantages to section hiking!
CONFEREE & 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

October 20-23, 2016 | Sanborn Activity & Event Center
815 South Alabama Ave, DeLand, FL 32724

Celebrate 50 years of service with the Florida Trail Association! We’ve scheduled speakers, presentations, movies and much more! Join us as we celebrate the Florida Trail at 50!

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Assistant Director | Recreation, Tourism & Public Services, US Forest Service

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*speakers subject to change
Withlacoochee State Forest, Citrus Tract, Holder Mine Campground

March 7, 2016

The pre-hike meal set the stage for the early evening: a pleasant and lively gathering of folks in their preteens to those in their 70s. There were splintered conversations here and there, and quiet participation from those on the perimeter. A picnic table held a collage of potluck foods.

The hike had two phases, the first starting at 6:20 p.m. Phase one took the shape of an irregular hexagon, a route that followed roads and horse trails. After just over a mile, there was the chance to take a cutoff back to the start while others continued on the prescribed 90-minute route. Seven hikers chose that shorter option, giving them the chance to return to the campground to more fully recover for the start of phase two.

Phase two, starting at 8:05 p.m., was the headliner: a two mile nature hike with frequent topography changes. Our destination was the bottom of a natural amphitheater surrounded by a hill covered with trees. The basin of this amphitheater held a large pond surrounded by wild prairie grass. We arrived moments before dusk and observed a minute of silence. It was a loud moment of silence, with the chaotic chorus of frogs, beetles and other night insects.

Shortly after this pause, over the prairie, there began the faint distant flashes of lightning bugs, which brightened as the darkness deepened. The lightning bugs could be spotted in every direction – above the pond, in the trees to the left, to the right, above our heads, up on the hill. Every 15 seconds or so the flashes pulsed in unison, many times just on the periphery of our vision. Lightning bugs were chased, a few were caught, and the rest provided just what we all need from time to time: absorption in ‘being’ part of the beauty of our natural world.

With flashlights on, the return to the campground was another adventure under the canopy of trees, walking up and down hills. It was a joy to be hiking at nighttime in the forest.

The event closed around a roaring campfire accompanied by snacks, marshmallows and camaraderie.

Thank you to Sue for organizing the pre and post hike get-togethers, to those who chipped in to help, to Java Joe and Ray for the hike route ideas and to those sharing photos of the hike on the website.


HOPE TO SEE YOU AT AN EVENT OR ON THE TRAIL SOON!
They grew up in two different states, but they both shared an appreciation for nature. Abigail Chambers, 21, is known as “Sunshine” when she’s hiking the trail. She was raised in South Florida and as a child loved exploring the Everglades. She found excitement in birdwatching, identifying wild edibles and studying the ecology and the landscape. One of her first adventures was in Avon Park with her Boy Scouts of America (BSA) Venturing Crew 314. This hike encouraged Sunshine to gear up and get out. Later, while hiking in Northern Minnesota she met her future trail partner, TrailMix, who earned his trail name from his immense love of fruit, nuts and chocolate.

Sunshine is a rising senior at Florida International University, where she majors in Environmental Studies. She often goes out to the mangrove forests and sawgrass plains in her orange canoe to find solitude, quietness, and to escape the hustle and bustle of Miami Florida.

Cody Loucks, 24, was raised in the Mississippi flood plains of Festus, Missouri, where he spent a great deal of time exploring Washington State Park before he became an avid backpacker. He later served as a Wilderness Guide and would pass the time by paddling the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, hiking the granite encrusted trails of the North Woods and enjoying the small town atmosphere of Ely, Minnesota.

TrailMix recently graduated from Missouri State University with a bachelor’s degree in Wildlife Biology. He enjoys leatherworking, finger weaving, crafting and, of course, exploring trails with Sunshine.

In January, fueled by a lifetime of adventures, the duo set out to thru-hike the Florida Trail from Big Cypress National Preserve to Gulf Islands National Seashore. Their trek would take them through Florida’s most wild and remote areas with many stops along the way, including the FTA headquarters in Gainesville!

We were first introduced to Sunshine and TrailMix when they tagged the #FloridaTrail on Facebook. FTA’s staff was glued to our screens as the two hiked across the state. With each post, we followed their adventure and waited in anticipation to see where they would find themselves next! This included slogging through the wet wilderness in Big Cypress National Preserve, traveling across the sawgrass prairies in Central Florida, meeting friends in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, hiking the Panhandle’s infamous Bradwell Bay Wilderness and exploring the historic Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island in Pensacola Beach, Florida.

Sunshine and TrailMix’s Grand Adventure
Reflections of Two Florida Trail Thru-Hikers
Our staff loved their photos and videos and invited them to share their adventure with our readers. So find a hammock, get comfy and enjoy Sunshine and TrailMix’s reflections on the Florida Trail.

**What do you love about hiking?**
We love the solitude, the solemnness, the detachment from the material world and the reconnection with nature that only comes when you get out and explore the wilderness.

**Why did you choose to thru-hike the Florida Trail?**
**Sunshine:** My first BSA Venturing Crew 314 campout was about two miles south of the Loop Road entrance to the Florida Trail. Not only was I introduced to the trail, but soon I became infatuated with the idea of hiking across Florida. The Florida Trail was one of my dreams, a calling one might say, and soon it would become a reality.

**TrailMix:** When I was invited by Abigail to hike the Florida Trail, I had only been to Florida once before. This offer was too hard to turn down, so I joined her on our epic journey across the Florida wilderness. And of course I took this trip to be with Abigail because I couldn’t imagine the trail without Sunshine.

**When did you start and end your hike?**
Our hike was from January 1 to April 7, 2016.

**How did you prepare for your hike?**
We prepared by buying, analyzing and testing gear, and by creating a day to day spreadsheet which included nearby towns and anticipated miles per day. We used FTA’s trail maps and *The Florida Trail Guide* to plan our daily attack on the trail. We also bought a truckload of food beforehand and prepared our food pickups. You couldn’t imagine how many calories we would burn on this trip! As far as physically preparing for the trip, that was little to none; we should have known better but we met the consequences and hiked through the pain.

**Describe your best day on the trail.**
**Sunshine:** My favorite day on the trail was when we were traveling from Oak Creek Campsite to the edge of Kissimmee Prairie State Preserve. It rained on us all day and we sloshed through waist-deep water as water droplets pounded hard on our clothes and gear. The live oaks and cabbage palms towering overhead made it feel as if we were in the Amazon.
jungle. I remember the water rippling around our every step. However, the sun appeared late afternoon and we made camp in an Oak Hammock, peacefully drying our bodies and gear. TrailMix: Every day had its ups and downs but never once did I have a bad day on the trail. Except maybe the time when I got sick with the stomach flu. That was a tough day.

**Describe your hardest day on the trail.**
The levees and reroutes around Lake Okeechobee, due to construction, had our feet mangled.

**Describe the most memorable moment on the trail.**
One day as we were hiking through the Ocala sand scrubs we were met by a friendly Scrub Jay Biologist, who gave us water and peanuts. He said that we should use the peanuts to feed and call the birds for behavioral training purposes. Later on when we came across a cackle of Scrub Jays, we did as instructed and were immediately surrounded by these beautiful creatures. We were amazed and in awe of their presence far surpassing any experience with an Eagle, Osprey or Starling.

Did you ever feel like quitting your hike? What challenges did you face?
Sunshine: The only time that I wanted to quit was once we reached Lake Okeechobee. We didn’t see the lake and the construction was unbearably exhausting. TrailMix: I never really wanted to quit, I just wanted longer breaks and more moleskin for my poor feet!

What was your favorite part of the trail?
Our top picks of the trail included Loop Road to the Oasis Visitors Center, the Kissimmee Prairie State Preserve, the Green Swamp, the Ocala National Forest (Hopkins and Farles Prairie), the Little Big Econ River, White Springs (Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center) and the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

What is the most unique section of the Florida Trail?
The Big Cypress ecosystem was like no other ecosystem that we’ve seen. It was wet and barren. Starvation Slough, near Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, also held many
uncommon features. We started our hike in a wet prairie but quickly found ourselves under the shade of large oak and palm hammocks. It kind of reminded us of the famous Cathedral of Palms section in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Last but not least, we were thoroughly impressed with the disappearing Aucilla River and its limestone pits in the Panhandle.

What plants and/or animals did you encounter on the trail?
We saw almost everything, except for a Florida Panther. The most unique animals were the Jagarundi, Crested Caracara, Barred Owl and the Florida Scrub Jays.

What fueled you hike?
Our hike was fueled by our love for each other and for the wilderness. The company of each other was a necessity to keep us going each day. Without it, we may have never finished the trail.

What is your favorite piece of gear? Why?
Sunshine: Hair ties came in handy in all situations from the most basic hairdos to major gear repairs. I also carried a minimum of four bandanas for an infinite number of purposes. TrailMix: Books! To keep myself entertained when Sunshine decided to go to bed early.
How did you earn your trail name? Who gave it to you?

Sunshine: Sunshine was my nickname all the way from high school. TrailMix: TrailMix was my nickname from working as a tree trimmer. It was better than “Greeny Newbie.”

Would you attempt another long-distance hike? If so, what trail.
Most definitely! Wherever the eagle soars, the otter swims, the wind may blow, the wild horse gallops or the stream meanders is where we shall go. We love exploring America’s wildlands.

How would you describe the Florida Trail? What makes this hike so special?
The Florida Trail is a wet and wild wilderness footpath. It unlike any other trail that we’ve hiked.

What did you learn from your thru-hike?
Sunshine: I learned about how to thrive in a wilderness setting with nothing more than what I can carry on my back. To suffer through the pain of every day struggles, to view the wilderness in its most primitive state and to experience Florida and its array of breathtaking sceneries. TrailMix: I learned that Florida is not a tropical rainforest; it looks like everywhere else in the country, plus palm trees and minus hills. I got a sense of self-fulfillment for being able to endure activity far past my expected limits.

Do you have any advice for the next class of thru-hikers?
Break in your boots, prep for the hike, don’t buy food at River Ranch (expensive), research your food resupplies way in advance, don’t expect to have dry boots (ever), don’t rely on only one resource, bring a reliable solar charger, know that Florida does get below 32 degrees and above all else - don’t quit!

What is your spirit animal?
Sunshine: The turtle - I take the world at my own pace and know that nothing can break my hard exterior. In the words of President Abraham Lincoln: “I am a slow walker, but I never walk back.” TrailMix: The otter - It is playful and peppy, but also vicious and relentless when necessary. Plus, I’m cute!
Walking a Railroad
Gone Wild

Against a bright blue sky on a chilly morning, the colors of autumn stood out strongly above a section of the Florida Trail that sees very few hikers. It’s the wildest part of the Palatka-Lake Butler Trail, stretching 9 miles across farmland and timber lands between US 301 in Hampton and CR 235 just east of the New River. Maintained by Florida State Parks, blazed by the North Florida Trailblazers, and accessible at several road crossings, it has no formal trailheads, just a few places to park off the side of a road and start your linear journey.

Leaving the buzz of US 301 behind to head northwest, following the former Norfolk Southern rail line tunnels you into a colorful array of forests and swamps. The trail is mostly canopied by the large trees growing along it, both in the uplands in and the floodplain forests, making for a pleasant journey.

One of the highlights of the hike is the Sampson River. The trail pops out of the woods and into the rural community of Sampson, passing right in front of homes before coming to a sharp turn to meet CR 225 to use the highway bridge across the river. The river is an outflow of Lake Sampson, controlled by
floodgates, and riffles over tiny rocky rapids before vanishing downstream.

Stepping over a gushing side channel, you work your way back to the very linear footpath. In this section, heading west from Sampson, it parallels a few farms before burrowing deep into timberlands, where the quiet - far from any road traffic - is both surprising and soothing.

While there are stretches of the trail that are a bit rough underfoot due to the gravel bed of the railroad, they are few and far between. What’s amazing is how easily you can walk down this forested straightaway, thanks to regular mowing by the Florida Park Service.

Hike with a friend to leave a car at both ends (CR 235 and US 301) to enjoy a 9 mile walk, or plan a turnaround point back to your vehicle at US 301. You can also access this section at CR 227 or CR 225, southwest of Starke. All access points have very limited parking and aren’t good places to leave a car overnight.

If you enjoy a quiet, off-the-beaten-path walk on the Florida Trail, go now and take a hike before, sometime in the future, it is paved as part of the master plan for the Palatka-Lake Butler Trail. Your feet will thank you.

Activity Leader Alan Collins Turns 90

If you’ve ever been on a hike in the natural areas in Palm Beach County, it is almost certain that Alan Collins was your leader. Alan not only leads the walks but has spent hours in scoping them out. Whenever a new natural area is opened, Alan runs a reconnaissance mission to the site to put together about an hour and a half walk suitable for Loxahatchee Chapter members and the public.

That’s not all he does. He scouts out restaurants within driving distance so that hikers can enjoy breakfast together afterward. And there’s more. He always steps up to the plate to write about his adventures for the chapter’s Trail Tales newsletter.

What’s unique about Alan’s hikes is he has a comedic sidekick named Dave Cook, and the two of them keep a repartee going while hiking. Dave offers the following quips:

- Alan is noted for his botanical expertise by quickly answering questions from hiking members concerning particular flowers with replies like: “That’s a yellow flower,” or “That’s a green plant.”
- He has a remarkable ability to answer many directional queries by quoting the great philosopher, Yogi Berra.

Alan fills his days (and occasional nights) with numerous chapter events, painting classes, involvement with community theater groups, and classes at Palm Beach State College. He travels one or two times annually to places in south and central USA to join hostel groups.

So we say congratulations, Alan, on a life well lived, and we hope to see you on the next monthly natural areas walk.
Volunteer Spotlight
by Karl Borton, Volunteer Program Coordinator

DON MOCK
Sandhill Chapter

Don Mock spent his childhood in South Florida, where he developed a love of nature and bird watching. This passion followed him to the University of Florida for college, where he spent countless hours in the Devil’s Millhopper - identifying various flora and fauna. It was also where he met and married his wife.

Although his studies, career and retirement took him across the country, he always made time to hike and study in nature. As an amateur naturalist Don loves to capture and identify all sorts of critters on trails near and far.

More recently, Don volunteered with the Florida Trail Association (FTA) to update the Association’s data book and map sets. Through his hard work the FTA is now able to offer accurate and superior resources to its members, volunteers and trail users. Don has clocked more than 1000 hours in the past three years to support FTA’s mission.

We recently sat down with Don to chat about his life and the Florida Trail. Read his interview below!

How did you fall in love with nature?
From a very early age my parents encouraged me to bird watch and to join them on their excursions. Later in my childhood I began to develop an interest in topographic maps. I loved studying these maps, with their elevation lines, dotted trails and waterways, and wondered what it would be like to be out there on the trail. I was curious about what would be down around the next corner. I had this immense fascination with the idea of hiking, but ironically had no real opportunity to pursue it because my parents weren’t particularly interested in camping or backpacking. But that never quelled my interest. During college I loved exploring the Devil’s Millhopper to try to identify all the little creatures that lived in that sinkhole.
and on the way back to the Nightmare pass we were surprised to see a shock wave in the water. Something kept disturbing the water right in front of us, so we decided to follow it. When it surfaced it was a manatee!

**Would you recommend that trip?**
Absolutely! That early experience influenced our whole attitude towards nature. I love exploring the wilderness because you never know what is going to happen around the next corner or what wildlife you’ll see. It’s about all the critters that you come across. It’s about the flowers or the things that you see that you never knew were out there. It’s a lot more than watching a National Geographic Special on TV; you really need to experience things first hand to feel them deeply.

**What is your favorite hike?**
The Wonderland Trail in Washington is quite the experience. Even though Mount Rainer is only 14,000 feet in elevation, once you’ve gone around it and climbed up and down the radiating ridges, the route turns into a 20,000-foot elevation gain and loss. When we first attempted it, it was a total failure. It rained a lot and my wife injured herself. Later she had to have back surgery. So that put an end to our trip. However, two years later we did it again and did it successfully. Ironically, that year it was the driest season that anyone had seen at Mt. Rainier. We went 12 straight days without a single raindrop, which is impossible to do in the Pacific Northwest. As we hiked we had beautiful views of Mt. Rainer, with glaciers tumbling down its sides. It was a magnificent experience. If anyone else could arrange for clear weather they should try this trail.

**What was the strangest trip that you ever took?**
Once upon a time we decided to take our old beat up Toyota van on a 10,400-mile road trip. It had 200,000 miles on it, so mentally I was thinking that if it broke down we would just sell it as scrap. However, it made the trip and we ended up driving from Colorado to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska on the Arctic Ocean and back! It was a strange trip because the sun never completely sets above the Arctic Circle. It’s always light outside and eventually your mind starts to do weird things to you.

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**What was your first big adventure?**
After marrying my wife, I thought ‘we’re already married, so let’s go for broke.’ I floated the idea of canoeing the Everglades Wilderness Waterway, and even though she wasn’t too keen on the idea at first, I eventually persuaded her to take on the adventure. She only had one stipulation; she wanted to wash her hair daily. So, I figured out a way for her to wash her hair in the backcountry, loaded the canoe with 10-days of water, mosquito spray and supplies and set out to conquer the Everglades. It was an amazing trip and fulfilled all of my childhood fantasies! Over the course of the trip we maneuvered through the mangrove swamp, saw amazing wildlife and even managed to get through a tight channel ominously named the Nightmare. It’s a section that you have to hit at high tide, otherwise you’ll get stuck in waist-deep mud. After this trip we borrowed gear and backpacked the Cumberland National Seashore in Georgia. When we moved to the Pacific Northwest we continued our adventures by backpacking the Wonderland Trail around Mt. Rainer, the Wilderness Coast in the Olympic National Park and the Life Saving Trail through the wilderness of Vancouver Island. These first experiences really got us into backpacking and paddling, and it quickly became a part of our life.

**What was your wildest experience in the Everglades Wilderness Waterway?**
My wildest experience was not planned. We missed high tide at the Nightmare pass, but fortunately found a route out to the coast. We found a small sandbar and set-up shop. While my wife washed her hair I enjoyed the scenery and wildlife. Nearby dolphins played, eagles soared overhead and gigantic horseshoe crabs swam in the ocean. It was absolutely beautiful
What got you interested in hiking a National Scenic Trail?
I always wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail, even as a young kid. I was captivated by the idea, but life passed by. On my 40th birthday I realized that if I waited forever that I’d never get around to doing it. I lived in Boulder at the time and decided to take a crack at hiking the Colorado Trail. It wasn’t the A.T. but it was a long distance trail and I was all in. We had two kids at the time, so I had to complete the hike solo while my wife watched the boys. I planned to attack the hike by section hiking it on the weekends. For the first nine weeks my wife would drop me off and pick me up at the end of the second day. However, by the tenth weekend the drive was too far for my wife, so I decided to hike 24 days straight to the end. My wife helped resupply me at major mountain passes and I completed the 462-mile hike in a total of 42 days. It was absolutely beautiful and everything I hoped for in a thru-hike. However, it also mentally scarred me. I learned very quickly what it meant to hike above timberline during heavy afternoon thunderstorms. I can’t tell you how much I learned about lightning strikes. It was quite intense. After a few storms, you can’t believe how fast you can run downhill to avoid the next big lightning strike!

How did you first hear about the Florida Trail?
In the early 80’s I unknowingly hiked the Florida Trail when I backpacked 66 miles through the Ocala National Forest. At the time the Florida Trail in this section was still named the Ocala Trail. It was a beautiful experience and when I retired my wife and I thought that Florida would be a great place for us to continue to be active. So like most others, I Googled hikes in the area and discovered the Florida Trail. Shortly after this discovery we decided that Gainesville would be a good hub for us. Gainesville has always held a special place in my heart. It's where I went to college, where I connected with nature and where I met and married my wife. So it's natural that we picked this city. It was also a 1 to 2-hour drive to most trailheads in the region, which was a huge deciding factor. At first I admit that I didn't know much about the Florida Trail, but when I discovered that it was a long-distance trail I figured that it would keep us busy on day hikes for a long, long time. In fact, during the first three winters my teenage son and I hiked more than 200 miles on the Florida Trail!

What do you love about hiking in Florida?
Out west you have the grand views and the macro-scale vistas. In Florida it’s quite the opposite. Instead of views and vistas, you’re intimately aware of the little things that surround you. When you hear a noise you pause and realize that it’s a small critter rustling through the forest, a bird overhead or an unseen alligator. That’s what I really love about hiking in Florida. If you glance at my Facebook page it’s mostly me holding things like snakes, lizards, insects and even flowers. I enjoy trying to figure out what they are and how common they are to see. A lot of that is from the Florida Trail. It's just fun to post these pictures, so that my friends back in Colorado can see all the strange stuff that I'm encountering down here.

What do your friends think about hiking in Florida?
It’s a different type of psychology and it’s kind of hard for some people to appreciate it. I know that when my wife and I first moved out west, it took us awhile to figure out how we felt about all of it. On one hand the views were breathtaking, but on the other hand there were hardly any critters. I’d often think to myself - ‘Where’s the bird song?’ When you’re out west for 35 years you get used to the big vistas, but I never get used to the micro-ecosystems in Florida. There’s a surprise around every corner and it’s never the same. You may see an alligator one day and then rain lilies the next. While there is not a diversity of terrain, there is diversity of ecosystems. Each section is spectacular in its own way and is teeming with life. If you can appreciate the diversity of life on Earth, then there’s no better place to experience it than here in Florida.

You mentioned animals but what about plants. Do you know a lot about them?
As an amateur naturalist I know quite a bit about plants and animals. However, I still use Google to identify a lot of them. I love capturing, identifying and posting about my adventures on Facebook.
Have you ever tried to eat a wild plant that you have identified?

No. I’ve heard too many horror stories of people that think they’re expert enough to trust their own judgment. Often times they end up getting sick or worse. I enjoy looking at flowers, mushrooms and other edible plants and can even identify some of the species, however when it comes to harvesting for dinner, I tend to leave that to the pros.

How did you first get involved with the FTA?

Shortly after I joined the Association I bought a few maps and a copy of the data book. However, I noticed that the copyright dates were from several years prior, yet the book implied that the information was updated annually. So I asked Diane (FTA’s Membership and Retail Store Coordinator): ‘What’s the story?’ After a lengthy discussion I realized that no one was in a position to update the maps. So I thought ‘I’m recently retired, I’ve always been interested in GIS work and can probably figure out how to update these resources.’ So I asked around, got the right contact and offered to volunteer to fill this gap. As I started to poke around, I quickly realized that GIS was way out of my league, but luckily Jeff (FTA’s North Florida Regional Representative) knew a GIS specialist named Dave Costakis. Dave committed to help, and together Dave and I developed a strategy to gather information to update the data book and related maps.

Was it hard to update the mapping resources?

It was quite the project. Poor Dave had to recreate many of the design files that we needed for the update. In addition, we discovered that the data book and maps did not accurately reflect the trail. Some mileages were going backwards when they should be going forwards, and others had two different distances based on the direction of travel. We also discovered that the waypoints in between two locations did not agree with the mileage that was in the description in the data book. So for the first year we focused on correcting these errors to ensure that what was represented on the maps and in the data book was completely accurate. I think this is important because people rely and stake their lives on these resources.
How long did it take you to update the maps?  
It took us 2000 hours to do that first year’s update. So if you know how many weeks that is; it’s not really sustainable for part-time volunteers. But luckily there weren’t that many changes needed in the second year. Plus, we knew more of what we were doing and had an established process to update the resources. I’m suspecting that this third year will be even easier, partially because we are more fully engaging the Regional Representative system. Tom Daniel (FTA’s former VP of Trails) also updated the Trail Manual, so it’s much more clear what people have to do in the field to pass information up the chain of command. Using this system, updates should be seamless.

What is your favorite part about volunteering with FTA?  
I think it’s feeling that you’re doing something useful that other people will appreciate. What I discovered in graduate school was that it was always more fun to help someone else in their research project, than it was to work on my own project. That’s probably one of the reasons why I never finished my doctorate. I always found more satisfaction in helping someone else out, than in solving my own problems. Even if I didn’t have the right expertise I was willing to find someone with that skillset, so that I could help make a difference for the organization.

Did you learn anything from this project?  
I learned quickly that people don’t like telemarketers. During the first year I called each Section Leader to update the maps. One Section Leader refused to answer my calls and once even picked up and said ‘I’m not interested.’ Click went the phone. I called a nearby Section Leader to ask ‘What was going on?’ He said that since I had a 303 area code that the elusive Section Leader was probably convinced that I was a solicitor and was trying to trick him into something. After a few introductions I was able to convince him that I was a volunteer for the FTA. It’s always interesting to work with diverse personalities, but by collaborating with FTA’s staff it’s not hard to overcome these challenges.

I hear that you might be prepping yourself to do more GIS work. Why do you want to learn GIS?  
Dave recently moved to Colorado. Although he stated that he still wants to be involved, I know how hard it is to move and get settled into a new job. With that in mind, I want to be in a better position to support him and share some of his workload. I’m freshly retired and if I’m lucky I’ll be around for the next 20 years, so I thought it’s not too late for me to learn something new. I look forward to learning GIS and hope that it will be useful to the FTA in the future.

When you’re not hiking what do you do?  
Since retiring it’s mostly volunteer work. I like staying busy and volunteer with the FTA, with the Paynes Prairie State Park, with the Devil’s Millhopper Geological State Park, with the Gainesville Community Playhouse and with the local Bar Hammock and Sweetwater Preserves. In the summertime I also volunteer with the Flatirons Mineral Club in Boulder, Colorado. It’s a club for people that really like minerals, gemstones and other rocks. I help run their annual fundraiser by preparing 1000 cloth grab bags. In each cloth grab bag there are approximately 9 to 10 mineral samples, which are individually labeled. Each grab bag is different and I help ensure that each bag is unique.

What other hobbies do you have?  
One of our hobbies is trying to see all of the National Park Units in the US. There are more than 400 units and we’ve been to 342 of them. It’s not everyone’s cup of tea. Some might get tired at the pace at which we hit these places, but we don’t do a superficial visit of them. Instead, we go to the trails, read the information stations, watch the videos and go talk with the rangers. It can be a lot of fun to go to the lesser known units. It’s really just an excuse to get out in nature.

Do you prefer hiking alone or in a group?  
I prefer to hike with my wife or my family. I’m not really much of a group hiker because I end up way behind. I like to stop to try to catch a critter or identify a wildflower. So, I’m not really good at keeping up with the group.

Are you more of a hunter or a gatherer?  
I tend to think of myself as a collector or a gatherer. If you visit my house we have sort of a weird collection of unique minerals, rocks, shells and preserved flowers. These items remind us of our trips.

Don obtained a BS and MS in Physics from the University of Florida, pursued a doctorate in Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Washington and eventually secured a job as a Support Scientist for the Physical Oceanography Group at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. As a Support Scientist he found a niche in computer sciences at the beginning of the 1980’s technology boom. It was here that he introduced Jacque Cousteau and other scientists to JPL’s interactive data sets and the latest color-imaging computer technology. Later, Don landed a job in Boulder, Colorado, where he eventually rose to the position of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Laboratories’ Executive Director and served as the City of Boulder’s Deputy Mayor. Don retired in 2012 and now splits his time between Boulder and sunny Gainesville. When he’s not volunteering his time at the FTA, Don likes to hike, volunteer and spend time with his family.
Partnering with Trail Runners to Support the FTA

The Loxahatchee chapter of the FTA has been engaging new members from trail running enthusiasts, like the Ultra Runners, over the past couple years. Trail runners are always on the lookout for footpaths in wilderness areas for training, races, and marathons. Many runners are in their 20s and 30s, an age group often underrepresented in organizations like ours.

One Ultra Runner, Brian Schoenberg, ran a chapter fundraiser by running 33 miles for his 33rd birthday, June 12. About 40 people showed up to run or support the runners. When the event was over, Brian and the other participants had raised over $400 in cash to donate. This was Brian’s second yearly birthday run. Last year he donated about $350.

Our leadership is attending these events to talk with people about the FTA, its goals and membership opportunities. Having assisted in their events as volunteers in the past, this year we began working with event organizers to include FTA membership opportunities in their online sign-up process. Some events draw runners from around the country. The Loxahatchee Chapter has acquired 15 runner memberships this year. And we are working on getting runners into our trail maintenance efforts as well.

Chapters can seek inclusion of runners in their areas by making contact and promoting trails the chapter maintains for this purpose. Helping to transport water and other materials for their events shows good will and a desire to include their interests in our own. It takes a team to build a bridge of common interest between outdoor enthusiasts. Working together we are supporting activities on the footpaths we love.

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Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at www.floridatrail.org Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter
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Provides funding for updating the Florida Trail's maps and databook.

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Please mark one of the boxes below if you are joining or renewing your membership in the Florida Trail Association

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☐ Trail Builder ($50)*
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*Includes spouse and children under 18.
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