FOOTPRINT Magazine

GATEWAY COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: WHITE SPRINGS

FOOTPRINT

Summer 2021 Volume 37 Issue 3

NEXT GENERATION Edition

Backpacking With Children In Florida Tips and Tricks From a Mom of Two

Florida Trail Association
Love it like you built it. Because you did.

In support of Florida's vibrant outdoor community, since 2014 the co-op has been able to contribute over $85,000 to stewarding the Florida Trail and other natural spaces around the state.

Come by and see us at your local REI before heading out to enjoy the fresh air, or visit online at REI.com.
Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), along with a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida. Together with our partners, the Association provides opportunities for the public to contribute to meaningful volunteer work, engage in outdoor recreation, and participate in environmental education.

The Footprint Magazine welcomes your comments. The editors are committed to providing balanced and objective perspectives. Not all letters received may be published. Letters may be edited for clarity or length.

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OUR MAGAZINE
The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,500-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida’s own National Scenic Trail.

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 efforts; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS
Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

MEMBERSHIP
As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The Footprint magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. To become a member, you can visit our website, mail in the form on the last page of this magazine, or call 352-378-8823.

ADVERTISING
Reach a highly targeted demographic of Florida outdoor enthusiasts by advertising with us or becoming a regular sponsor. Your advertising dollars directly support production and publication of this magazine and assist the Florida Trail Association in fulfilling its mission. Call 877-HIKE-FLA or email communications@floridatrail.org for more details.
I hope you all enjoy this summer edition of the Footprint. There are a lot of great stories, activities, and adventures here for the whole family to enjoy. Don’t miss the incredible photography of a four-year-old!

I am particularly excited to announce the call for nominations to our Next Generation Coalition, a forum for the 18- to 30-year-old to have an impact on organizational development. This is an excellent opportunity for young adults to learn about all aspects of trail development and conservation, to network with leaders in the field, and to gain valuable leadership skills regardless of their future career path. We are looking forward to creating a diverse coalition from across Florida to bring forward the next generation of ideas and actions to protect the Florida Trail.

In the Spring 2021 issue I mentioned the winners of our 2022 calendar photo contest. The calendar is now available and looks better than we could have imagined! I ask you to support all the work we do by donating $55 in honor of our 55th Anniversary of trail building and get your copy of the calendar as a thank you gift. Look for the calendar ad on page 21 or you can visit FloridaTrail.org/cal2022.

We finished our fiscal year on June 30th. Thanks to your generosity, we ended FY 2021 ahead of our budgeted revenue target. We embark on FY 2022 with ambitious but achievable goals. We are in the process of developing a strategic plan for the organization and look forward to sharing it with you in the new year.

Thank you for your commitment to the Florida Trail Association.

Happy trails,

- Paul Reynolds

“Thanks to the whole team for the incredible work you all do!! 🥳🥳🥳🥳”
Would you like to empower the next generation to enjoy, share, and preserve the hiking and volunteering experience? Consider joining the FTA’s new Next Generation Coalition. The Next Generation Coalition will be dedicated to welcoming, training, and supporting the next generation of hikers and trail volunteers.

**TASKS**

- Participate in quarterly meeting of the Next Generation Coalition
- Opportunities to participate in and advise the Florida National Scenic Trail Coalition
- Opportunities to contribute to FTA communications, including the E-Blaze, Footprint Magazine and social media
- Opportunities to organize dedicated hikes and trail maintenance events
- Help develop FTA and Florida National Scenic Trail strategic plans
- Strengthen partnerships with colleges, schools, affinity groups and other organizations
- Other projects and initiatives as determined by the coalition
- Opportunities to collaborate with the U.S. Forest Service partners
- Opportunities to contribute to FTA Board of Directors meetings and decisions
- Contribute to, create and implement FTA Justice, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) initiatives

**BENEFITS**

- One-year membership to the FTA
- Complimentary FTA swag!
- Opportunities for scholarships to attend special events, conferences and trainings
- Networking opportunities with leaders and other professionals in the trail community including land managers, U.S. Forest Service, and National Parks
- Excellent resume builder for those interested in careers in the outdoor industry
- Opportunity to have your social media accounts promoted by FTA, if desired
- Opportunities for travel throughout the state of Florida
- Opportunities to advance in FTA leadership/board of directors

**APPLICANT REQUIREMENTS**

- Between the ages of 18 and 30
- Passionate about the Florida Trail, outdoors advocacy, and justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in the outdoors
- Strong communication skills
- Available to engage regularly throughout the year on social media and through FTA communications
- Available for quarterly meetings
- Available to attend at least one local chapter meeting
- Available to attend at least one Volunteer Work Party
- Committed to serving on coalition for one year with opportunity to serve for up to 2 years with majority of time commitment served during Fall/Spring semesters
- Interested applicants from the BIPOC, Latinx, LGBTQIA+ and other underrepresented communities are strongly encouraged to apply

Reach out to our Community Outreach Manager, Chelsea Collison, at chelseac@floridatrail.org for more information and to get involved.
Youth engagement is a big part of the mission and vision of the Florida Trail Association (FTA), and partnering with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) offers us a way to involve many young volunteers who take an interest in our work. When our staff and volunteers work with Scouts, we provide meaningful, challenging, and often life changing work for those interested in improving and supporting our trails. Scouting and the outdoors are like fish and water, inseparable since their inception. There is a long running connection between different Scouting organizations and the Florida Trail. Ask many of our most dedicated FTA volunteers where they developed a love of trails, and you’ll learn that their passion for the outdoors was nurtured while Scouting.

In recent years, the FTA has partnered with the BSA on dozens of projects, including many partnerships with Scouts on their pathway to earning the Eagle Scout designation. People who have earned an Eagle Scout medal consider it one of their most treasured possessions. Eagle Scout is the highest rank attainable in the Scouts BSA program of the Boy Scouts of America and since its inception in 1910. After completing a lengthy review process and sometimes years of work earning merit badges and assuming leadership positions in their respective Troops, only four percent of Scouts earn this rank.

The Florida Trail is the perfect setting for these young men, and now, also young women. Starting in February of 2021 the first class of 1,000 female Eagle Scouts joined the ranks of the more than 2.5 million males who had previously achieved the rank. The FTA is proud to help these young adults strive to complete the hard work and dedication it takes to complete the process.

Below are some of the recent highlight projects completed by Eagle Scouts on the Florida Trail in the North region. Many Troops engage in routine volunteer service on the trail as well, and we thank them.

(Above) Eagle Scouts recruit helping hands to complete large scale projects.
In 2017 there were 1,500 service hours contributed by a single Scout troop from the Ocala, FL area, on the eastern corridor of the Ocala National Forest. Over the course of the fall and early winter, three Scouts looking to achieve the rank of Eagle Scout coordinated projects to repair and replace all the signage on approximately 60 miles of the FNST. No small feat, this job required a lot of logistics, teamwork, volunteer recruitment, fund raising, and muscle.

The work of inventorying all of the 650 sign setups, with each individual sign and post being counted separately, took place in the summer of 2015 by FTA staff and was subsequently broken down into work plans based on the amount of work needed between major road crossings. The 72 miles from Clearwater Lake Recreation Area and Rodman Dam was broken down into 10 sections. Each section had a designated spreadsheet with an accompanying work plan to make the job easier for the volunteers that would do the job. While this project was originally set up for FTA volunteers, with three local Scouts looking for Eagle projects it was a perfect fit.

Evan Bauman, David Ogden, and Kevin Ogden split the 60 remaining miles of trail into thirds and each began the work to get their individual tasks lined up. FTA provided all of the materials for the sign installation, including Florida National Scenic Trail shield signs, regulatory signs, road signs, distance signs, and posts. The Scouts had to either remove, replace, add, or maintain the signs as they came to them along the trail which they found by using the GPS and sign data provided by the FTA. Much of the existing signage was in serious disrepair: burnt up, shot up, missing, or incorrect. The trail was ready for a signage face lift that was many years in the making, and thanks to these Scouts it happened in a single trail season.

In 2018, the remaining miles of the Ocala National Forest on the Western Corridor were re-signed by Mark Warburton of Troop 611 of Gainesville. Mark inventoried the 22 miles by backpacking the trail and collecting data. He then used that data to create maintenance logs for every sign along the trail and then created a work plan based on those. After recruiting many friends and mentors, Mark built new signs, fundraised for materials, and coordinated field days to remove, maintain, and install all new signage along the trail from the Marshall Swamp Trailhead to the east/west junction behind the 88 Store.

Fast forward to the 2020/2021 trail season when another round of three Boy Scouts rushed to the Florida Trail to complete their path to becoming Eagle Scouts. One Scout in particular looked to achieve the Summit award—the highest award given to Scouts in the Venturing program, a co-ed program for Scouts age 14-20. The venturing motto is, “Lead the Adventure,” something the FTA hopes to inspire in all of our volunteers. Two new campsites were built along the Suwannee River inside Stephen Foster State Park in White Springs, and the Yearling Trail on the Ocala received a major overhaul in the form of an updated interpretive loop plus a beautiful new kiosk at the trailhead.

Aaron Collins from Troop 408 in Wellborn, FL installed a new campsite at Catfish Hole along the Suwannee River that included a new picnic table, fire pit, and benches. Within one week the site was being used by overnight hikers. Aaron owns his own landscaping business and approached this project with a level of professionalism that was well beyond his years. He came with a crew ready to get the job done and he led the project from every angle.

Farther down the trail in the Suwannee River State Park, Dominic Noto of Troop 887 in Jacksonville also installed a brand new campsite at River Overlook along the banks of the Suwannee. Benches, a firepit, and a picnic table now offer amenities to day users and overnight campers along the trail.

“MR. GLENN TRIED TO TELL US HOW MUCH WORK WOULD BE INVOLVED BUT WE COULDN’T REALLY UNDERSTAND UNTIL WE WERE ACTUALLY OUT ON THE TRAIL AND WORKING. IT WAS VERY EASY TO UNDERESTIMATE HOW MUCH TIME IT WOULD TAKE.” ~DAVID OGDEN
The largest Eagle Scout project of the 2020-2021 season was completed by Brady Bauer of Troop 72 of Ocala. His project was large in scale and required a lot of logistical planning as well as time and carpentry skill. Brady worked to give the Yearling Trail on the Ocala National Forest a much needed signage upgrade and large trailhead kiosk. The Yearling Trail is one of three major portals into the Juniper Prairie Wilderness and offers hikers a glimpse into the past along a self-guided interpretive trail highlighting the story of Pat’s Island and the community highlighted in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ famous story The Yearling. The new kiosk Brady and his team constructed highlights the story of the Yearling, provides information about the Florida Trail, and includes camping tips on bear safety and Leave No Trace principles. This particular kiosk is built with heavy timbers and a large roof, making it more challenging to build and exceedingly heavy. The crew utilized a small crane to lift the structure into place.

As part of his project, Brady also worked with local equestrian groups to redo signage along the trail, much of which was in poor condition or inaccurate. Brady and his troop made the new signs and used the horse teams to haul them in and bring the old materials out. His whole project required a high level of skill and professionalism and the end result shows that.

Patrick Gross from, a Venture Scout from Gainesville, FL, completed the final project of the trail season by building a brand new trail in the Rice Creek Conservation Area that leads to a “nearly discovered” champion bald cypress tree. Previously, the tree was only accessible to the hardiest walkers willing to trek a long way off of the Florida Trail through thick and swampy conditions. Through the generosity of our partners at Wetland Preserve, an adjacent land owner has given access to an easy and beautiful hike to see this massive tree. Patrick flagged the new route and worked with FTA staff to build the trail. Future plans for the trail include interpretive materials showcasing some of the flora along the trail, including the featured cypress. The age of the tree is unknown but estimates range from 500 years to...
2,000 years. The trail will be open periodical-
ly throughout the year via a private road and
will be advertised to the public when those
times are. The trail is easily accessible to Rice
Creek Florida Trail users as well as cyclists
passing by on the Palatka-Lake Butler State
Trail.

The future of the FTA and the Florida
Trail rests in the hands of our youth. In an age
of technological dependence and disconnec-
tion from the natural world, our membership,
staff, volunteers and land managers should do
all we can to cultivate the next generation of
stewards.

If you are a trail volunteer and have a
project in mind for a Scout, get in touch with
your Regional Trail Manager and we can work
to pair together your chapter with an aspiring
young trail volunteer.

“\textit{I NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT GOES INTO}
\textit{KEEPING UP A HIKING TRAIL. THIS PROJECT HELPED}
\textit{ME UNDERSTAND THAT A LOT OF DIFFERENT THINGS}
\textit{GO INTO MAKING THE FLORIDA TRAIL A SAFE AND}
\textit{ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCE FOR HIKERS.}” \textit{~KEVIN OGDEN}
Revealed along its trails
A footstep at a time
A paddlesroke away
A ride into the unknown:
Florida, naturally.

FloridaHikes.com
Trail information, how-to, reviews, guidebooks & more
In early March of 2020 I was working with a student group from the Rochester Institute of Technology in the Apalachicola National Forest and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. We spent our days out on the trail, largely isolated from the rest of the world, focused on the natural environment around us. The weather was warm and pleasant, tiki and spring wildflowers were blooming, and the crew was marveling at a landscape entirely different from the still-snowy hills of upstate New York. None of these students had any experience with trail work before this trip, but after a couple of days they had grown into an enthusiastic and hard-working crew. We worked on rebuilding a bridge at Porter Lake, maintaining footpath in the Port Leon Wilderness of St. Marks, and clearing minor FT re-routes along the Sopchoppy River. Every evening, though, we’d return to the St. Marks bunkhouse and catch-up on disturbing news reports coming in from around the country: the spread of a mysterious illness, the recurring word “pandemic.” Everyone was growing anxious, worried about family and friends, and trying to imagine what our future held. Near the end of the trip, the students learned that their campus was being closed and they wouldn’t be able to return to their dorms. There was a mad scramble to come up with alternative travel plans, and soon they were all making fearful, solitary trips home. No student groups have been back to work on the Florida Trail in the Panhandle since that week in March, well over a year ago. The COVID pandemic has resulted in a field season unlike any other. While the Florida Trail Association’s staff and volunteers have worked hard to adapt and fulfill our mission of maintaining the FT, our partnerships with youth and college groups have struggled. It’s proven to be fairly straight-forward to safely host local volunteer work parties—working outdoors and practicing social distancing—but it’s been impossible to safely arrange for long-distance travel and the lodging of a student crew. Most students spent the last year attending classes remotely, and traveling for volunteer work was simply not an option. Only now are we finally starting to imagine a return to normalcy, and for the FTA that includes re-engaging with our college alternative break partners and other youth groups. The FTA has a long history of working with universities to host service-orientated Alternative Spring Break programs, especially here in the Panhandle. These programs allow college students to engage in meaningful volunteer work while learning about conservation and the unique natural history of our state. Many of these students come from urban areas and have little-to-no experience with hiking and backpacking, let alone trail maintenance; performing trail work in Florida’s woods and swamps can be an eye-opening experience that pushes them significantly out of their comfort zones. They’ve proven to be up to the challenge, and over the years they’ve made a significant contribution to our trail development and seasonal maintenance. One of our more enduring spring break partnerships has been with the University of Florida’s Alternative Breaks Program (FAB). FAB provides service-learning trips on specific social issues during academic breaks; the program strives to create active and engaged cit-
izens who are committed to positive, sustainable change. For several years now FAB has been sending UF students up to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge for a spring break weekend of trail work. Every year a returning crew member steps up into a leadership position to organize the next event. Thanks to the multi-year efforts of this group, we’ve been able to clear, blaze, and re-open the long-neglected Swamp Hammock trail in eastern St. Marks, bringing the Florida Trail back onto its historical route through a scenic wetland. In 2018, we marked this re-opening event with a dedication and ribbon-cutting ceremony, and the UF FAB program committed to adopting this section of trail and maintaining it in future years. Since then they’ve fulfilled that commitment, as well as helping to maintain the historic Port Leon wilderness section of trail south of St. Marks.

The FTA has also partnered with numerous university groups from outside of Florida. We have a long-running partnership with the American Hiking Society (AHS) and their Alternative Break program. Every year we share a calendar of available weeks with AHS, and they in turn advertise these opportunities and recruit college groups from all over the country to come down and work on the Florida Trail with one of the FTA’s Regional Trail Program Managers. In the Panhandle these events are usually hosted at the St. Marks bunkhouse, a comfortable facility for large groups that provides easy access to the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, Apalachicola National Forest, and Aucilla Wildlife Management Area. These large student crews have been particularly useful for helping to maintain the nearby wilderness sections of the Florida Trail, including the notoriously difficult Bradwell Bay swamp crossing. The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a nation-wide system of protected land where human impacts are minimized as much as possible; this includes prohibitions on the use of power tools such as mowers and chainsaws. This poses a challenge for trail maintainers, especially in a climate like ours where the growing season never ends. A large group of motivated college students, armed with loppers and handsaws, is one of our greatest tools in beating back the encroaching vegetation on these sections of trail.

Another youth program that has contributed to the success of the Florida Trail is the Student Conservation Association (SCA). Part of a long tradition of American conservation corps, the SCA seeks to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of the environment. Unlike typical Alternative Break programs, these crews receive extensive training on trail building and maintenance, making them a valuable resource for infrastructure projects and other technical field work. SCA crews have helped build bridges and boardwalks all over the state. Here in the Panhandle, they most recently participated in our response to Hurricane Michael; an SCA chainsaw crew spent several weeks working in the far-western Apalachicola National Forest, clearing blowdowns and restoring damaged trails. The FTA is cur-
Currently working with our USFS partners to bring yet another SCA crew to the Florida Trail this fall. This crew will spend several months working alongside the Panhandle Chapter to improve trail conditions in the Econfina section by rerouting around damaged infrastructure and clearing the inevitable new blowdowns that continue to be the long-term legacy of Hurricane Michael.

Our staff is looking forward to welcoming these various groups back to the Florida Trail, and their absence has been keenly felt over this past fall, winter, and spring. The young people who volunteer their time to work on the Florida Trail are, quite literally, the future of our organization. These types of opportunities help to plant a seed for future environmental stewardship, and by introducing young people to the Florida Trail we gain advocates for Florida’s wild places and the footpaths that run through them. With this in mind, we’re always looking to grow our students and youth partnership. Interested students, professors, or administrators can always reach out to start a conversation on how we can collaborate on Florida Trail service projects.

PHOTOS

14 Staying cheerful while dealing with intense insect pressure, an SCA crew helps FTA volunteers respond to Hurricane Michael damage in the Apalachicola National Forest.

15 Students from the Rochester Institute of Technology work with FTA and FOC staff to repair the Porter Lake Bridge in the Apalachicola National Forest.

16 Students from the Rochester Institute of Technology pose at Porter Lake.
Imagine this scene: You’ve been hiking through a Florida winter deluge for two days when you finally reach the roaring beauty of Big Shoals on the Suwannee River, Florida’s only Class III rapids. You pitch a damp tent, again, wring out your socks, and laugh at the delightful struggles of hiking in Florida. Knowing that the nearby town of White Springs will be able to provide much needed creature comforts makes it all bearable.

Make sure to get your Florida Trail Passport stamped in White Springs. Check out the locations here [https://www.floridatrail.org/passport/](https://www.floridatrail.org/passport/)

White Springs was the first town in the state to be designated as a Florida Trail Gateway Community back in 2007, and remains a hub for hikers, cyclists, and paddlers. When I thru-hiked the Florida Trail in 2020, White Springs offered much needed rest and accommodations. My partner and I called the White Springs B&B the evening before our arrival to town and Judith, the owner, offered us a room at the discounted hiker rate. When we arrived at the gorgeous, historic, 1905 home, we were greeted by two sweet dogs and a fellow hiker lounging in a rocking chair on the wrap-around porch. Upon checking us into our room, Judith offered to take our laundry and let us know chili would be served for dinner. Beyond providing outstanding accommodations, Judith truly cares for the hiking and outdoors community and makes all feel welcome. A stone’s throw from the B&B, Fat Belly’s is an iconic spot for hikers to chow down. While you’re there, check out their display of arrowheads uncovered from the Suwannee River, evidence of the Timucua who originally inhabited the area.

The Suwannee section is one of the original stretches of the Florida Trail dating back to 1966, spanning nearly 75 miles along the Suwannee River from Big Shoals west to Mill Creek in Twin Rivers State Forest. I got a lesson in Florida Trail history from hiking expert Sandra Friend, who proposed and spearheaded the Gateway Communities program in the early 2000s when she was an FTA staff member. “White Springs has always been a popular destination for hikers,” she shared, recounting the first annual Florida Hiking Festival that took place at Stephen Foster Folk Culture State Park in 2008. “Activity leaders led guided hikes all during the event. We had grant support from [the state of] Florida as well as local tourism and businesses. It drew close to 700 people over a weekend.” The nearby award-winning state park is no stranger to hosting festivals. Each Memorial Day weekend, the Florida Folk Festival draws a crowd to celebrate music, dance, stories, crafts and food that make Florida unique.

For the hiker who wishes to stay a while and enjoy more outdoor adventures, Amer-
Footprint Summer 2021


White Springs celebrates selection as first Gateway Community

What is a Gateway Community? It is a community along the Florida Trail where hikers can stop to enjoy a short rest or a longer stay. You can eat at restaurants, shop, tour historic locations or enjoy natural attractions. Then you can stay overnight at a campground, hotel or bed and breakfast. Does that sound like the Town of White Springs? The Florida Trail Association (FTA) thought so. They were so impressed with the town’s amenities, they named White Springs the first Gateway Community on the trail.

The FTA held a ceremony in White Springs on Friday, Feb. 23, to unveil the town’s Gateway Community sign. Association members, government officials, local people and visitors gathered at the Nature and Tourism Center to celebrate the fulfillment of a vision. White Springs has been a tourist destination since the 1800s when travelers came to stay at fine hotels and to bathe in the sulfur springs. Its beauty has

see White Springs, Page 7A

Antiques on display at Fat Belly’s.

Historic White Springs Bed and Breakfast and a Cozy room at White Springs Bed and Breakfast.
American Canoe Adventures provides kayak and canoe rentals to paddle along the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, and will help arrange a shuttle for a section hike. If you ever wished you had your fishing pole while hiking, Rooster’s Outfitters is a one-stop shop with all the advice on local fishing spots. White Springs is also headquarters for the Suwannee Bicycle Association, whose members have cleared and maintained over 50 miles of off-road bicycle trails; you can rent bikes at Stephen Foster Folk Culture State Park.

Former White Springs mayor and Florida Trail hiker Helen Miller remarked on the positive impact of outdoor recreation in the area: “Having the trail come through town has increased commercial opportunities for all our small businesses, and it has allowed the town to charm a number of hiking guests into deciding to make White Springs their new home.” Whether you’re planning a weekend trip, a long section hike, or tackling a thru-hike, a stop in White Springs will make your trip memorable.
LIMITED EDITION

**2022 CALENDAR**

**GET YOURS TODAY!**

This year marks the 55th anniversary of the first orange blaze and the start of the Florida Trail.

Make a gift of $55* or more to the Florida Trail Association (FTA) and we will send you a complimentary copy of our first “Official Calendar of the Florida Trail Association”.

The 12” x 12” wall calendar photos were selected from over 500 submissions by FTA members and enthusiasts.

Experience the beauty and wonder of the Florida Trail every day for 16 months beginning September 2021.

*Does not count towards membership dues. Your contribution will support our mission to protect the Florida Trail System. Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery.
**FLORIDA TRAIL BINGO**

Plants and animals unique to Florida can be found throughout the trail’s many ecosystems. This includes plants like the American beauty berry, saw palmetto, longleaf pine, and even coastal favorites like sea oats. You may also spot animals like the armadillo, Florida scrub jay, zebra longwing butterfly (the state’s official butterfly), or gopher tortoise.

The flora and fauna you see will depend on the ecosystem where you’re hiking. An ecosystem is made up of all the living and nonliving parts of the environment. Florida’s ecosystems include scrub, pine flatwoods, cypress swamps, dry prairies, coastal dunes and hardwood hammocks.

Make copies of this BINGO game and bring them along on your hikes. You’re likely to get different results every time!

**Instructions**

Take this BINGO game along with you on your day hikes and cross off each item as you find them. You can reuse the game to track the varying biodiversity of the trail each time you hit the trail!

Remember: If you find anything on the trail, leave it as you found it or take a photo so someone else can help you identify it. If you find trash, pick it up!

For recommendations on where to hike, check out the list of Family Friendly Hikes, page 44.

**BONUS ACTIVITY**

For extra fun, take photos of each item on your hike and create a photo album of your finds. If you share on social media, tag @FloridaTrail to be featured on our page!

**Items**

1. Mammal
2. Vines
3. Spider web
4. Fungi
5. Something edible
6. Something man made
7. Something red
8. Amphibian
9. Something with thorns
10. An orange blaze
11. An insect
12. Palm
13. Free space
14. Pinecone
15. Moss
16. Tree roots
17. Body of water
18. Reptile
19. Pollinator
20. Trash (pick it up!)
21. Fellow hiker
22. Bird
23. Flower
24. Bridge
25. Rock
Keith Curry-Pochy has been hiking with his son Cypress (now, 4 years old) since he was only 11 days old. While living in Gainesville, FL, they started their father-son hiking adventures with local favorites like Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park. As Cypress grew, so did their car rides, as they ventured further out across the state including Big Cypress, Suwannee, and Tosohatchee sections of the Florida Trail.

Keith reminisces about one of Cypress’s first trips on the Florida Trail, enjoying the views from a carrier on his dad’s back. On this hike, Cypress was determined to touch every bright orange blaze that crossed their path, requiring Keith to lean towards the tree trunks every few paces. Now, when hiking, Cypress often turns into what he calls “Adventure Cypress,” which means running as fast as he can ahead of everyone else. Patience, a required skill for much of parenthood, is absolutely essential when hiking with children, says Keith.

Eventually car camping and a new baby brother, Sabal, were thrown into the mix, making their trips even more impressive. On each of their adventures, along with toting two kids, water, and snacks, Keith always carried the extra weight of his DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) camera to capture the beauty of wild Florida alongside the memories of Cypress and Sabal exploring the outdoors for the first time.
As expected, Cypress became increasingly more curious, but not just about nature—he wanted to know more about photography, too. Keith started setting up shots with his own camera and tripod for Cypress but quickly realized that he was going to need his own equipment.

Cypress was first given his waterproof, shockproof, point-and-shoot camera at 2 years old and giggled when told he had been taking photos for half his life! Keith started by showing him the basic features like how to turn it on and off and which button to push to take a photo. At the time of this interview, Cypress was eager to show off how the flash works and what he does to zoom in and out, used mostly for taking photos of insects, he says.

“I like when I can take a photo of a bee when it’s pollinating.”

~Cypress explains

He also pointed out the big red button he uses to “do filming” a trick he picked up on his own in the backseat of the car on a recent camping trip to Big Cypress, recording shaky footage of the passing swamps.

Keith says he is not worried about the risk of his camera being broken, and is more concerned about giving Cypress the chance to experiment. He believes it’s important that Cypress feels trusted from the beginning. He takes a similar approach when hiking, giving Cypress choices like, “Hey, there’s some water, you want to walk through this?” For Cypress, the answer is usually a resounding yes, taking any chance to get his feet wet or muddy.
When asked where his favorite place to hike is, Cypress told us, in true Florida scavenger fashion, that he loves hiking anywhere he can find sour oranges, to make his own orange-ade, of course! “You just add sugar,” he exclaimed! He also likes to keep an eye out for some of his other favorite Florida finds - magnolias, lotuses, violets, alligators, and of course his and his brother’s own namesakes, the cypress tree and sabal palm. Although

his most favorite animal to photograph, the giraffe, is unfortunately yet to be found on his hikes, it remains a highlight of his trips to the zoo.

Keith explains that hiking with Cypress and Sabal has not only changed the pace and distance of his hikes but also his own photography style and appreciation of nature. Being 6 feet tall, he says, “If you’re not looking for it, you often miss the small stuff. But when hiking with his kids, they are quick to point out the sights and sounds at their level. Inspired by Cypress’s point of view, he takes more frequent stops, gets lower to the ground, and at Sabal’s request, stops to take dramatic whiffs of the flowers.

One of the things Cypress enjoys most about taking photos is looking back at his shots as mementos of his hikes. After the Curry-Pochy family’s recent move to Minnesota, Cypress says his photos help him remember Florida, something he and his parents will likely appreciate for many years to come. After this interview, Cypress spent some time teaching Sabal how to use a camera, so there might be a third photographer in the family in no time!
PHOTOS

24 Keith Curry-Pochy documenting Cypress’s Florida adventures in Paynes Prairie State Park.

27 Cypress’s photo of the lotus flowers in bloom.

29 Selection of Cypress’s early photography.

30 Cypress getting his feet wet at Big Cypress National Preserve.

31 Cypress’s photo of his Dad along the trail.
“I go to nature to be soothed and healed and to have my senses put in order,” said American naturalist and nature essayist John Burroughs.

For many, getting outdoors is more than just exercise and fresh air. It is a way to reconnect to one’s surroundings, let go of the grind of the daily work day, or practice self reflection. Research has shown that getting outdoors is a safe and effective way to connect with others and reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Spending time in nature can also act as a balm for our busy brains and even boost memory function! This is true for adults and children alike.

Whether you’re new to hiking, introducing a child to the trail for the first time, or are an expert hiker, the following activities include ways to reconnect with nature while using your senses on the Florida Trail.

Create a Sound Map!

A sound map is a great way to focus on sound, tuning in to the detail of a place. A sound map is a visual (sometimes digital) representation of the sounds in a specific location. In this case, it’s recommended you find a shady spot along the Florida Trail, but sound maps can be created anywhere!

Sound maps are often used to help people slow down and ground themselves. When the emphasis is taken off the sometimes overwhelming visual surroundings, people are able to more easily tune into the sounds around them.

Materials:
- Pencil or pen
- Paper or piece of cardboard
- Surface for writing (notebook, clipboard, tree stump)

Instructions:
1. Find a shady spot along the trail to have a seat.
2. Draw an X on the center of your paper. The X represents where you are sitting.
3. When you hear a sound, make a mark on the paper to represent the sound. The location of the mark should indicate the direction and distance of the sound from your seat. You don’t need to draw a detailed picture for each sound, just make a simple mark. For example, a few wavy lines could represent a gust of wind, or a musical note could indicate a singing bird. Making simple marks keeps the focus on listening rather than on drawing. Spend 5-10 minutes noting the sounds in your area and add this to your paper. Be still and quiet and really focus on sounds you can hear.
4. After 5-10 minutes, stop and ask yourself (and your partner if you’re doing this in a group) what sounds you heard that you may not have noticed before? Was it easy or difficult to focus just on your sense of hearing while ignoring your other senses? Were you able to identify any of the sounds?
Make a Nature Collage!

When hiking, it’s sometimes hard to resist picking up a perfectly shaped rock, a colorful fallen leaf, or feather laying just across the path. But if you’re following the Leave No Trace principles (as we recommend), you know it’s best to leave what you find so that others can experience the sense of discovery as well. With this activity, you can embrace your collector habits to create a work of art then replace your materials wherever you found them. This activity is a great way to appreciate the visual beauty of nature while tapping into your more creative side. We recommend trying it out at a campsite or picnic table.

Materials:
- Found natural objects like sticks, leaves, flowers, acorns (make sure you use objects on the ground and not torn from plants)
- Camera or notebook/pencil (optional)

Instructions:
1. Collect your found natural objects from the ground and find a flat surface out of the way of other hikers.
2. Arrange your materials on the surface to make a picture. You could try using your objects to make a face, an animal, or something more abstract.
3. Take a photograph or sketch of your art! Remember this project is a temporary work of art but you can take a picture of it or sketch it in a notebook to help you remember your hike.
4. Do your best to replace your natural materials where you found them. You don’t have to get it exactly right but it’s important to make an effort to protect our trails.
5. Start a notebook to keep track of your bark findings!

Try bark rubbings!

Have you ever taken the time to appreciate the diversity of trees in Florida? From cypress trees to sabal palms, Florida’s trees have all kinds of bark textures. Understanding the texture of tree bark not only helps form stronger appreciation for plant life but also helps to improve identification skills. This is especially helpful in the North Florida winters when many trees lose their more identifiable leaves. Bark rubbings can be used to explore textures and create works of art but are also used by scientists to record observations and remember features of different species!

Materials:
- Paper
- Crayon (peel the paper off the crayon in advance to avoid littering on the trail)

Instructions:
1. Find a tree trunk at least 4 inches wide, the wider the better.
2. Place your paper flat against the bark of the tree in an area with no branches. Bigger trees are easier to get rubbings.
3. Rub the side of the crayon against the paper until the pattern of the bark is visible on the paper. Make sure to keep the crayon flat against the paper.
4. If you know it, record the name of the tree or shrub on your paper. If not, try using a scientific identification app like iNaturalist to help you identify the tree.
5. Start a notebook to keep track of your bark findings!
A
alow me to introduce myself, I am Chelsey Stevens, trail name Honeybee. I met my husband Chris (Waterbear) in 2017; bonding over a strong love of all the adventure Florida has to offer. We started out doing adventures with just the two of us and slowly started including my children. As a means to preserve our experiences, we started our blog ‘The Sunshine State Seekers’. Luckily, our children, trail names Lyonia (11) and Flutterbye (7), have grown to share our love for the outdoors. This past year they expressed an interest in joining us on some of our backpacking adventures. The thought of backpacking with children can seem overwhelming to many, but like most new hobbies, the trick is practice, patience, and preparation. Last year we decided to take the leap from day hikes to multi-night backpacking as a family. We have plenty of practice as a couple, but including children can be a big task that requires a lot of research. When backpacking with children, there are many things to consider including their physical capabilities, comfort, safety and enjoyment. With these tips and tricks, you will hopefully have an enjoyable experience that has your children begging to go backpacking again and again.

**Get a Few Hikes Under Your Belt**

Starting children out while they are young is preferred, however, it is never too late to hit the trail. We started hiking with our girls when they were 4 and 7 years old, sticking to hikes 1-4 miles in length. The main struggle when first starting is maintaining your child’s engagement. No matter what you do, they will likely complain. The main issue when hiking with children is overcoming the mental obstacles. “I am tired” is easily translated to “I am bored” or ”I wish I were watching TV”. Keeping them mentally engaged is key and there are many ways to do so.

**Creating Goals and Sticking to Them**

One of the most effective motivational tools is creating and achieving short and long term goals. We chose to start by doing 10 of the Florida Trailwalker hikes with the Florida State Forest Service; upon completion each participant earns a patch. This took us a few years to achieve, but our goal pushed us to keep going. Many of the hikes in the Trailwalker program are on the shorter side so it makes it easy to start small and work your way up to longer sections.
Keeping It Fun
Activities that seem to have the most success with us have one thing in common: they are some type of scavenger hunt. One of our go-to games is the “Alphabet Game” where we search for things along the trail in alphabetical order, for example, “Acorn, Blue Jay, Cat Briar”. When we hit a roadblock, we keep it low-pressure and skip a letter. Nature Bingo, (see page 22 for BINGO game) where you bring a printout with you to be completed on your journey is a newly discovered hit for our kids.

Stewardship is one of our core values as a family. For example, we pack out any trash we find along our hikes. By always packing trash pickers and a bag, we’re ready at any moment making the hike a fun competition to see who can pack out the most. This may not sound enjoyable to some, but it gives children an incredible sense of worth and accomplishment. These activities along with many others can help families achieve the short-term goal of completing their hike.

Activities to Avoid
One thing I advise against are any games involving a digital device; devices can quickly become a point of obsession and distract kids from enjoying their surroundings. The exception to this can be a camera, however we have a rule that we do not review our photos until after the hike is completed; if that rule is not followed the phone gets handed back.

Safety First
I recommend investing in a wilderness first aid class if they are available in your area. If time and expenses are an issue, there are also a lot of resources online. Another option is to check with your local outdoor outfitter for any classes they might offer. Often, they are free or affordable. REI Co-op often has classes on hiking with children, hiking basics, and basic hiking safety.

I also recommend purchasing some sort of GPS location device in case of a real emergency. We use the Garmin inReach but there are many options on the market. The one thing you do not want to pack are your fears. The more prepared you are the more comfortable you will feel.

What to Pack when Backpacking with Children
As your hikes get longer, it is more important to consider your packing list. On shorter day hikes, I recommend that you always bring the following essential items: a day pack, weather appropriate clothing, hiking boots or shoes, snacks, water, navigation, sunscreen, a first aid kit, and a knife.

When it comes to gear for multi-day trips, the lighter in weight the better. That said, lightweight gear can come at a steep price tag. For beginners, my recommendation is to find the most affordable options that will work for you. This can include purchasing used gear, or borrowing from a friend. Slowly upgrade as needed.

Backpack
Each hiker needs an appropriately fitting backpack; this is good advice for all and not just for backpacking with children. During our first backpacking trip we lent Lyonia one of our old packs and sized it down as small as we could. This was not a good idea, and there

Lyonia and Flutterbye - Earth Day Clean Up - Little Big Econ State Forest.

Lyonia in Oversized Backpack - Micco Bluff.
was a lot of discomfort as a result. When we got home we researched packs for children and chose to go with the Deuter Fox 40, though there are many other suitable options. For Flutterbye, we went with a much smaller option.

According to KidsHealth.org “Use the bathroom scale to check that a pack isn’t over 10% to 15% of your child’s body weight. For example, the backpack of a child who weighs 80 pounds shouldn’t weigh more than 8 to 12 pounds. Use and pick up the backpack properly. Make sure kids use both shoulder straps.” We find that having the kids carry items that are lightweight but have a larger volume is the best option. We load their packs with sleeping bags, Inflatable pillows, jackets, and whatever other clothing we can fit but keep under their weight threshold.

**Water**
The most essential item to pack when hiking in Florida is plenty of water — more water than you think you will need. This is even more important when backpacking with children. With that in mind, it is not always possible to bring all the water needed, meaning water will have to be collected from natural sources. Because little tummies can be more sensitive, I find chemical treatments to be more appropriate than filters to make sure you are able to eliminate the risk of viruses that filters cannot. However, both choices are viable options.

You can also cache water along the trail the day before you hike if there is a convenient crossroad. Especially during hiking season, make sure your water caches are well hidden. You will also want to include your name and the date you plan on removing them from the trail. Unfortunately, you...
cannot always guarantee the water will still be there when you hike to it, so keep that in mind.

Shelter
When backpacking with children, the answer to what type of shelter to bring depends on a few things: their age, how comfortable everyone is with sleeping in their own tent, and how much weight can be carried. Our children are experienced campers and are used to sleeping outdoors. Although we do have a large family tent, they really enjoy sharing a small backpacking tent between the two of them. When we backpack, we bring two tents: one for them, and one for us. With that said, we backpack with a family who shares one larger tent. This means whoever carries it has a lot of weight to load, but that may be the appropriate choice for your family.

Sleep System
In my experience, children can sleep just about anywhere. I think a simple accordion sleeping pad works just fine, however I do recommend getting a thermal sleeping pad. Even in Florida, temperatures can dip below freezing at night. Sleeping on the cold ground is never enjoyable. As far as a sleeping bag or blanket, make sure it is rated for the temperatures you will be exposed to. Also remember that the rating indicates the lowest temperature at which the average sleeper will be warm. I recommend going for a lower rating than you think you will be exposed to. There are countless pillow options and what works for you is different depending on your preference. Whatever you choose, I recommend something inflatable that packs up relatively small.

What to Wear
Less is more! I often pack more than we need, but have slowly been making better choices and leaving anything not essential at home. When it comes to backpacking, "embrace the stink." We personally limit our outfits to one shirt, one pair of shorts, and one pair of longer pants to be worn every day; Jackets should be packed in the colder months. The only items you really need to bring multiples of are socks and underwear. These should be changed to a fresh pair every day.

Your selection of shoes will depend largely on your budget. Ideally, it is best to have kids in boots to protect their feet as much as possible. Although we are not afraid of the Florida wildlife, we do respect the facts—most snakebites occur on the hands, feet, and ankles. We will not be handling any snakes but the risk of stepping on one is there. With that said, hiking boots are expensive, and kids grow FAST. My recommendation is to buy second hand. If you cannot find anything second hand, buy something affordable even if it is not perfect. If new quality boots every few months are an option, do it. For many people that is not a reality. Do not let that keep you from the big adventure.

Luxury Extras
One of the most useful purchases we have made is fanny packs. This makes access easy for snacks and knick knacks, eliminating complaining by half. Non-edible items that you might consider packing are identification cards (animal tracks, birds, native plants), a compass, a small set of binoculars, geocache exchange items. I find it best to store personal items here as well—toothbrushes and paste, floss (this can double as string!) hand sanitizer, a spoon and a handkerchief. Everything else should be snacks. We like fruit and nut bars and gummies. Let the kiddos choose a special treat.

Choosing Your Adventure
When backpacking with children it is best to start easy, then work your way up once you
get a grasp on the group's capabilities. Do your best to check the conditions prior to heading out as many of our Florida trails get very wet. On our first extended backpacking trip as a family, we failed to properly do this. Trusting that the conditions of a trail we hiked the week prior would equal one in the same area, we set out on our adventure. We were wrong and hiked the first 1/4 of a mile in water that was knee deep for the little ones. Although we do not mind hiking through water, many folks do. Check the conditions with your own eyes and be cautious relying on the well-meaning advice from the community. It is also a good idea to have a plan B in case of unforeseen circumstances.

We prefer to hike loops or join another family and park a car at both ends of the trail. Keeping mileage low and letting your children choose the pace is important. Take breaks but leave them no more than 30 minutes for the most part. Joining another group with children can also assist with motivation. Most importantly, be flexible. The planned camp site may not pan out. Mileage goals you set for your family might not be hit, or it can be surpassed. You might find a cool spot and decide you want to spend a few hours there. There is nothing wrong with changing your plans mid hike. Have multiple options prepared in advance; This can ease a lot of stress.

Do Not Forget to Have Fun
Unlike solo backpacking trips, where you might be pushing yourself for a faster time, or backpacking with other likeminded experienced hikers with a common goal, backpacking with children should really have one objective: fun. Find what works for you and your family and go with it. Remember that everything in life comes with some level of risk. Be as prepared as you can and remember to enjoy yourself. To quote the great David Attenborough: "The natural world is the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source so much in life that it makes life worth living".

Lyonia and friends - Juniper Creek - Blackwater River.
Kiddos Being Silly after finishing our hike - Micco Bluff.

Lyonia, River, and Flutterbye, Wet Trail! - Micco Bluff.
I can still see it if I close my eyes—The empty lot between my house and my neighbor’s. Out my gate, down the sandy road and into the entrance only she and I knew about. The softness of the pine needles beneath my feet as I moved toward the center of the lot. Out of sight from the road, I waited in our spot for her to arrive. We were nine years old, and this was our kingdom. Failed attempts at building a treehouse. Collections of sticks, pinecones and beauty berries. Playing for hours, just an earshot from home, but worlds away. Recently, at a Florida Trail work party, the smell of the pines was so familiar, it stopped me in my tracks. I wanted to hold onto that sensation, I wanted to be nine years old again. I wanted to discover Florida’s natural world for the first time, instead of watching it vanish before my eyes.

An article in *People and Nature* by Louise Chawla recently warned, “Within a generation, children’s lives have largely moved indoors, with the loss of free-ranging exploration of the nearby natural world, even as research indicates that direct experiences of nature in childhood contribute to care for nature across the lifespan.” What role does nature play in child development, conservation and the general wellbeing of our society?

“Every child should have mud pies, grasshoppers, water bugs, tadpoles, frogs, mud turtles, elderberries, wild strawberries, acorns, chestnuts, trees to climb. Brooks to wade, water lilies, woodchucks, bats, bees, butterflies, various animals to pet, hayfields, pine-cones, rocks to roll, sand, snakes, huckleberries and hornets; and any child who has been deprived of these has been deprived of the best part of education.”

~Luther Burbank—American Botanist

**Why Nature Play**

The International Right To Play Association declared that play is “a fundamental part of life; it is a biological, social, cognitive necessity for individual children but also has benefits for society and the human species.”

Benefits for the human species is a lot of pressure to put on a 5 year old’s time in the backyard. However, the global benefits of children who are allowed to play may have been overlooked as we move towards global dependency on technology and an increased focus on results.

Emotional regulation is on the decline. Surveys show that one in six children have a mental health disorder including ADHD, anxiety, depression and more.
Researchers like Richard Louv attribute some of the challenges we see in our youth to something he calls, “Nature-Deficit Disorder.” In his book, Last Child In The Woods, Louv describes this disorder as:

“...the human cost of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. Nature deficit can even change human behavior in cities, which could ultimately affect their design, since long-standing studies show a relationship between the absence, or inaccessibility, of parks and open spaces with a high crime rate, depression and other urban maladies.”

Louv goes on to introduce biophilia. This theory, first introduced by Pulitzer Prize winner, Edward Wilson, is the “urge to affiliate with other forms of life”. We are born with it. It is the reason so many children’s books, toys and programs are based around animals and nature. It naturally appeals to us—we don’t need encouragement to be curious. Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University, took this a bit further and described this natural affinity as an “eighth intelligence” and defined it as: “The human ability to recognize plants, animals and other parts of the natural environment.” It could quite possibly be the key to more balanced, empathetic and prepared children, yet no test exists to ensure students are being prepared in this area. Little to no time during the school day is devoted to nature exploration and children are spending more and more time utilizing technology.

Without human-nature interactions, we face several dangerous feedback loops as described in an article by Masashi Soga and Kevin Gaston for The Ecological Society of America. A loss of connection with nature decreases their willingness to visit nature which may influence others (and future generations) affinity to nature. As this cycle continues, regard for environmental health declines and indifference towards positive behavior such as recycling, conservation etc. reduces and the cycle continues. The same article goes on to explain, though, that simply having access will not disrupt this cycle; a generational change must happen in children. Attention given to positive childhood experience before the age of 12 is the top factor in redirecting the loops for positive environmental attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, nature play develops empathy. In a study completed by the Children and Nature Network, preschoolers exposed to nature throughout the school day showed four dimensions in children’s connection to nature: enjoyment of nature, empathy for creatures, sense of oneness and a sense of responsibility. Children exposed to nature use softer voices, gentler hands and respect living plants and animals. Though longitudinal studies are still taking place, experts anticipate that this empathy will translate into teens and adults who care about their fellow man and larger community.

FEAR
I feel it as she runs—Watching my niece sprint down the trail, words of caution leap in my throat. What if she falls? What if she comes upon a rattlesnake? What if she disappears around that curve and someone snatches her? I take a deep breath. I know this trail. She knows this trail, we visit it often. I take a deep breath. I know what I want to pass on.... and it isn’t apprehension.

So what stops the potential for growth through nature? Quite simply, fear. In a particularly litigious world, opportunities to participate in perceived risky behaviors are reducing every generation. One study showed that in four generations, children went from being allowed to travel up to a mile independently to only 300 yards. Thanks to our twenty-four hour news cycle and ever increasing access to sensational news, child abductions may seem like a huge risk, but actually account for less than one percent of missing children annually (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2020).

If the fear of abduction shouldn’t be what keeps kids inside, what about getting hurt? Katy Bowman, a researcher and author of Movement Matters, attributes the perceived increase in bone injuries to a combination of heavier body weight and decreased muscle strength. The CDC estimates that 19.3% or 14.4 million children are considered obese. The National Center for Biotechnology Information reported that obese children are 25% more likely to experience a bone fracture.

When children are allowed to take risks, they instinctively learn how to protect themselves and prevent injury. They can test the limitations of their bodies, while connecting the neural pathways necessary to ensure the next time they try, they can recall what worked or didn’t in the past. The lessons they learn instill confidence in their bodies and allow them to feel safe to continue to try new things, which fosters creativity.
Finally, there is a fear of the unknown. Bugs, snakes, gators, dirt, germs, getting lost or struck by lightning... the list goes on and on. So often I hear things from my non-Floridian friends such as “everything in Florida wants to kill you,” or my personal favorite, “how haven’t you been eaten by an alligator by now?” (Just to get this out of the way- according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the risk of being the victim of an alligator bite is 1 in 13.2 million). Additionally, in our hyper sterilized world (Covid times, aside), children’s immune systems are actually becoming suppressed instead of protected. Dr. Mary Ruebush, immunologist and author of Why Dirt is Good: 5 Ways to Make Germs Your Friends, said that letting kids play in the dirt is immune-system-building step number one. Infants exposed to nature at an early age have stronger immune systems, sleep better and have a lower risk of developing allergies and asthma as they age (John Hopkins University, 2014).

Through our actions and our words, we hold the answers to the next generation’s health and happiness. By allowing them to play outdoors, we let nature guide their instincts for caring for our planet.

WHAT COUNTS AS PLAY?
I can still hear it if I listen - My mom would send me out the front door with the sole instruction to “go play.” Tossed from my air conditioned luxury, I’d sit on the cool concrete driveway, staring at the fence. I would start to walk the fence line, drifting towards the pond in the backyard. With the mud squishing between my toes as I approached the edge of the murky water, I remembered the palm fronds that had fallen with the last rain. I realized if I lined them up, I could make a bridge of sorts so I set off gathering. Minutes turned to hours and as the sun set, I almost missed the call for dinner.

Peter Grey, researcher on play, said that “Children need play, they need play to develop well. It is not a luxury. It is not something we should regard as recess or a break from learning. It is learning.” According to Grey, play is only truly play when it is self-controlled and self-directed. The self-direction is what gives play an educative factor.

The amount of time children spend in unstructured play is reducing rapidly. Indoor and structured activities have replaced time spent outdoors coming up with something to do (this isn’t nostalgia, it is a fact). When released outside, children seem stuck and unable to come up with a game or imaginative play and often return to adults to declare boredom or to tattle. They seek constant direction and reassurance of how to spend their time.

Our twenty-first century culture is rooted in the production of results and benefits. Trophies, test scores and the ability to log and capture every moment takes even recreation and summarizes it in an accomplishment. In things like organized sports, we accept the possibility of injury because there appears to be real benefits like teamwork, dedication and perhaps even career possibilities. Playgrounds seem to have been vetted for safety and purpose. Risks like tree climbing seem like all risk and no benefits. Time spent sitting in the backyard listening to birds very rarely goes on a college application. For our smallest citizens though, unstructured play in nature can create some of the longest lasting results and benefits.

Children need to be engaged in what is defined in Barefoot and Balanced as deep, meaningful play which is open-ended and exploratory in nature. This can take time for a child who is first discovering unstructured play to get into, up to 45 minutes. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, children spend up to 7.5 hours a day engaging with a screen, 4.5 hours of which are with a television. Time spent that can actually rewire the brain. So as children move from directed play or screen time to exploring unstructured play, it will take time to rewire the impulse control and pleasure receptors that have been established for constant stimulation. It can be done, but it will take time and persistence.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?
1) Commit to spending more time outdoors—We spend approximately 6,000 hours a year awake. Children spend 1,000 of those hours in school. What percentage of those remaining 5,000 hours could be outdoors? 1,000 Hours Outside (www.1000hoursoutside.com) has wonderful trackers, digitally and in print, to help track your goal.

2) Bring nature inside your home—Children have natural biophilic tendencies, they want to connect with nature in their homes. Allow them to grow a plant, care for a pet, press flowers and collect shells. Seek out loose part toys instead of toys with a defined use.

3) Read about it—Studies have shown that children cannot acquire new vocabulary words from a screen in the same way they do hearing them from another person or by reading them themselves. All the Discovery Channel in the world will never substitute that moment walking through the woods with your child that they had a moment of recognition and understanding. Reading together and taking those books outside.

4) Ask don’t answer—In How to Raise a Wild Child, author Scott Sampson encourages adults to turn children’s questions back on themselves. “Ask questions that are open ended and have plenty of potential answers—How can you find out together,” and explore the topic at length.

5) Find a sitting spot—A sit spot, as defined by Scott Sampson, is a place that a child could visit on a regular basis and simply sit. It allows the child to get to know and observe one spot intimately. Perhaps this is in the backyard or perhaps your favorite trail. As the child grows, consider a photo or paper journal of observations. Track what they see and hear. According to Sampson, “the best spot is one you use,” so select convenience over grandeur and just be still in the space together.

6) Avoid saying be careful—Saying “be careful” implies there is danger ahead. Encourage problem solving and planning through dialogue so they have self efficacy in how they proceed. Taking risks means failing. But failing means you tried instead of being fearful of making a mistake.
WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A CHILD IN MY LIFE?
Florida is changing. There is no hiding that. Currently the third most populous state, our green spaces and water sources continue to shrink. Florida continues to need advocates for green spaces for future generations to enjoy.

1) Join the fight — Consider joining our partners at the Florida Wildlife Corridor to learn more about their efforts to permanently protect and connect the corridor.

2) Recommend the Florida Trail to neighbors and friends — Don't keep your favorite section a secret. We need to create the next generation of trail lovers. The age of influence is 12, after that it becomes harder and harder to create long lasting connections to a space.

3) Be a welcoming ally to families and children — Not all families recreate the same way you think is best. They might be loud. They may run. They might squeal from excitement when they see a deer and scare off wildlife. Let them. Model for them. Show them grace. Help them be explorers.

There is a proverb that says, “It is better to know one mountain than to climb many.” No one needs to travel far to experience nature. Work with what you have and grow when you can. Allow yourself to sit and be uncomfortable while the child in your life learns to play in nature. Provide guidance but not answers. Allow nature to nurture the empathy and imagination inside every child. Four generations. That is all it took to change how children experienced nature. What happens in the next four is up to us.

FOR MORE READING

For grown ups
“Balanced and Barefoot” — Angela Hanscom
“How to Raise a Wild Child” — Scott Sampson
“Last Child In the Woods” — Richard Louv
“Wild Play: Parenting Adventures in the Great Outdoors” — David Sobel
“There’s No Such Thing As Bad Weather” — Linda Akeson McGurk

To read together
“How to Be a Good Creature” — Sy Montgomery
“We Are Water Protectors” — Carole Lindstrom
“The Wonders of Nature” — Ben Hoare
“Hiking Day” — Anne Rockwell
“The Hike” — Alison Farrel
“Hike” — Pete Oswald

Alternatives to saying "Be Careful"

Do you feel safe there?
I noticed _____?
What do you think will happen if you _____?
Is it slippery _____?
How will you get down from there _____?
Sticks need space. Where can you and swing that?
Are you balanced?
If you do that will anything/anyone get hurt?
Move slowly.
How will that feel on your _____?
Should we try that together?

“Wildness is the preservation of the world.” — Henry David Thoreau.
Check out our top family-friendly destinations along the Florida Trail for your next visit.

Which destination is the closest to your house?

______________________________
The Florida Trail through the Eyes of Youth Writers

The Florida Trail Association is excited to feature youth writers who answered our call on social media to send us their submissions on the theme of outdoor recreation or the biodiversity along the Florida Trail. Read on to learn about their adventures!

James Krumholtz, Age 7, St. Augustine, FL.

James’ favorite outdoor activities to do in Florida include playing tag, climbing, and skateboarding.

One day I went hiking on the Florida Trail near Gold Head Branch State Park. Towards the middle I saw a Coral Snake! And since I was 4, I thought it was good, and walked towards it. My parents told me to stop, but I kept walking towards it. And they moved me away from the snake. And looked up the snake and learned it’s poisonous.

Xavier Garner, Age 8, Tampa, FL.

Xavier’s favorite outdoor activities to do in Florida include hiking, kayaking, mountain biking, and camping!

Plink, plink, and plink. We thought it was raining at Hillsborough River State Park last spring. We were there to camp and we were camping with friends. Buuuut it was CATERPILLARS falling from the trees! They were everywhere. I had never seen so many.

We learned they can cause very itchy rashes. My family and I learned they’re called tussock moths. They didn’t get in the way of our fun. We went hiking on a suspension bridge on the Bayhard Trail. At the end of the day we made a campfire and roasted some marshmallows and s’mores. The next day we hiked the wetland trail.

My conclusion is that we had a blast there. We didn’t want to go home. And that you should not let anything get in the way of your camping and hikes and other adventures. Go out in nature and have fun!
When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

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 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.
MEMBERSHIP AND GIFT FORM

JOIN BY PHONE 877-HIKE-FLA OR ONLINE AT floridatrail.org/join

Name_____________________________ Spouse_____________________________

Phone_________________________ Address_________________________________

City___________________________ State_______________ Zip_____________

Email_____________________________

☐ I do not want my address shared with FTA-affiliated organizations

MEMBERSHIP

☐ Please send a gift membership to:

Name_____________________________

Address__________________________ City__________________________

State________________ Zip_________ Phone________________________

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Ship membership package to  ☐ Me  ☐ New Member

The Footprint magazine?  ☐ Digital ☐ Printed

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

☐ $35 ☐ $50 ☐ $100 ☐ $500 ☐ $1000 ☐ Other______________

MY GIFT TO THE TRAIL

☐ $35 ☐ $50 ☐ $100 ☐ $500 ☐ $1000 ☐ Other______________

My gift is:  ☐ In Memory  ☐ In Honor

Of __________________________________________

PAYMENT OPTIONS:

CHECK: Make checks payable to “Florida Trail Association”.

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SEND FORM AND PAYMENT TO:

FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION
1022 NW 2nd Street, Gainesville, FL 32601.
Interested in getting involved?

Visit our website!

www.floridatrail.org

Cypress exploring the Suwannee River section of the Florida Trail.

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