

THRU-HIKER SPOTLIGHTS

FOOTPRINT

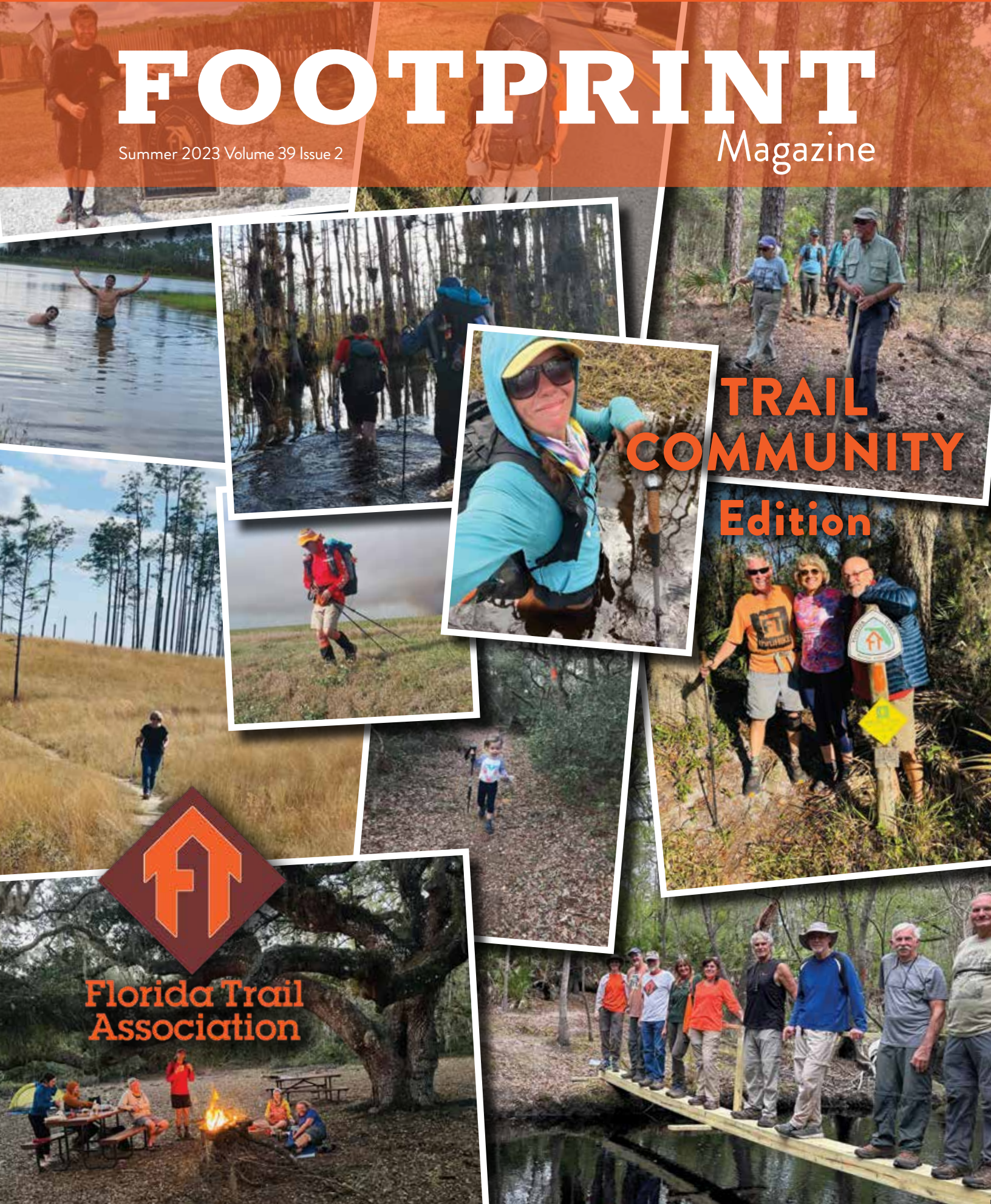
Summer 2023 Volume 39 Issue 2

Magazine

**TRAIL
COMMUNITY
Edition**



**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.

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Cover Images

The Florida Trail community enjoying the outdoors.

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.

communications@floridatrail.org

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Gainesville, FL 32601

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FLORIDA TRAIL FOOTPRINT

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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.

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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.

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Executive Director's Corner

by Royce Gibson, Executive Director

Thank you to everyone who contributed to our last issue! The kudos are still coming in on how impressive it was. We will be able to use it for some time to help tell our story.

Also, a huge thank you to all our members and donors who continue to invest in the Florida Trail Association (FTA). Significant donors are listed elsewhere in this issue and grew significantly from last summer's listing.

With the start of July, we kick off our three-year strategic plan. We have set some ambitious but achievable goals. If you haven't seen the plan, you can review the outline at floridatrail.org/strategic-plan. One part of implementing the plan is to establish consistent messaging and visuals across the chapters. The FTA board of directors recently approved updated logos for the organization to accommodate various usages. Regional managers will be working with their various chapters to help update and replace outdated displays, canopies, and marketing materials.

As you will see in this issue, staff and volunteers have been busy promoting the Florida Trail and the Florida Trail Association. We have many more activities scheduled for the fall and winter as we continue to celebrate our 40th anniversary as a National Scenic Trail.

We are hosting the annual conference for all the National Scenic and Historic Trails in November in Orlando. Participants from around the country will gather November 7th through 9th at the Florida Hotel and Convention Center. Registration is open to all. If you are interested in learning about programs being developed at other trails or how to build capacity in your chapters, you can explore the agenda and register at this link pnts.org/new/our-work/workshops. Since FTA is a member, you can register at the member rate and the discounted "3 plus attendees" rate.

Congratulations to all our 2023 Thru-hikers! Check out our hiker roster later in this issue.



Finally, the Florida Trail Association's Official 2024 Calendar will be available soon. Check your mail and email for how to get yours first.

Have a great summer,



The Florida Trail Association Participates in Hike the Hill

by Adam Fryska, Trail Program Director



Each February, as Florida's winter hiking season is in full swing, a team of Florida Trail Association staff and volunteers heads to Washington, D.C. to attend "Hike the Hill," a week-long advocacy event organized by the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) and American Hiking Society (AHS). PNTS is an umbrella organization that brings together the non-profits and federal agencies that manage the 30 national scenic and historic trails within the National Trails System, while AHS works on policy issues and legislation that ensures funding for trails, preservation of public lands, and protection of the hiking experience. Hike

the Hill allows our trails community to come together and advocate for shared legislative priorities and trail funding in one collective push. Each year, FTA's representatives passionately advocate on behalf of the Florida Trail and highlight the invaluable benefits that trails bring to communities and individuals alike.

At this year's Hike the Hill, the FTA team consisted of Executive Director Royce Gibson, Board Chair Bill Turman, Trail Program Director Adam Fryska, as well as two members of FTA's Next Generation Coalition; Adrian Wilson and Austin Burton. This was the first year of Next Gen participation at the

event, and Adrian and Austin did a tremendous job of forging meaningful connections with their elected officials, sharing stories of their personal experiences along the trail, and raising awareness about the FT's importance to Florida's diverse and growing population. We couldn't be more proud of their contributions, and we're looking forward to working more closely with FTA's Next Gen Coalition at future advocacy events. Many thanks to our Next Gen Program Coordinator, Rachel Shireman, for her work in developing this program and supporting our coalition members as they prepared for Hike the Hill.

Meeting with Florida's elected officials—

Wild Florida Trail Run

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City of White Springs, FL

All proceeds go directly to the
Florida Trail Association

or more often, their staff—is our major goal at Hike the Hill. In the weeks before arriving in Washington, we work to schedule meetings with staffers from the offices of as many of Florida's legislators as possible, focusing especially on the districts that host sections of the FT. This year was by far our most successful in terms of numbers reached; we met with the staff of 23 out of 28 representatives, as well as the office of one of our senators, Marco Rubio. These meetings with congressional staffers allow us to introduce the FT to those who might not be familiar with it, share stories about why this trail is so important to the legislatures' constituents, and persuasively argue for maintaining funding for the National Trails System. We also underscore the numerous economic and health benefits associated with the FT. By attracting outdoor enthusiasts, nature lovers, and tourists, the FT bolsters local economies through increased visitor spending, job creation, and the promotion of small businesses in trailside communities. We are also able to share feedback from our membership about the positive impact of trails on public health, promoting physical activity, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. The FT is important to so many people in Florida and beyond, it is valued by people on all sides of the political spectrum, and we work hard to

ensure that our elected officials are aware of that support.

FTA's participation in Hike the Hill also fosters collaborative relationships with other trail organizations and like-minded advocates from different parts of the country. By engaging in constructive discussions and sharing experiences, FTA explored opportunities for mutual support and knowledge exchange. These collaborations not only amplify FTA's efforts but also contribute to the broader objective of enhancing trail funding and support nationwide. With this perspective in mind, our team also advocated in support of the Transit to Trails Act, National Scenic Trails Parity Act, Outdoors for All Act, and Continental Divide Trail Completion Act.

Meeting with congressional staff is just one part of Hike the Hill. The second big event is a series of meetings with the US Forest Service leadership team in Washington, including a round table discussion with USFS Chief Randy Moore. This is an opportunity to share our accomplishments from the past year, celebrating the positive outcomes that result from our close collaborative partnership with the USFS FNST Administrator, Shawn Thomas. This year we focused on sharing updates about several of FTA's successful

major infrastructure projects, particularly the Crabgrass Creek bridges, as well as highlighting the strengths of our chainsaw training program, Wilderness First Aid program, and Next Generation Coalition. All of these accomplishments were made possible by strong USFS support for our Trail Program. The agency leaders were particularly excited to engage with our Next Gen representatives, Adrian and Austin, and hear about their work to foster inclusivity along the trail while engaging the next generation of trail stewards. We also brought attention to some of the challenges we continue to face, particularly the ongoing struggle to close the gaps and move the FT off of roads.

Throughout all of these meetings, it was gratifying to witness the strong support and appreciation that Florida's elected officials and our federal agency partners have for the Florida Trail and FTA. In a time of great political divisiveness, support for the work we do continues to cross party lines, and our leadership team is confident of continued federal backing for FTA's Trail Program and our work to build, maintain, protect, and promote the FT. Together, we all play a vital role in the collective effort to ensure the longevity and accessibility of our trail system for current and future generations.

Zpacks

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ULTRALIGHT HIKING GEAR

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IDIDAHIKE 2023 Hike In the Rain

by Abe Christian, Operations Manager



Joel Hickox volunteering at one of the Aid Stations along the route.

Photo courtesy of Randy Madison

The 2023 Suwannee River IDIDAHIKE sponsored by the North Florida Trailblazer Chapter was a huge success despite the forecast of a rainy day washout. An estimated 278 participants came out in support of our Florida Trail. Approximately 35 of which were veterans, new volunteers and citizens of the Town of White Springs. They were all instrumental in shuttling hikers and parking over 100 cars that came to this small trail friendly town.

A little rain did not scare away this event from happening. It actually made it an even more memorable experience and kept anybody from overheating out on the trail.

I quote the event leader, Randy Madison in thanking FTA volunteers: "Tracey Tyrell for organizing the guests and registration tent, Janie Hamilton for organizing Aid Stations, Melissa Russell for cooking a fantastic spaghetti dinner for over 100. A special thank you to all that volunteered and to those who drove from all parts of the state of Florida and beyond to participate!!"

After the hike, the participants had the opportunity to enjoy a feast put together by a wonderful team of volunteers.

Gross profits from the event was \$18,911, with expenses of \$5750.42. In the end the Trailblazer's netted \$13,160.58 in support of our Florida Trail. Way to go North Florida Trailblazer Chapter! All proceeds go to helping protect, promote and maintain the FT.

The main FTA office purchased the remaining IDIDAHIKE shirts from the chapter and made them available for you to purchase in our shop. They are available in many sizes and colors. Get yours now by visiting this link: floridatrail.org/product/ididahike-shirt/

The next IDIDAHIKE is scheduled for March 1st to the 3rd, 2024 and will be sponsored by the Western Gate, Choctawhatchee and Panhandle Chapters. We look forward to seeing you there! For updates visit: floridatrail.org/ididahike



Photo courtesy of Randy Madison

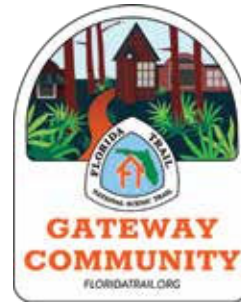
From left to right, Jodie Klienbaum, Dotti Price, Melissa Russell, Beth Daniel, Carol STOB and Kathy Hickox posing for a group photo while making a hearty feast of spaghetti, salad, garlic bread and dessert.



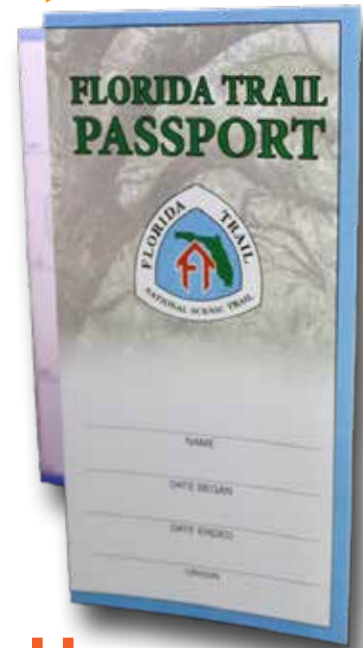
Example of the IDIDAHIKE shirt available in the FTA shop.



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DETAILS
FLORIDATRIL.ORG



Florida Trail Association

IDIDAHIKE 2024

March 1st -3rd



Florida Trail
Association

Panhandle Region

floridatrail.org/ididahike



Photo courtesy of @ResLife

Hiking the entire Florida Trail is an incredible achievement worthy of recognition. It represents not only athletic ability and proficiency navigating wild Florida, but also devotion and dedication to the journey.

If you have completed the Florida Trail and your name is not on this list, please fill out the End to End Hiker Application on our website: floridatrail.org/end-to-end-hikers

S – Section hiker **T** – Thru-hiker

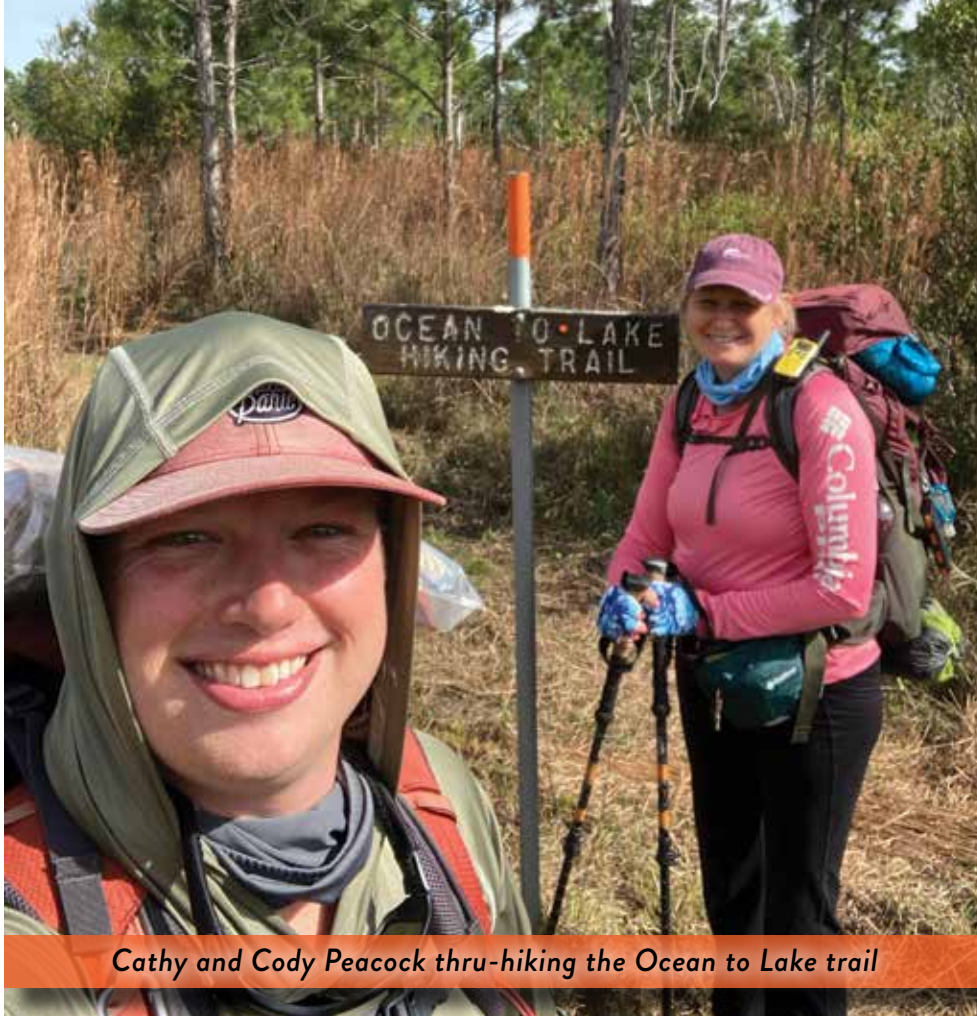


| | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---|
| 2023 | | | |
| Jeffrey Smith | Smitty | Covington, KY | T |
| Bill Snow | Scholar / Snow Dogg | St. Augustine, FL | S |
| Stephanie Lynee Muttait | Snapper | Grand Haven, MI | T |
| Andrew Underwood | Denver | Aurora, CO | T |
| Jesse Cody | Boston Mule | Santa Fe, NM | T |
| Harlan Hastings | Ghost | Interlaken, NY | T |
| D'Anne Duclos | Dallas | Dallas, TX | T |
| Tara Atkinson | BAM - Bad As Mom | Portland, OR | T |
| Tim Sharp | Nine Lives | El Paso, TX | T |
| Curtis Bojorquiz | DezTor | Palm Desert, CA | T |
| Matthew Fitzpatrick | Honeylocust | Cincinnati, OH | T |



Josh Widdowfield, aka 301

Photo courtesy of Josh Widdowfield



Cathy and Cody Peacock thru-hiking the Ocean to Lake trail



George Lugeanbeal

| | | | |
|----------------------|---------------|------------------------|---|
| David Kierych | Delaware Dave | Port St Lucie, FL | T |
| Danielle Kierych | CreamTea | Port St Lucie, FL | T |
| Brittany McDonald | Puddin' | Haleyville, AL | T |
| Sarah Malmstrom | Taskmaster | Pemaquid, ME | T |
| Daniel Cholewa Jr | Machine | Norfolk, VA | T |
| Shaun Lynch | | Austin, MN | T |
| Arne Barras | Socrates | Niwot, CO | S |
| Jim Bledsoe | Dirty Gil | Williston, FL | T |
| John Volt | Grizzly | South Weber, UT | T |
| Jim Hughes | Horselips | Coon Rapids, MN | S |
| Maria A. Llorens | Sawgrass | Miami, FL | T |
| Kathy Romig | Sarah Conner | Gastonia, NC | S |
| Shane Romig | Terminator | Gastonia, NC | S |
| James Parker | Steps | Santa Rosa Beach, FL | T |
| Alayna Reynolds | NotSoBad | Hilton Head Island, SC | T |
| Alessandro Fantauzzo | Deep Dish | Missoula, MT | T |
| Jensen Falker | Snacks | Missoula, MT | T |
| William Harding | Chili | Thousand Oaks, CA | T |
| Ally Russell | Spice | Citrus Heights, CA | T |
| Owen Eigenbrot | AtHome | Burlingame, CA | T |
| Brett Scales | Nancy Drew | Weirsdale, FL | T |
| Jeffrey Couzins | Simple | Cincinnati, OH | T |
| Gabriel Vasquez | Tripod | Fenwick, MI | T |
| Rosan Garcia | Rosan | Brazil | T |
| Zoey Krulick | Wrong Way | Maitland, FL | T |
| Jeremy Fillingim | NightWatch | Creola, AL | T |
| Pieter Kraayeveld | Ghost | Grand Rapids, MI | T |
| Josh Widdowfield | 301 | Bridgewater, VA | T |
| Crystal Gail Welcome | The Giver | Longville, MN | T |
| George Lugeanbeal | Dust | Jacksonville, FL | T |



Thank You To The Florida Trail Donors!

by FTA Staff



Photo courtesy of George Luganbeal

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Florida Trail Association 2022 Annual Volunteer Awards

The Florida Trail Association's annual awards serve as a way to recognize members, volunteers, partners, and supporters for their incredible contributions to the FTA and the Florida Trail. Every year, we ask our partners, members and volunteers to nominate people in the community for their exceptional contributions.

Please take part in helping us recognize those who have played a vital role in supporting and furthering the mission of the FTA. Thank you all for your dedication!

THANK YOU!

ACTIVITY LEADER AWARDS

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Andy J. Niekamp, Western Gate Chapter
David Griswold, Happy Hoofers Chapter
Gary Wasserman, Indian River Chapter
Rachael Augspurg, Central Florida Chapter

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Karl Byars, Western Gate Chapter
Jim Peaks, Indian River Chapter
Darryl Updegrove, Panhandle Chapter, FTA Board
Cody Peacock, Big Cypress Chapter
Janet Miller, Loxahatchee Chapter
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JOHN WEARY TRAIL WORKER AWARD

David Maltby, AKA Pinto, Indian River Chapter
Don Ravinski, Western Gate Chapter

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Walter Ahern, Loxahatchee Chapter
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Brad Henderson, Western Gate Chapter
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Big Cypress New Testament Baptist Church

Sean Blanton – Run Bum Tours
FTthruHIKE

PATHFINDER AWARD

Chris and Chelsey Stevens "Sunshine State Seekers"

FLORIDA TRAIL MAINTAINER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Eugene Stoccardo, Central Florida Chapter

FLORIDA TRAIL ADMINISTRATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD

Lynn Thompson, Happy Hoofers Chapter

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Mike and Lynn Thompson, Happy Hoofers Chapter
Dawn Dunnam Griffin, Apalachee Chapter

A Retiree Thru-Hikes The Ocean to Lake Hiking Trail

by Gary Loderhose

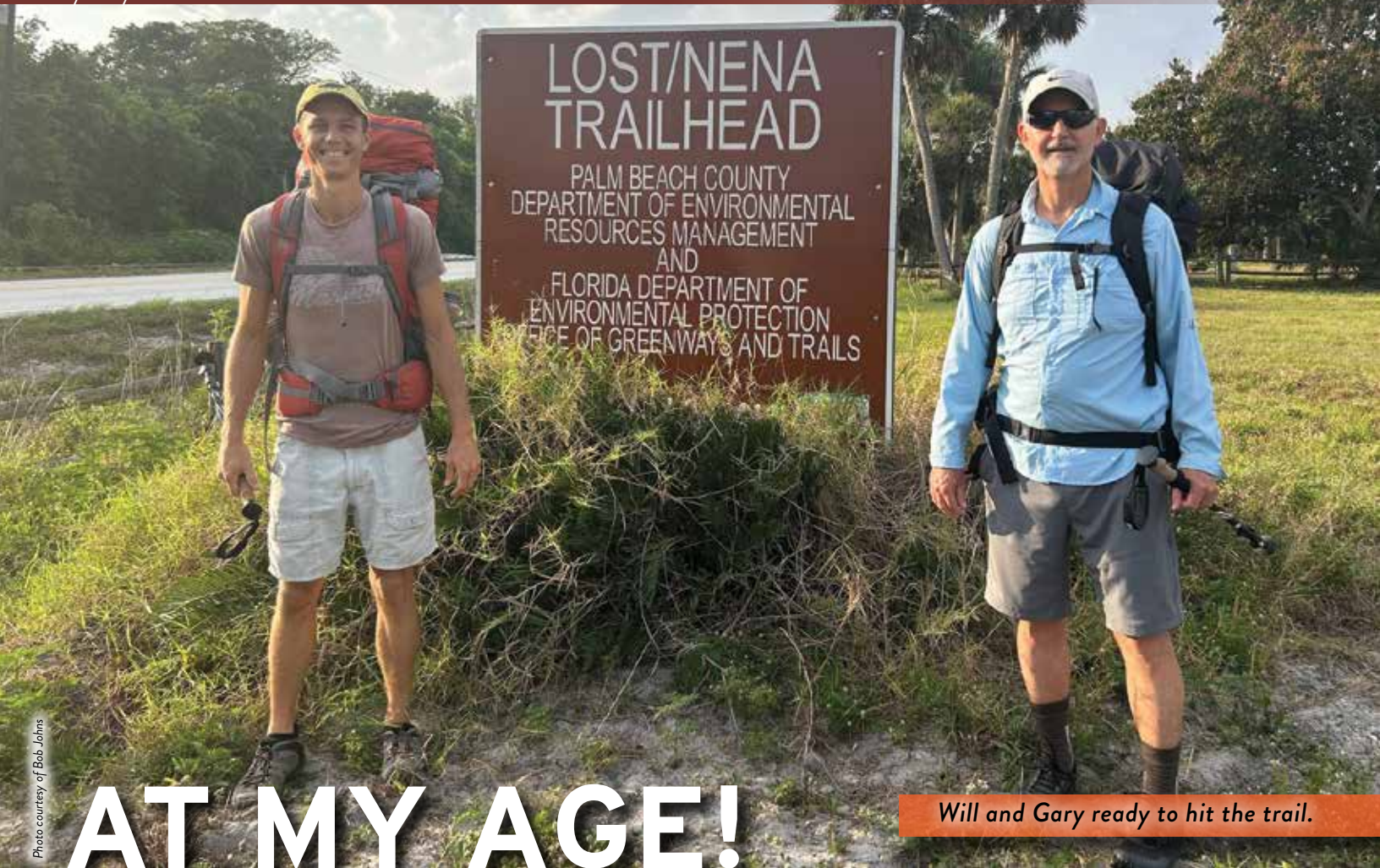


Photo courtesy of Bob Johns

AT MY AGE!

Will and Gary ready to hit the trail.

We arrived at the LOST/NENA trailhead western terminus for the Ocean to Lake Hiking Trail (OTLHT) at 7:30am. The bright dawn promised delightful hiking. Will, my hiking partner and youngest son, signed the hiking register at the kiosk. My best friend, Bob, joined us as we trudged up the hill and snapped photos of us posing on the dike with the expansive Lake Okeechobee filling the background. We ventured back down the hill where we donned our packs. Thus started the five-day routine where Will lifted the pack to my back because of my herniated disc. Lifting and standing upright were the bane of my condition. Will dutifully obliged.

After a quick snapshot in front of the trailhead sign, Bob hit the road returning to Cape Coral and we plodded across the highway and entered the trail—beginning what I hoped would be a five-day, 62-mile journey to the Atlantic Ocean. Traversing dirt roads the first few miles gave me time to reflect on our trip as the steady, even trail required little focus.

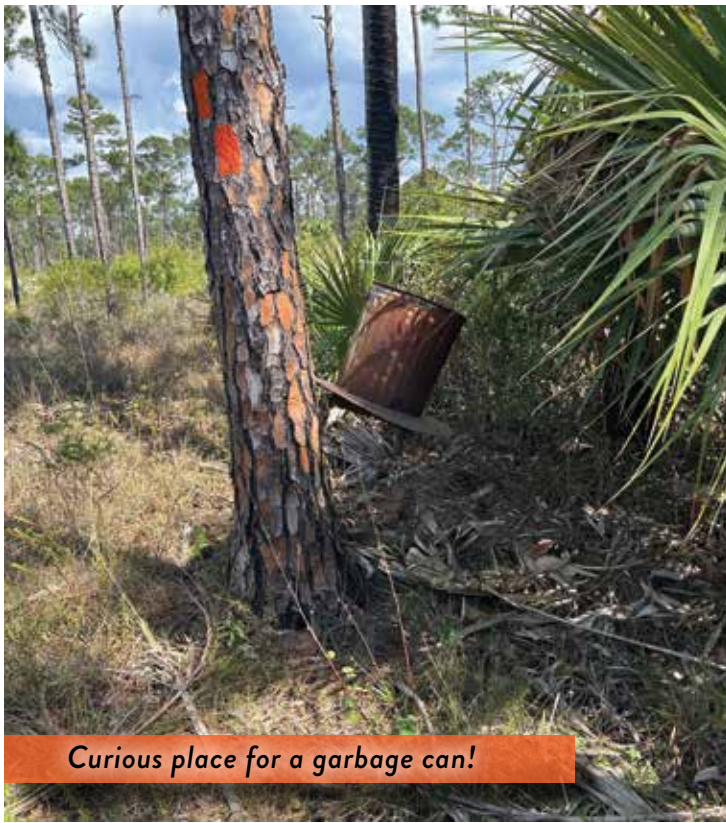
Leaving my native Pacific Northwest behind and arriving in Florida in 1979 to attend Flagler College I met and married Karen, a fifth generation Floridian from Fort Myers. I quickly learned to love Florida but never dreamed of hiking in the wilds, being too easily deterred by the ubiquitous, “What about snakes and alligators?” warning. This changed in 2020, when Karen, Will and I hiked nearly every preserve in Southwest Florida mostly in search of birds.

Then, in the early summer of 2022 I read Johnny Molloy’s book chronicling his Florida Trail thru-hike. To be truthful I didn’t know such a trail existed. I scoured the Internet then hit upon the Florida Trail Association’s website where I quickly became a member and ordered many of the trail maps. Desiring to hike something more challenging, Will and I pored over the maps for a satisfactory section hike and settled upon the OTLHT as it seemed perfect in length and duration. Plus, the trailhead is only a two-hour drive away from our hometown.

Although doubtful I could withstand such an arduous trek, we plunged into hike preparations ordering a plethora of needed gear. By August of 2022, campsites and park admissions were reserved and paid for at Loxahatchee Slough and Jonathan Dickinson State Park. Food being our final preparation, we decided to try famous hiker Jupiter’s method of cold meals for lunch and freeze-dried for dinner, except for our first night on the trail where we would pack in fresh food.

Finally we were ready. But self doubt still hounded me. With my back issue could I really endure? We planned to hit the trail Monday morning, March 6, 2023. On the preceding Friday I found sleep evading me.

Feeling the lack of sleep I wondered how I would complete the 14.4 miles to Powerline campsite. We neared the end of our road walk when a gentleman driving a farm company truck stopped to chat. He



Curious place for a garbage can!

Photo courtesy of Gary Loderhose



Will enjoying our daily mid-morning coffee break in J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area.

Photo courtesy of Gary Loderhose

had heard of the OLHT and gazed upon Will and me with amazement. Clearly, I saw doubt in his eyes when he looked at me with the 30-pound Osprey pack clinging to my back. He wished us well, warning us to keep a keen eye out for snakes and alligators.

Climbing over the guardrail we entered Dupuis Management Area and stopped at the comfortable benches near the Dean Drake Memorial where we initiated a highly anticipated daily routine—coffee and Clif Bar break. Being a coffee snob, I snickered with delightful surprise at how tasty instant coffee could be.

We trekked through Dupuis for the remainder of the day. The trail was extremely dry as we plodded along through needle-carpeted pinelands and recently burned areas. After lunching at the beautiful Loop 4 campsite, we finished the remaining six miles to Powerline campsite, arriving around 3:00 in the afternoon tired and footsore but surprisingly energetic considering my lack of sleep.

After setting up our tents along the canal, we refilled our bottles with tannic water from the canal using our Sawyer water filtration systems. I watched Will as he scoured the area for firewood then used his flint and steel sparking a fire which quickly roared into a blaze. Before long a sheet of aluminum foil piled high with potatoes, peppers and sausage sizzling away. I couldn't eat much, but dinner was delicious. As the sun rapidly dove into the western horizon, Will's keen eyes spotted a Barred Owl in a nearby oak tree. Being bird lovers, we were blessed to see or hear Barred Owls at every campsite along the OTLHT. Next morning Will claimed they watched over us as we heard several deep splashes in the nearby canal.

We started out on a shorter 10-mile day the next morning with Bowman Island campsite as our destination. While passing under the powerlines I inadvertently walked on a pencil-thin snake. It looked up at me as if to say, "What do you think you are doing?" After expressing my apologies, we moved on. This proved to be one of many snakes spotted, surprisingly none were venomous. One lone alligator sunning on the banks of a distance pond proved to be the only gator spotted on the entire trip.

Promptly at 9:30am we plopped down on the damp trail for our cherished coffee break. Afterward we dissected a damp cypress strand which evidenced it had recently been underwater. The orange blazes appeared with more regularity to help the hiker find their way when flooded. Will and I were very pleased with the blazing. Wandering off the trail was nearly impossible. But still I found myself breaking away from Will then shamefully directed back on course by my son's keen eyes pointing out the next blaze directly in front of him. He took the lead.

After lunching at Little Gopher campsite, we continued to the Main Canal where Will filled our water bags. Somehow we missed the blue blaze trail leading to Bowman Island. Instead, we tromped along a swamp buggy road in knee deep, fetid water, our feet sucking up muck with each labored step. Upon reaching the campsite I plopped down in a green plastic chair, feet wet, socks caked with muck, and feeling a little defeated while Will cheerily gathered firewood. After setting up camp and eating dinner he started a fire and we enjoyed the back and forth calls of a mating pair of Barred Owls.



Photo courtesy of Gary Loderhose

Dinner cooking over an open fire at Powerline campsite.



Halfway!

Exhausted and in pain from a newly formed blister, I entered my tent that night realizing that I needed a good night's sleep as the next two days would be our longest mileage days on the trek. Within minutes of zipping up our tents it began. A Chuck-will's-widow serenaded us all night! At first I wondered how I could fall asleep with the reclusive bird belting it out overhead. But soon the cadence of his call soothed me and acted as a lullaby resulting in my best night's sleep on the trail.

We arose and broke camp early as we set out on a 17-mile day to Soggy Socks campsite located in Loxahatchee Slough. We passed the halfway point shortly after our morning coffee break. After entering the Loxahatchee,

we met a retired couple returning from a day hike.

"Where you headed?" the husband inquired. "Hobe Sound on the Atlantic," I responded. "Start at the lake?"

Will nodded. The man informed us our campsite was in excellent condition then left wishing us well. We arrived at Soggy Socks around 4:00pm, set up camp, and being famished, ate dinner.

Again, we started early the next morning, having over 15 miles to hike before reaching Scrub-Jay campsite in Jonathan Dickinson State Park. We snaked through the remaining Loxahatchee trail which emerged into a long and exposed road walk next to a canal then skirted in and out of woods until entering the



Will dipping water out of the Main Canal. No minnows!

beautiful Riverbend Park. Later we stocked up on fresh water and sparkling water drinks at a convenience store.

Will's youthful pace proved quicker than mine and rounding a corner he had stopped, a sly grin on his face like he wished to share a witty quip with the class. As I neared him he pointed to the BZ Creek sign bolted to a pine then stated, "Easy BZ!" I laughed and we continued.

Not long after passing under I95 I took a fall. Easily distracted by birds I looked up at a flutter and my foot caught a palm root stretching across the trail. I stumbled and



Arrived at Bowman Island tired out and wet.



"Easy BZ!"



Battle wounds!

caught myself, but the weight of the pack lunged me forward into a bushy trunk nearly impaling me on a root.

"Dad!" Will cried, running to my aid and helping me to my feet.

Except for a skinned-up left leg, only my ego felt bruised.

A mile further down the trail we met a couple hiking out of the state park. The wife was impressed we had come from the lake and the husband confirmed the trail ahead was dry except for the crossing at Hobes Grove Canal in ankle-deep water. Pressing on, we stopped at Kitching Creek to refill our water bags for the last time. Along the last stretch a bobcat darted across the trail not 15 yards ahead. Nearby two deer stared us down before bounding off, white tails thrust upward. Off to our right two Sandhill Cranes cackled as they crossed the trail while Will captured on video a soaring Swallow-tailed Kite catching insects in mid-flight overhead.

"This is why we hike the trail, Son!" I cried,

astonished over the unbelievable chain of natural events.

After arriving at Scrub-Jay campsite and scouring the area for firewood and pinecones, Will started a fire. Our jaws dropped at the intense sunset through the pines and open palmetto landscape.

The ocean lay only five miles away giving us the impetus to begin early Friday morning. An hour later we trudged through sand dunes in scrub country, my favorite habitat. The Florida Scrub-Jay is my favorite bird, but sadly, we saw none.

After crossing US1 we plodded along A1A reaching the town of Hobe Sound before turning east on our final mile to the ocean. Karen met us with hugs and kisses and joined us for the final few hundred yards.

We tramped onto the beach amidst many glaring beach goers, dropped our packs, and waved as Karen snapped pictures. We made it! Why did I doubt myself? As Will said, it was "Easy BZ!"



Fiery sunset at Scrub-Jay campsite, Jonathan Dickinson State Park.

I wouldn't trade this phenomenal experience for anything. In fact, it proved to be one of the most remarkable experiences of my adult life! If you are interested in hitting the trail, I urge you to push doubt aside and go. If you prefer hiking solo, then go and the trail will richly reward you. If you hike with a companion, as I did, then all the better as the blessings of cherished times are etched deep into memory, compliments of our beloved Florida Trail.

Will and I are already planning to thru-hike the Ocala National Forest section of the FT next winter. Can't wait to build more memories!



Karen joins us for the last steps!



We made it!

Telling the Florida Trail Tale

by Jenna Taylor, Regional Trail Manager



FTA staff and partners including U.S. Forest Service and FWC gathered alongside volunteers and community members at the newly opened Crabgrass Creek Bridge.

The bike rider slowed to a stop beside the Army Corps of Engineers vehicle on the dike overlooking Lake Okeechobee. Kate Adams, Trail Coordinator for the FishEating Creek Chapter, hopped out. She inquired if he knew he was currently on the Florida National Scenic Trail, which he did not. We chatted with him about his experience as a trail user. We repeated this several more times as we drove, inspecting campsites and benches as we went.

We found that some had no idea that they were standing on a trail that so many pour so much energy into every year. Often called the best-kept secret of Florida, the

Florida Trail is celebrating 40 years as a National Scenic Trail in 2023. Still, whether from the influx of seasonal and new residents or some other factor, we still have work to do when it comes to spreading the word. Enter the year of the outreach events.

While much of the sweat (hopefully very little blood or tears) labor is put into the actual trail maintenance, the FTA wants to acknowledge the incredible impact that outreach volunteers have on the Florida Trail's success. With 2020 came Covid, and with Covid, came the loss of many opportunities to see and speak to Florida residents about the Trail. In 2023 though, the outreach teams

came back totally on fire.

The greatest gift a volunteer can give a nonprofit organization is to tell a friend about it. So often, I hear from new volunteers or new members that they had no idea about the Florida Trail, until someone invited them on a hike, to a potluck, or to a clip and walk along a local trail. The second greatest gift is to tell a stranger. And telling strangers is precisely what collectively, the FTA has been up to this year. From January to July, chapters and FTA staff members attended over 75 events, many of which for the first time, reaching thousands throughout every corner of the state. One weekend, just in the central and southern



Representatives from FWC, South Florida Water Management District, Army Corps of Engineers, the Clewiston Museum and Fisheating Creek Chapter of the FTA and elected officials from the City of Clewiston, Glades County, City of Labelle and the City of Moore Haven gather for a thank you reception and outreach event in Clewiston.

"When I first moved to Florida in 2022, I was one of the many people who didn't realize that the State of Florida had one of the 11 National Scenic Trails. After joining my local chapter, I made a pact with myself to help promote the Florida Trail. Every day, I ask at least three people (typically strangers) the following question: 'Did you know that there's a 1500+ mile national scenic trail that runs through the heart of almost the entire length of the state of Florida?' Whatever their answers, it opens the door to lively chat about the long history of the Trail and the fact that it's maintained by volunteers. I then ask for their ideas about the types of activities they'd like to see in our area. I hope by National Hiking Day in Nov. 2025, it'll be tough to find anyone in our area who does NOT know about The Florida Trail."

~ Kate Adams on her goals for the FTA Gateway Community, Glades County



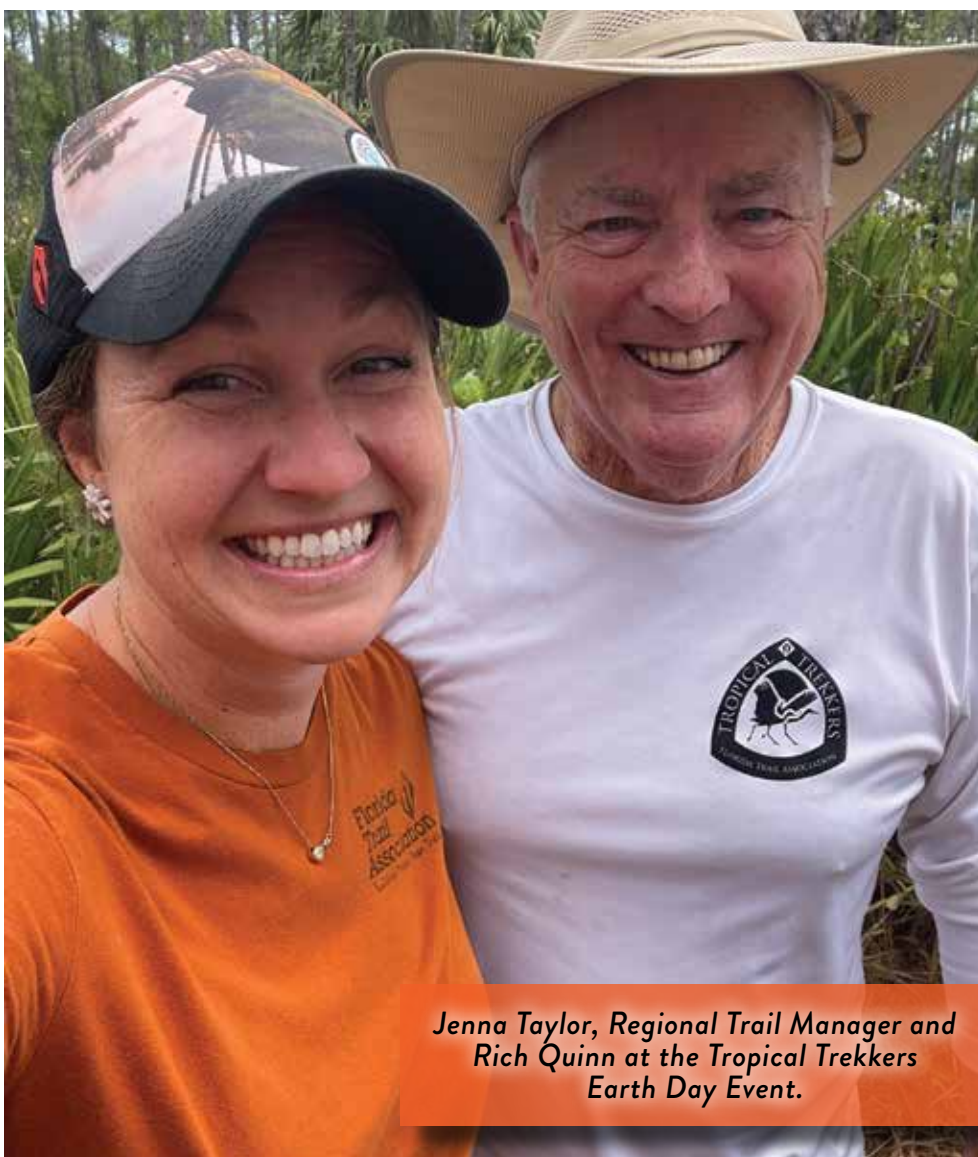
regions alone, the FTA was represented at 11 separate events at the same time. Armed with brochures, popup tents, and FTA swag, our volunteers spent hours looking out across a table, hoping to get a chance to discuss hiking.

As I sweated my way through the Oxbo Eco-Center in Fort Pierce with the Tropical Trekkers, I took the opportunity to appreciate how much skill an outreach event takes. Not only does a volunteer need to have an engaging display and a welcoming smile but they need to be able to offer recommendations of FNST and local trails. They need to know which shoes to advise, where to see (or how to avoid) gators and to explain over and over, that no, the entire trail is not wet but yes, you will encounter water but it is part of the fun. It takes true passion and a lot of patience. What is returned is gratitude and excitement. For some, just showing them access to the outdoors is attainable is all they need to feel empowered to try.

Many events were the usual tabling suspects, community festivals, farmers' markets, and Earth Day celebrations. At times though, FTA staff members, chapters, and Next Gen Members found themselves with really creative opportunities to reach new and diverse audiences.

In an effort to deepen our partnership with REI, this year the FTA participated in several state-wide celebrations. Now home to seven stores, Florida ranks sixth in the nation for the most REI locations. As welcoming neighbors, these stores have invited chapters to host events, lead classes on backpacking, and welcome customers at FTA tables throughout the year.

The Census Bureau shows that 320,000 new residents moved to Florida between 2021 and 2022, making the state number one for migration in the nation. That equates to 320,000 new opportunities to tell people about the beauty that is Florida beyond the beaches and Disney. As the Florida Trail community continues to grow, we must continue to reach users that reflect our diverse state. The FTA is so grateful for volunteers willing to share the Florida Trail's story, beauty and mission with others.



Jenna Taylor, Regional Trail Manager and Rich Quinn at the Tropical Trekkers Earth Day Event.





Big Cypress Chapter Chair, Susan Bennett Manns, plants a tree on Arbor Day at an outreach event with Miami-Dade County Parks and Recreation.



Central Florida Chapter Member Doug Kucklick, an outreach legend, talks to a visitor at the Orlando REI.

Superlatives for Outreach Events 2023

- ◆ **Most unique:** Sopchoppy Worm Gruntin' Festival - An event celebrating the earthworm complete with gruntin' demonstrations.
- ◆ **Largest crowd:** South Florida Fair - Loxahatchee Chapter members tabled at this 17-day event.
- ◆ **Furthest Travel:** Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia - Loading up the FTA "Taco" Tacoma, a team of volunteers, Next Gen Members and FTA staff shared the Florida Trail with AT hikers who just might be looking for their next thru-hike.
- ◆ **World's Largest:** HangCon - The World's Largest Hammock Convention!
- ◆ **Most delicious:** A Festival of Chocolate - A two day celebration at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Miami.



FTA and U.S. Forest Service staff pose with Palatka mayor Robbi Correa at the O2O Expedition Kickoff and Gateway Community Celebration.



Happy Hoofers members at the Seminole Tribe of Florida Earth Day event serving hundreds of children and families from Miami Dade County.



Ididahike, led by the North Florida Trailblazers chapter, is an annual opportunity for hikers to experience the trail in a supported way. This year, 278 hikers participated in the event, followed by a spaghetti dinner.



Highland Chapter Members encourage visitors to come talk to them about the trail!



Loxahatchee Chapter Members at a South Florida REI location.



FTA staff members Jane Pollack, Hailey Dansby and Rachel Shireman at the O2O Expedition Kickoff and Gateway Community Celebration in Palatka.



Apalachee Chapter Members at the Tallahassee REI location.



Pensacola

Pensacola
Earth Day

Blountstown

North Florida
Wildflower Festival

Tallahassee

Sopchoppy

Sopchoppy
Worm Gruntin' Festival

1 - SportsAbility Outdoor Expo
2 - REI Tabling

The Worm Gruntin' Festival celebrates Sopchoppy's most important animal: the earthworm. FTA staff got to enjoy a fun-filled day with worm gruntin' demonstrations, live music and the crowning of the Worm Gruntin' Queen.

Despite less than perfect weather, the Traliblazers hosted 278 hikers for a hike along the Suwannee River and to a Spaghetti Dinner afterwards. Profits from the event approached \$13 K and which will support chapter and FTA projects.

1 - Folk Fest
2 - IDIDAHIKE 2023

1 - Tree Fest
2 - Beast Feast
3 - REI Tabling
4 - Sweetwater Greenway Fest
5 - Cypress & Grove Farmer's Market

Florida Trail Association Events

1 - A Festival of Chocolate
2 - Water Matters Day 2023
3 - Arbor Day Coconut Creek
4 - Seminole Tribe Earth Day
5 - Arbor Day at Acadia Park
6 - Miami Hiking Club Happy Hour
+ Florida Trail Talk



Thru-Hiker Spotlight Maria Llorens

by Jane Pollack, Outreach and Communications Manager



Photos courtesy of Maria Llorens

SCROLLING THROUGH YOUR INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'D BEEN CONNECTED TO BIG CYPRESS, GATORS, AND THE WILDS OF FLORIDA FOR SOME TIME BEFORE COMMITTING TO THRU-HIKING THE FLORIDA TRAIL. WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO TAKE THE PLUNGE AND THRU-HIKE?

For various reasons, I reached a personal roadblock last year and needed a physical and mental reset. Since COVID started, I found being out in the Everglades to be both deeply healing and challenging, especially Big Cypress. A thru-hike seemed like a more intense version of that—a big goal that would help me build myself up after a difficult time.

I also thought it would be a unique opportunity to get to know the entire mainland of Florida top to bottom. I've road-tripped across the state over the past few years, but seeing it on foot would truly

allow me to see it in a way few people do. I was born and raised in Miami, but it wasn't until recently that I felt a connection to other parts of my home state.

YOU CARRIED A FILM CAMERA ON YOUR HIKE, WHICH IS A BIT OF A LOST ART THESE DAYS. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT HOW SHOOTING THE TRAIL ON FILM IMPACTED YOUR EXPERIENCE? (MARIA'S FILM PHOTOS FROM HER THRU-HIKE ARE FEATURED IN THIS ARTICLE!)

Film is certainly less common these days, but, like vinyl, it's making a comeback! I took thousands of photos and videos on my phone, but the fewer than 100 photos I took on 35mm film were moments where I was so struck by what I was seeing that I paused and reached for the camera. Digital photos document what I'm seeing in a matter-of-fact way, but film helps me capture what it felt

like to be there. Looking at them now, it's a beautiful reminder that my experience of the trail was more than sore feet and cold nights and hunger pangs. There were moments of real connection with the land, the wildlife, the people, and the history of Florida.

I NOTICE YOU LIKE TO DELVE INTO THE HISTORY BEHIND SOME OF FLORIDA'S ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS. WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE STOPS ALONG THE WAY? COULD YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT ONE OF THOSE HIDDEN GEMS?

Most of my stops involved food or cold drinks, so I'll shout out Lone Cabbage Fish Camp on the St. Johns River. It's a classic roadside dive with a fun gator display out front and the food is great. I had fun playing darts with the locals at the 88 Store in Ocala National Forest. And the Chalo Nitka Festival in Moore Haven was a wonderful surprise detour where I got to eat multiple servings of pumpkin fry bread and watch alligator wrestling.

WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE SECTION OF TRAIL AND WHY?

My first pick is always Big Cypress, but aside from that—I absolutely loved St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge. After hitching a boat from the town of St. Marks to cross the river, I saw more wildlife than I saw in any other section of the trail (KICCO/Kissimmee was a close second). Deer, otter, boar, alligators, countless birds, and my one and only sighting of an Eastern diamondback rattlesnake. It's also where I took one of my favorite film photos of a cypress swamp.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO HIKE SOUTHBOUND?

Down south there was still a lot of water in November, and getting a ride home from the southern terminus would be easier as I'm based in South Florida. I was also hoping to finish the northern sections in the fall before it got very cold, and then make it down south in time for the last of the cool and dry weather. I ended up taking longer than I thought, so I got almost every kind of weather you can get in Florida, including some below-freezing nights.

A nice surprise was how dry it was up north in November and December. Monkey



Creek in Bradwell Bay only had water up to about my ankles at most. And Big Cypress was bone dry by the time I got there. I hardly ran into any hikers the entire way, although I saw more folks once I hit Ocala National Forest. If you're looking for a different experience and prefer going it alone, I definitely recommend going south.

WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE EXPERIENCE IN A FLORIDA TRAIL GATEWAY COMMUNITY?

Crestview was a really charming small town, especially the main street. I loved the Elvis-themed Tom's Main Street Ice Cream, and the nice folks at Back Home Bakery gave me a free coffee when I stopped by to get a stamp for my trail passport.

WHAT WAS YOUR INTERACTION WITH THE TRAIL COMMUNITY LIKE?

I was surprised at how well-connected and supportive the trail community was. I wasn't really expecting or looking for help, but help found me. I have a tendency to buckle down and suffer in silence, and the trail community taught me that I don't have to do that. The trail angels, fellow hikers, and complete strangers that were kind to me, even with just a few words of encouragement, helped keep me moving on tough days.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE PHYSICALLY OR MENTALLY ALONG THE WAY? HOW DID YOU OVERCOME THEM?

I was so exhausted most days. I dealt with it by listening to my body, taking a lot of breaks, and tweaking my food intake and supplements. A big hurdle I had to get over was beating myself up or comparing myself



to other hikers. The saying "hike your own hike" was one I had to repeat to myself often. Eventually, I realized that challenging myself to push a bit harder than I did the day before was a better goal than trying to go as fast as someone else.

I'm pretty good at enjoying my own company, but I underestimated how lonely it gets when you're alone for such long stretches of time. I was in a lot of pain and getting sick often in the first half of the trail, and those were the hardest times to be on my own. I was really grateful for the trail angels and a few friends I saw along the way who helped and encouraged me. I initially thought I would want to be totally disconnected and rarely use my phone, but it was really a lifeline when I needed support or someone to talk to (or a fun distraction).

HOW WAS THE HIKING EXPERIENCE TRANSFORMATIVE FOR YOU? WHAT WAS GOING THROUGH YOUR MIND AS YOU APPROACHED THE SOUTHERN TERMINUS?

I thought I would be more teary-eyed as I got to the finish line. More than anything I felt a sense of calm and joy (while also being VERY hungry). Some part of me knew I would finish it no matter what, but actually getting there taught me that I was capable of chipping away at a huge goal until it was done. When I feel overwhelmed now, I remind myself to just put one foot in front of the other. Keep it simple.

The trail made me very grateful for my life and everything I have. Living without a shower, a bed, or food isn't a choice for a lot of people. When I get in my head or frustrated with something, I try to remember that.



TELL US ABOUT YOUR CONTINUING JOURNEY! WHAT'S NEXT IN STORE FOR YOU?

I was honored to be elected to the FTA Board of Directors after finishing the trail, and look forward to serving the trail community as Vice Chair. I am currently preparing for the Florida bar exam. I lead hiking groups out in the Everglades and spend time out there by myself to recharge and take photos. It's not the same as hiking 8-10 hours a day, but I'm staying active by training for a half marathon and going to my local climbing gym. I'm a total beginner and really terrible at both running and climbing, but I also wasn't good at hiking when I started. The journey and seeing myself improve is part of what makes it rewarding.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA HANDLES I'M SURE FOLKS WOULD LOVE TO FOLLOW ALONG!



Sure! I'm on Instagram at [@dispatchesfromtheswamp](https://www.instagram.com/dispatchesfromtheswamp)













Thru-Hiker Spotlight Jason “Out and About” Tompkins

by Hailey Dansby, Gateway Community Coordinator



CAN YOU GIVE A BRIEF BIO ABOUT WHO YOU ARE, WHERE YOU'RE FROM ETC.? WHAT DO YOU ENJOY DOING WHEN YOU AREN'T CRUSHING MILES?

Well, I grew up in South Florida, about two miles from the Atlantic, and, back then, had easy access to slash pine forests and cypress swamps.

Starting around age 12, my mom and step-father would take us kids on weeks-long camping road trips. We'd seen Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and one year, even drove from FL up to Deadhorse, Alaska, to dip our feet in the Arctic Ocean.

After community college, I attended the University of Florida, in Gainesville, but sooner than later, I'd caught the travel itch. Since then, I've been moving from town to town, state to state, and trying to experience as much of the US as I could (10 years in Minneapolis, MN being the longest stretch by far.)

Prior to hiking full-time, I'd spend my time playing in bands, exploring new areas on my bicycle, gardening, and going for day-hikes. These days, I guess I just walk.

I UNDERSTAND THIS YEAR WAS YOUR SECOND THRU HIKE OF THE FLORIDA TRAIL. WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO HIKING THE FT INITIALLY?

Despite my outdoorsy adventures as a kid, I wasn't wowed by the natural story that Florida tells. However, after having been away from the region for many years, I'd come back to visit and fell head-over-heels with the ecology of the place. The uniqueness and familiarity sort of dovetailed at just the right time for me.

In 2021, while I was contemplating doing a series of long-distance hikes, I finally heard about the Florida Trail. I'd been aware of the Ocean To Lake Trail (its eastern terminus is just 15 miles from where I grew up), but had never heard of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

I listened to all of Misty's Orange Blaze podcast (wonderful series focusing on the FT) twice through, and just knew that I had to start my thru-hiking future back home in the swamps & sawgrass.

I thought I'd hike the OTLT first, as a shake down for my gear, as well as a shake-down for me, and I knew I'd have an easy out if I didn't enjoy it.

If that went well, and it did, I would try my trail runners out on the FT, with the same mindset. Honestly, it really was the FT that made me fall back in love with long-distance hiking, and I thank all of you for that.

HOW DOES YOUR SECOND TIME HIKING THE FT COMPARE TO YOUR FIRST TIME? DID YOU HAVE DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS THIS YEAR?

I expected that this experience of the FT would be different; how, there was no way to anticipate.



I started my Eastern Continental Trail (ECT) journey knowing that I wanted to time it so that I could attend the FT Kick-Off. I wanted to see old friends and meet the new hikers. My experience at Kick-Off last year was so wonderful that I knew I couldn't miss it.

After parting ways, well-fed for sure, I headed back into the swamps. Knowing that this trail brings a magic all of its own, I was giddy with excitement. As I made my way north, I was lucky enough to foster brand new friendships and create new ties, both with new hikers, and with new locals.

I couldn't have anticipated that I'd hike my entire 2nd thru-hike of the FT with Flamingo (an absolute baddie who both put up with my shenanigans and inspired me along the way.) The joy on my face, seeing old friends/trail angels, was obvious, and the lighting up of my eyes, when getting to meet new characters, was just as enriching.

This year I took the western alternates around Lake Okeechobee and Orlando. Each route has its merits, and I am glad I chose to experience the great birds of western Okeechobee, as well as the lushness of the Green Swamp and the Withlacoochee.

Going through Bradwell Bay in the daytime (last year was, well, a challenge by moonlight) was a reason to pause. Every old pine, every stump covered in micro-ecosystems, brought a sense of awe and humbled a hiker.

Leaving my friends as they pushed westward towards Ft. Pickens was difficult. However, the Blackwater Connector called, and the winter in Newfoundland, wasn't going to wait.

Overall, I wouldn't have changed a single thing about my second walk through my home state. Once again, it engendered a true sense of presence and gratitude for such a

place in this world, as well as the kindness of the people that make it possible.

HOW DO YOU CHARACTERIZE THE FT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR EASTERN CONTINENTAL TRAIL TRAVERSE?

Great question. It was a little different starting the Florida Trail "section" of the Eastern Continental Trail (ECT), given that I'd just completed a thru-hike of it the previous year.

Even that being the case, I still had a distinct feeling of "now the adventure starts." Stepping onto the FT brought the first true sense of a journey-beginning. The swamps, long canal walks, wild country, and wild plant life, bring a sense of remoteness and a reminder that the ECT i.e., The Beast, was actually a visceral thing that is now truly being experienced.

The first two sections as a northbound hiker (NOBO) were a great jumping off point; the Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail getting your legs moving, and the Florida Connector, getting you a little further from civilization and more comfortable "figuring it out."

As I made my way north, I chose the western alternates that I'd not taken the previous year, and that gave me a sense of newness unfolding. The novel people I was lucky enough to meet warmed my heart.

However, even though I was starting this trek in the middle of winter, I knew that I was already racing against next winter. As much as I wanted to go slower and really get to know the communities I was traveling through, I knew that winter was coming, and that I had to push onward. I'd known that this dynamic would be there for the entirety of this 5,700-mile hike, so I tried to be present with those moments and witness those experiences as much as I possibly could.

Even before I reached Alabama, on the Blackwater Connector, I knew that I'd miss my home-state, but that was the contract that I'd signed with myself. It was difficult leaving, but new experiences and characters were waiting, and isn't that part of the whole thing?

WHAT WAS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE HIKING THE FLORIDA TRAIL FOR YOU THIS YEAR? WHAT HAS BEEN THE GREATEST CHALLENGE SO FAR ON THE ECT?

Honestly, my greatest challenge for both the FT, as well as the ECT, has been having to keep up a pace that cuts down on the amount of time I can go swimming, or lounge around camp, or get to know the trail community more.

The pace that I need to keep, in order to make it through Newfoundland, Canada before October, requires this sacrifice, and I knew this going into this journey. I knew that I wouldn't like this part of it. I knew that I'd be saddened to force myself to leave group hangs earlier than I wanted. I also knew that a hike of this kind, trades that off for other positives, and those have been worth it.

It hasn't been easy, but it has been utterly fulfilling.

YOUR PHOTOS FROM THE TRAIL ON SOCIAL MEDIA ARE CAPTIVATING AND I APPRECIATE THAT EACH JOURNAL ENTRY ENDS WITH YOUR RELATIVE POSITION ON THE GLOBE. CAN YOU TALK A BIT ABOUT YOUR APPROACH TO DOCUMENTING YOUR JOURNEY?

About 20 years ago, I attempted a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. I made it about 500 miles before I broke my foot and had to exit. On that trip, I decided not to journal or take any photos, thinking that I'd remember everything; I was very wrong.

Now, I try to journal every day, and take photos and videos of things I find interesting.

For me, the little details, the rich ecosystem living on just one rock, or the contrast of light as the sun breaks the horizon, brings me a greater appreciation of the life that I'm living, and helps to keep me present in that life; a grounding if you will.

The videos I take are both for me to look back on, and to share with others. With video, there's a greater sense of context that helps to tie the documenting of a journey together.

And frankly, if I make someone else laugh or can even inspire someone, then that's just icing on the cupcake.

HOW DO YOU PLAN TO CELEBRATE COMPLETING THIS GARGANTUAN JOURNEY?

I'm trying to finish this beast, and be out of Newfoundland, Canada, by October. Once finished, and whatever emotions pass, I'll be figuring out how to get to Death Valley, CA as quickly as possible (surprisingly, I found love while out on this adventure, and her zip code is in the desert).

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE?

Yes, I want to thank everyone that makes this trail so wonderful. All the hard work that you all do does not go unnoticed.



Follow the adventures on instagram:
@outandabout53

Empowering Young Leaders

by Rachel Shireman, Next Generation Coalition Coordinator



HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FIRST NEXT GENERATION COALITION RETREAT

The Florida Trail Association hosted our first Next Generation Coalition Retreat at Riverwoods in Kissimmee, FL, in April 2023. It was a transformative event that brought together young leaders passionate about the Florida Trail. During this inspiring gathering, participants worked on a strategic plan for the Next Generation Coalition, learned from seasoned volunteers during an activity leader training, and participated in team bonding activities.

The retreat provided an opportunity for participants to engage in collaborative discussions and workshops, collectively developing a strategic plan. Through this process, the coalition's goals were clarified, and a roadmap was created to guide their mission of fostering inclusivity while preserving natural places for future generations. The team had help from Executive Director Royce Gibson and former

board member Patrick Brennan as they shared their expertise in strategic planning. Every Next Gen Coalition member brought valuable perspectives and ideas from their backgrounds and experience with the Florida Trail.

The Next Generation Coalition effectively organized themselves into four subcommittees: Trail Maintenance, Advocacy, Marketing and Education, and Outreach. Each subcommittee focuses on a specific area to contribute towards the coalition's overarching mission. Through dedicated efforts in trail maintenance, advocacy, marketing, and education and outreach, the coalition aims to make a lasting impact on the Florida Trail.

The Next Generation Coalition also had the support of dedicated volunteers, Ernie Lynk and Eve Cater, who have extensive experience leading hikes on the Florida Trail.

They conducted a training session for the NextGen members, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to become activity leaders within their local chapters. This training emphasizes trail safety, assessing the location and weather, mitigating conflict, and ensuring all participants have a fun, safe experience on the Florida Trail. Our team had the pleasure of going on a hike at Micco Bluff as we learned from Ernie on the best ways to engage a group and encourage hikers to get the most out of their Florida Trail experience. The training empowered the group to lead hikes in their respective areas and welcome younger folks to explore the trail. Learning from Ernie and Eve was an incredible opportunity for the NextGen participants to gain insight on guiding visitors on the Florida Trail. With their newfound skills, the Next Gen members are now empowered to inspire



and guide more youth in discovering and appreciating the wonders of this beautiful trail.

Coming together in person at the retreat provided a unique opportunity for Next Gen Coalition members to connect on a deeper level. Participants formed strong bonds and developed a shared sense of purpose. With group planning sessions, shared meals, team building activities, and evenings by the fire-side, Next Gen members and FTA staff left the retreat feeling refreshed, inspired, and part of an amazing team.

The retreat emphasized the power of community, and the importance of the Next Generation Coalition's mission to create a

welcoming and inclusive environment within the Florida Trail, ensuring its beauty and accessibility for years to come. We know this community will go far in their efforts to make the Florida Trail a welcoming and inclusive space for all.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The first Next Generation Coalition Retreat at Riverwoods showcased the power of collaboration, youth engagement, and community building. Through strategic planning, training activity leaders, and forming subcommittees, the coalition is poised to make a lasting impact on the Florida Trail. By empowering young leaders and embracing diversity, they

are working towards a future where natural places are preserved, and everyone feels welcome in the great outdoors.

Here are just a few of the ambitious goals from the NextGen strategic plan:

- ◆ Build partnerships with college outdoor groups
- ◆ Participate in Florida Trail advocacy initiatives such as Hike the Hill and FNST Coalition meetings
- ◆ Facilitate educational and recreational opportunities to recruit and inspire peers
- ◆ Contribute to FTA fundraising initiatives

Stay tuned as we expand the program and host Next Gen Volunteer Work Parties this fall!



Thru-Hiker Spotlight Miranda "Bopit" Pridgen

by Catherine Selin, Panhandle Regional Trail Manager



Springs and we talked briefly about the challenges she was facing. I was in awe. The idea of trying to set any kind of athletic record was not something I had ever considered although I had been ramping up my own athletic challenges. Seeing her out there doing it and being honest about the difficulty helped me to grasp the idea in my mind. Could I? I let the idea roll around like a pebble in my shoe as I hiked the Pacific Crest Trail last year. Eventually, I decided it was a challenge that appealed to me.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE PREPARATIONS YOU MADE BEFORE STARTING YOUR RECORD-BREAKING ATTEMPT? DID YOU FOLLOW A SPECIFIC TRAINING REGIMEN, AND HOW DID YOU PLAN YOUR LOGISTICS AND SUPPORT ALONG THE TRAIL?

I don't have a specific training regimen but I do think it is important to stay active in ways that I enjoy. Going outside everyday and doing something challenging and fun is important to me. The fitness circuit at my local park, walking the beach, a little trail running, bike riding, and hiking at local parks all play into my everyday life and help me maintain overall fitness for hiking.

By December of 2022 the idea of going for the FKT had been on my mind but I wanted to check myself since I had been off trail for months. First I did a warm up hike from River Ranch to Okeechobee. I was heading to the Kick Off event for the Florida Trail to volunteer with FT ThruHike. They scooped me up and I was able to get in some trail community time. It was inspiring to spend time with the FT ThruHike crew helping feed hikers off to start their Nobo adventures. That enthusiasm radiates out. My real test was to hike through Big Cypress and then up to Okeechobee pushing for consecutive 30-something mile days once out of the swamp. I decided to assess how I felt and then make the call whether to try for it or not. So I headed out of Big Cypress and spent my first night on trail camping with a crew that would later become my honorary tramily! The legs were a bit tight by the time I made it to Okeechobee but not anything worrisome. I decided to go for it. My mom came to get me and I made my way home to figure out the logistics and work for a week or two.

COULD YOU SHARE WITH US A BIT ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AS A HIKER AND YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH LONG-DISTANCE TRAILS?

Overall I have completed about 16K miles on trail. I started long distance hiking in 2019 on the Appalachian Trail going southbound. It took me a full six months on that first hike but I looked at it as a once in a lifetime adventure. I did not realize when I started that trail that I would love the challenge so much. Since then I have completed my Triple Crown hiking the Appalachian Trail, Continental Divide Trail, and Pacific Crest Trail along with some others.

And I just got the opportunity to set the new record for the Florida Trail Women's Self-Supported FKT.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO ATTEMPT TO SET THE FASTEST KNOWN TIME ON THE FLORIDA TRAIL? WERE THERE ANY SPECIFIC REASONS OR PERSONAL GOALS BEHIND THIS CHALLENGE?

Shayna Kott was out setting the Women's Self-Supported FKT record in 2021 when I was also hiking the Florida Trail at a more relaxed pace. I ran into her at Alexander



Once home I also needed to clarify the FKT rules, contact the previous record holder, send resupply boxes and shoes. Shayna sent me information from her experience on trail, I used Jupiter's resupply spreadsheet, and looked through FarOut to confirm mileage. My previous experience on trail was helpful too. I decided to mail three resupply packages. The Florida Trail accesses towns and gas stations pretty regularly especially with the number of miles I hoped to do each day so it was not necessary to mail more than that. I talked with a couple friends about what I would need on trail encouragement wise and I made a spreadsheet of places I planned to stop for resupply, availability of showers, laundry, bathtubs, and possible milkshakes.

THE FLORIDA TRAIL IS KNOWN FOR ITS UNIQUE CHALLENGES, SUCH AS ITS DIVERSE ECOSYSTEMS, WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS, AND WEATHER CONDITIONS. WHAT WERE SOME OF THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES YOU FACED DURING YOUR JOURNEY, AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME THEM?

Everyone thinks we are out here wrestling alligators but really the most challenging parts of Florida to me were the heat and the consistent flat walking. No shade, intense heat and humidity when hiking can be

terrible. Walking on flat ground means we are engaging the same muscle groups over and over without variation which I find more challenging than climbing mountains, funny enough.

Swamps! They are basically a big watery obstacle course. Bradwell Bay was upper thigh to waist high when I went through and

I had been getting reports that hikers were going around. It was not my first rodeo so I checked it for myself. I did have one moment where I needed to go over a submerged log so I stepped closer, my right leg sank fast, I had to resist the urge to panic, pushed myself up on the log without putting the other leg down, and hauled myself over. Mastering my own fears and how I respond in those moments can be difficult and that is part of the challenge.

Dry Swamp is the worst swamp. When I reached Big Cypress the mud in the savannah was almost all dried up but still wet enough to be very irritating. It is thick, sucks at your shoes, heavy and slippery. It's also the last stretch of trail going southbound so I was exhausted by the time I reached it which upped the intensity. The swamp heard many expletives that day.

Panthers! I did not have an encounter with a panther on this portion of the hike but I did run into one at night on the practice hike. Yes, it was scary. I did all the things one is supposed to do when engaged by a predator. Make myself look big, don't turn my back, yell, make noise, and get crazy. It worked but that experience definitely put me on edge since I was hiking well before the sun rose and long after it set each night.

As a solo female hiker safety has some additional nuances to consider. Reaching my goal meant night hiking regularly and setting up camp in less than ideal areas at times. I think it is important to remember that element of any long distance hike. Be aware. Listen to your intuition.





HOW DID YOU MANAGE YOUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING DURING THE TRAIL? DID YOU HAVE ANY STRATEGIES IN PLACE TO DEAL WITH FATIGUE, INJURIES, OR MENTAL FATIGUE DURING THE LONG-DISTANCE HIKE?

The first few days on trail I pushed too hard too fast and I was in pain. The tendons in my legs were incredibly tight. At that point I had to make allowances for myself. I wanted to do 30-35 miles daily but I wasn't going to be able to do anything if I didn't take care of myself. I had to adjust the way I was thinking. I started to thank my body for being on the adventure with me: "I appreciate your flexibility in this pursuit and for always helping to hold this body together."

The mental game is always the most important factor, in my opinion. Remember the long game and be nice to yourself.

Three hotel stays were also placed as carrots for myself. I took my first one in Ebro which was much earlier than I had hoped but it was necessary. I hiked a decent day the next and then ended up taking another short day at Hillcrest Baptist Church. That was a difficult decision. It was important to keep in mind that the trail is 1,110 miles. A couple of shorter days in the beginning could be addressed later as long as I could continue to build up rather than wear down. Patience is a virtue. Strategy is essential. Flexibility is inevitable.

I train my mind with the podcasts and books that I listen to on trail. Endurance athletes, adventurers, soldiers, and experts in

any field requiring mental and physical resilience are the kinds of things that I look for in a podcast. Hearing how another person has overcome difficulty of any kind helps to shift my perspective and I take what resonates to use as I move forward. Rich Roll Podcast, Huberman Lab, Tim Ferris, Jocko, and Glennon Doyle are all good ones for me and I usually spend half the day listening as I hike.

I also had great support from my family

and friends, especially two good friends, Ja-Boots and Steve M, that checked in with me daily. Beforehand, I discussed with them the type of encouragement that is most helpful to me and they were incredible at delivering it. I do enjoy my solitude but loneliness became a challenge around 20 days in and I was grateful to spend time with other hikers when I did come across them. Sparkle, Boston Mule and Puddin were all out on trail too and became an important part of my support system whether they realized it or not. Luckily, I was also able to reach out to Shayna Kott to commiserate when I didn't think anyone else would understand the struggle I was facing in the moment and she was awesome.

Community is a powerful thing.

WERE THERE ANY MEMORABLE MOMENTS OR HIGHLIGHTS THAT STOOD OUT TO YOU DURING YOUR RECORD-SETTING JOURNEY? ANY PARTICULAR LANDSCAPES OR ENCOUNTERS THAT LEFT A LASTING IMPRESSION?

Funny enough the places that I find the most challenging are also the places I find the most incredible. Bradwell Bay and Big Cypress are stunning in their own swampy way. Maybe that is what intensifies the beauty for me personally. The landscape is so different from anywhere else I have hiked and every step requires mindfulness and willpower to push through.





WHAT WERE SOME OF THE KEY LESSONS OR INSIGHTS YOU GAINED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE? DID IT CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON LONG-DISTANCE HIKING OR PUSH YOUR LIMITS IN ANY WAY?

We are so much more capable than we realize. As adults we slip into this habit of pointing out all of the things that we cannot do rather than thinking of the possibilities. We become self-limiting and realizing that can make all the difference. I would like to explore my own limits further.

WERE THERE ANY UNFORESEEN CHALLENGES OR DIFFICULTIES YOU ENCOUNTERED DURING YOUR ATTEMPT? HOW DID YOU ADAPT AND ADJUST YOUR STRATEGY TO OVERCOME THEM?

At times my personal safety was a concern. Hiking with the FKT in mind meant that I was not planning my miles based on a nice campsite. Sometimes I was too close to town and did not sleep well out of concern, night hiking along busy roads, or I decided not to push that last five miles because it would leave me somewhere that may be unsafe. That was a frustrating reality for me and one that left me wishing the trail had a bit less road walking.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO ASPIRING HIKERS OR TRAIL RUNNERS WHO ARE INTERESTED IN ATTEMPTING A FASTEST KNOWN TIME ON THE FLORIDA TRAIL OR ANY OTHER LONG-DISTANCE TRAIL?

This was definitely the hardest thing I have done. I found it incredibly gratifying to practice my own self-discipline and expand my personal limits. I would tell them to remember what they love about being out there and what they want to find out about themselves. And to give yourself some grace...but not too much. And maybe just focus on seeing what you can do when you push your limits rather than beating someone else's record.

FINALLY, WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER HIKING OR OUTDOOR ADVENTURES IN MIND, OR ARE THERE ANY OTHER RECORDS YOU ASPIRE TO BREAK IN THE FUTURE?

I am not sure about any other records just yet but I am considering a couple things. I am going to hike the Pacific Northwest Trail with friends this summer and I would really like to hike the Long Trail in the fall if possible. For now, I am going to get out and explore all the water adventures Florida has to offer.





Torreya Challenge Trail Booster Shot 2023

by Howard J. Hayes and Dawn Griffin, Apalachee Chapter

AFTER A HURRICANE AND COVID A SPECIAL TRAIL IS RESTORED

Torreya State Park is located along the high bluffs of the Apalachicola River halfway between Bristol and Chatahoochee. It was acquired in 1935 making it one of the original Florida state parks. The park was named for the rare Florida tree, *Torreya taxifolia*, which was named for the American botanist, John Torrey. During the Great Depression the Civilian Conservation Corps developed its first facilities. The park plays a critical role in preserving unique plant and animal species, and natural communities of regional importance. The high plateaus, extremely steep bluffs and deep steep head ravines harbor a variety of rare and endemic plants and animals. Several of the species are more common further north and not seen elsewhere in Florida. Currently the park contains 13,737 acres, and is designated for

public outdoor recreation and conservation of the property.

The Apalachee Chapter has been involved in building and maintaining the hiking trails within the park since the mid-1980s. The park provides approximately 15 miles of trails which allow hikers to enjoy the natural communities. Several spur trails connect to the Main Loop Trail which allow hikers to select shorter distances. The six-mile Torreya Challenge Trail is considered arduous and is located in a remote area of the park. The trails connect to three secluded primitive camping areas. The steep trails are occasionally used by backpackers who are training for their planned AT hikes.

In 2018, Hurricane Michael crashed into the park with Category 5 winds. Like other areas of Florida's panhandle, much of the

beautiful, dense tree canopy disappeared. Light reaching the forest floor stimulated a thick growth of vines, brambles and shrubs. The trails became an obstacle course requiring climbing over and under tree trunks. After many years of dedication, our Section Leader, Jerry Herting, had to give it up and then the pandemic delayed much needed maintenance.

From January 20 to 23, 2023, members of the Apalachee Chapter (and a few wonderful FTA folks from other chapters) came out in force to bring the Torreya Challenge Trail up to acceptable standards. A total of 33 volunteers participated in the event, some for a day and some camping over the weekend. The plan was for two and a half days of solid hard trail maintenance. Park staff provided great assistance facilitating this work weekend.

FloridaTrail.org



Photo courtesy of Howard Hayes

Mike Tucker conducts the safety briefing.

On Saturday, six work crews tackled different sections of the loop trail and a connector trail with mowers, brush cutters, chainsaws, loppers, and paint. As the name suggests, the Torreya Challenge Trail is especially challenging to maintain. Crews used secret unimproved roads to access remote areas of the trail. Teams with ropes were used to pull the mowers up the steep slopes and control the mowers going downslope. A wooden bridge that was smashed by a fallen tree was dismantled in preparation for new construction.

Because of Sunday's rain, we did not have time to work on some of the other trails in the park; however, it was an opportunity for impromptu tool maintenance training under the park's pavilion. The rains passed during the night allowing a large number of volunteers to continue work on the Torreya Challenge Trail on Monday.

Many volunteered to prepare the morning and evening meals over the weekend. This included some of the most delicious and hearty meals needed to fuel the trail workers.

Although the landscape has changed since Hurricane Michael, the park continues to provide the public with exceptional scenic vistas and hiking opportunities, as well as attractive camping and picnicking areas. The park is still in recovery following Hurricane Michael. Thanks to the wonderful group of volunteers, by the end of the weekend we can say that the Torreya Challenge Trail can be easily used by backcountry hikers.

Photo courtesy of Eric Shepard

You are invited to join us on future trail maintenance days. Look to the Apalachee Chapter Meetup site for maintenance days at one of the most important and unique parks in the state.

Special Shout Out to Mike Tucker and the Friends of Torreya State Park who have spent many hours working in all types of weather and conditions to make the trails accessible.

Great news! The 15 miles of hiking trail has a new Section Leader, Nichole Tuszynski. Nichole grew up in Bristol and has fond memories hiking in Torreya State Park with her grandfather. She is very excited to have the opportunity to maintain this amazing trail for the enjoyment of others.

Check out: floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/torreya-state-park



Dismantling bridge destroyed by Hurricane Michael.



Assigning work crews and locations.

Photo courtesy of Howard Hayes



Pizza and pasta dinner.

Photo courtesy of Howard Hayes



Nichole Tuszynski, New Section Leader for Torreya.



Weeping Ridge at Torreya State Park

Photo courtesy of Sandra Friend



Photo courtesy of Ken Damiller



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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.

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