



Vistas

Issue 17: April/May/June 2011

Prescribed Fire Provides Life from the Ashes

Florida has a long history of fire, but it is not the catastrophic event that one might imagine. Rather, fire serves the purpose of promoting the health of the many Floridian ecosystems which are dependent upon regular fires to promote growth. Prescribed fire is applied regularly by the Natural Resources Department to mimic these natural fire cycles, many of which have long since disappeared due to man's influence on the land and desire to exclude fire.

Riverview Pointe's burn has been years in the making. Possibly over 50 years have passed since the coastal upland habitats at the preserve experienced fire. The land had become overgrown, cluttered with a load of natural fuel – leaves, brush, branches, and logs – that could pose a real threat should a wildfire break out. The land needed fire, but with a thriving neighborhood and a national park next door it would be no easy task to apply prescribed fire.

Learn more about prescribed fire on page 2



Rangers conduct "mop up" to extinguish anything that is still smoldering at Riverview Pointe. *Photo by Jon Mathes*



Working Together for Success at Riverview Pointe

Any time staff conducts a burn, a specific plan is developed that is appropriate to the location, habitat, and overall design of the site. Staff selects features, such as trails and waterways, that will act as fire lines to prevent the fire from spreading to other areas. The type of fire used is determined; land managers know whether they will use a wind-driven head fire to burn the land quickly or a slower backing fire to move across the habitat. Once a plan has been developed, staff is able to conduct the burn provided the weather conditions are optimal for burning.

This is the standard procedure for conducting a prescribed fire in one of Manatee County's conservation properties, but at Riverview Pointe it was important to adapt to the location's special features. Planning began months in advance and included more than just the land itself. As this location was in the "urban interface," it was necessary to involve all of the stakeholders who would be affected by a burn.

The prescribed fire at Riverview Pointe was truly an example of an interagency partnership. The successful burn, which occurred on March 23, 2011, happened with the help provided by the Department's partners. DeSoto National Memorial, Riverview Pointe's neighbor to the north, assisted with neighborhood relations. The Memorial's staff provided press releases on the event and hosted a special information session for area residents. Staff from West Manatee Fire Department and Big Cypress National Park helped to monitor the fire and provided equipment to insure safety. Inmates from the Hardy County Correctional Facility helped to prepare the site for burning. And as always, NRD's own volunteers provided endless assistance helping to prepare for the burn, and afterwards by assisting with mop up. Thank you, partners, for all your help with this project!





VistasImage **Of the Quarter:** *Artist Pat Bond at Neal Preserve*

For this issue's Image of the Quarter, photographer Pat Bond has presented a special treat. The images below are of a very rare plant species found right here in Manatee County. If you take a look at the white, fluffy seed pod below, you might be able to guess the name of this plant. Although, it may surprise you to learn that this is actually a wild Florida native.

If you guessed this might be cotton you were correct! The plant in these images is Florida wild cotton, *Gossypium hirsutum*, a relative of the commercial cotton with which we are all familiar. Believe it or not, this plant is a native to the state and, at one time, could be found throughout Florida's coastal hammocks and thickets. These days, though, the plant is so rare it is listed as endangered.

In the 1900s, federal government crews were assembled to eliminate the wild cotton plant from the southeast to protect cultivated cotton from the boll weevil. All across Florida, great stands were destroyed to protect the cotton crop. But this one survived, unnoticed until now.

Pat snapped this photo during a recent Sneak Peek Shutter Stroll at Neal Preserve. Visitors can view this plant during future Sneak Peeks, or once the preserve opens. But remember, collecting anything from the preserves is not allowed according to the County's Parks Ordinance. And, for this plant in particular, it is illegal to plant it. This may seem strange for such a rare species, but because this plant can harbor the cultivated cotton's nemesis, the boll weevil, as well as a number of other pests, it's prohibited by the State of Florida. In protected areas like Neal Preserve and other exempt state and national lands, however, you can still find this rare and beautiful native plant.



Photos by Pat Bond



Seasons

Naturalists know that the timing of seasonal events in an area, such as when certain plants flower or when migratory birds appear, yields important clues about weather and climate trends. In fact, since the beginning of agriculture, natural events were used to determine planting and harvest dates, or predict the upcoming year's growing conditions. Have you heard of the Old Farmer's Almanac? It's been publishing these types of predictions since 1792.

The study of periodic plant and animal life cycle events is called "Phenology". Ecologists collecting phenological data typically track the dates of the first and last occurrence of a cyclical phenomenon in an area. You have to be a patient person when you're working in this field. Because each year yields one, or maybe two data points, several years of data are required before larger trends become visible in the data. Comparisons of agricultural harvest records to instrumented meteorological records have validated phenological observations as a indicator of climate trends.

Frequent visitors to our beautiful preserves experience the beginning or end of many natural cycles throughout the year. However, it's also might be true that many "see, but don't observe". So, I propose a little project which I hope will enhance your enjoyment of our preserves. On your future visits, note when you see that pretty flower, spawning fish or cute baby bird. Come next year; ask yourself if you see the same thing earlier or later than you did before. What might the difference mean? Can you say that its "good" or "bad"? Have fun, and thank you for visiting our preserves.

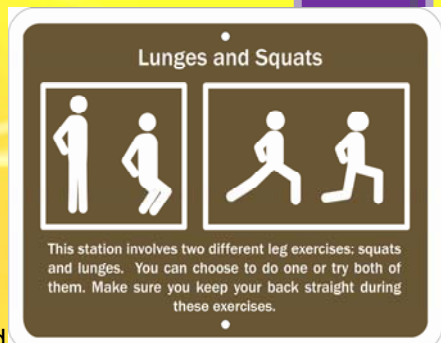
- Guest column contributed by
Greg Blanchard,
Environmental Programs Manager

<http://weside.deviantart.com>

Get Fit at Robinson Preserve

We've added a new way to enjoy Robinson Preserve! For those of you looking for a way to spice up your exercise routine, we now have a six-station, 2.2 mile (one way) fitness trail. It was designed by department intern, Allegra Buyer, and installed this past January by volunteers from the West Manatee Fire Rescue District.

The stations can be found at the rest stops along the paved Spoonbill Trail, which winds from the main entrance of the preserve to the southern-most tip. Each stop has a sign with instructions on how to perform the basic activity. Some have added equipment, such as a balance beam and a pull-up bar. The routine starts out slowly with basic warm-up exercises, then builds in intensity to work all the main muscle groups. The great thing about the trail is that you can change the variety and level of intensity according to your fitness goals. Interested in getting your heart moving? Do the trail at a faster pace. Is toning more your thing? Do more repetitions of each exercise. You can also add in or substitute exercises of your own. If you'd like more information on the exercises and the trail, a brochure can be found at the trailhead or in the visitors' center.



The grand opening of the trail was held on February 12, with free water and massages provided by Shapes Fitness. Even though it was a very blustery morning over 20 participants braved the chill to run the trail for the first time. The next time you're out on the trail at Robinson give some of the exercises a try. A lunge here, a crunch there, and you'll be well on your way to a healthier day!

- Contributed by Suwanna Blakey, Greenways and Trails Coordinator



In Defense of Serpents

Snakes. Whether you hate them, love them, or choose to respectfully stay as far away as possible from them, these scaly creatures have had an impact on man from our earliest times. Some scientists believe that the widespread fear, or at least caution, of snakes has to do with an innate respect of animals that could potentially hurt us; an innate caution evolved over millions of years of survival. Other experts think that this is a learned fear, one that has been passed down each generation, incorporating a variety of myths and misconceptions and furthering them.

Regardless of the origin of the fear, it is one that is shared by millions. But what is the "truth" about these slithery serpents? Is it necessary to fear snakes and eradicate them on sight? Or is it better to have a healthy respect for them, sharing Florida's natural habitat?

Snakes are mysterious creatures. And, well, anything without legs that regularly sticks its tongue out at you could certainly be called creepy. But what may be creepy in our world are masterpieces of adaptation from the snake's perspective and a matter of insuring survival too. The body plan of a snake is made for fast locomotion, capturing prey, and even climbing and traveling underground in burrows. A lack of legs is not a disadvantage, but rather leads to creative ways of moving. The venom that seems like a weapon is simply the snake's way of immobilizing prey, a handy tool to use when preparing food. It can, of course, be used as a

method of defense, but this is often only done when a snake has no other means of escape.

Believe it or not, snakes actually serve a beneficial role to not only Florida's ecosystem, but to humans too. Snakes are prey for a variety of species, serving to feed everything from hawks and owls to herons and raccoons. They themselves are great consumers of insects and rodents, two species that have long plagued man. Snakes help remove both of these creatures which can spread disease and have impacts on our gardens and food stores. What about that venom? Well, scientists are studying it even now and using it for treating everything from cancer to heart disease to Parkinson's disease. And venom even appears in cosmetology as it can be injected to combat wrinkles too.

It's perfectly okay to be afraid of snakes and you don't have to like them either. But it is important to understand and acknowledge the fact that they have a place, like all creatures, in the natural environment. The absence of snakes would have a huge impact on all of the other species we love. Treat snakes with caution and respect, and please let them survive in Florida.

Did You Know?

Florida only has six species of venomous snakes, and four of those are regularly found within Manatee County. How can you avoid them? Be smart! When working or traveling outdoors in Florida's natural areas, wear long pants and boots. Most bites occur when people attempt to catch, move, or even kill a venomous snake. Any of these activities puts you in close proximity to the snake; steering clear of visible snakes will certainly curtail the risk. If you happen to encounter a venomous snake, the best thing to do is to back away slowly.

To learn more about Florida's 50 species of snakes, please visit the great resource at:
<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/herpetology/fl-guide/onlineguide.htm>





Manatee County's Conservation Lands and YOU!

You never know who you might see in Manatee County's preserves. Check out the images below to see the exciting happenings within *your* conservation lands:



Photos top counter-clockwise:

1. Members of the Old Braden River Historical Society test out the new kayak launch at Jiggs Landing during the Great American Coastal Cleanup. *Photo courtesy OBRHS*
2. A dedicated volunteer climbs to remove rosary pea during Tampa Bay Estuary Program's 10th Anniversary Give a Day for the Bay at Emerson Point Preserve.
3. Young volunteers work together to tackle invasive Brazilian peppertrees during Sarasota Bay's Bay Guardian workday at Neal Preserve. *Photo by Sara Kane, SBEP*
4. The Old Braden River Historical Society's volunteers help clean the historical cabin replica at Jiggs Landing during a monthly cleanup. *Photo courtesy OBRHS*



A Matter of Survival

Many species of Florida's shorebirds and seabirds nest on the beach. Disturbances can threaten survival. Help protect shorebirds on the west coast of Florida and throughout Manatee County.

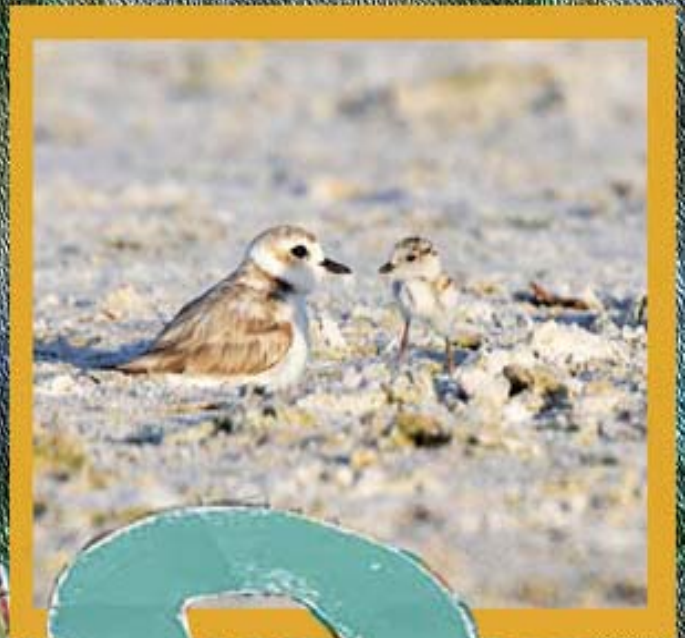
- Keep your distance from resting or nesting birds. When these beach-nesting birds are disturbed and flushed off their nests, the eggs and chicks are exposed to predators, such as gulls and crows, and to temperature extremes.
- Keep out of posted areas. It's easy to unknowingly crush nearly invisible nests.
- Don't feed the birds on the beach. It is important they find their own food and it attracts predators to nesting areas. NEVER feed gulls on the beach.
- Dogs (a perceived predator) are not allowed on beaches and easily flush birds off nests.
- Please don't litter and be a good Samaritan about picking up littler that may not be yours. Trash attracts gulls and crows to area beaches – the main predators of beach-nesting birds.
- Spread the word. Many people do not realize their actions may be harmful to wildlife.

Manatee County and Anna Maria Island Turtle Watch are part of Florida Shorebird Alliance, a network of organizations and individuals throughout the state diligently working to protect Florida's amazing diversity of shorebirds and seabirds. For FREE guided walks & tours:

In Manatee County contact Suzi Fox at amiturtlewatch@gmail.com or 941-778-5638.

For our partners in Sarasota County, contact Bonnie Samuelsen at beachvolunteer@sarasotaudubon.org or 941-951-7704

- Contributed by Suzi Fox
and Bonnie Samuelsen





Manatee County Natural Resources Department

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Help us save paper! Add your name to our email list and receive *Vistas* electronically. Email Melissa.nell@mymanatee.org today!

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FREE Monthly Eco-Events!

Be a part of our newsletter! We're looking for photos that illustrate the spirit of our preserves. Submit a photo in JPG format to Melissa.nell@mymanatee.org and *your* photograph might be featured in an upcoming issue of *Vistas*!

PLEASE NOTE: Manatee County cannot return any photographs submitted to it. Submission of photographs or other images constitutes representation that the person making the submission has the legal authority to make the submission, and that Manatee County is granted permission to use the photographs or images without compensation in any of its print or web-based productions, including image databases and marketing materials. The County will make every effort to credit the artist, owner or photographer in such materials. Manatee County will not sell or market any individual image to the general public.

FREE Paddle Manatee Guide

This FREE publication features maps of the County's blueways, GPS coordinates, paddle tips, and much more. For a FREE copy, please call 941-748-4501 ext. 4613.

Wildlife Issues

Please report any sightings of injured or deceased wildlife!

For Emerson Point, Leffis Key, Robinson, and Riverview Pointe preserves call: 941-745-3723

For Rye Preserve call: 941-745-3723

For Duette Preserve call: 941-776-2295

Please leave a message if you are not able to reach a Ranger. Thank you!