

The Florida Galapagos

Story and Photos by Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

O*nce upon a time, a long, long time ago, and far, far away....well, not so far away — only about an hour's drive from Tampa — but definitely a long, long time ago (several million years, give or take) Florida was a little spit of land — a chain of islands, actually — only one hundred miles long and 15 miles wide.*

During the ensuing ice age, the sea levels fell to 300 feet below the current level, and Florida's land mass extended almost halfway into the Gulf of Mexico. (Now you know why the gulf is so shallow so far out.) The end of the ice age created the current Florida configuration. That ancient little chain of islands is still with us today in Central Florida, and is known as Lake Wales Ridge. The sea throughout it's history, never washed over the area, which resulted in unique plant and animal life known no where else on earth. The area is nicknamed the "Florida Galapagos," and contains one of the highest concentrations of threatened and endangered plants and animals in the United States. We visited Central Florida recently and learned this and a lot more fascinating information about the area that was previously unknown to us.

We checked into the Best Western Admiral's Inn in Winter Haven, which is a good central point for visiting the natural preserved areas of Central Florida. It's also right next door to Cypress Gardens, so bring the kiddies! The hotel guest rooms have an old world comfort, with dark woods, hunter



Admiral's Inn lobby.

green and burgundy colored decor. We had a nice breakfast each morning in their Baxter's Restaurant before heading off on our adventures.

Our first stop was the Circle B-Bar Reserve, where we met ace bird expert, Chuck Geanangel and Reserve Director, Herman Moulden who proceeded to take us on a tour of the 1,300 acre refuge and point out different wildlife and plant species. Visitors enter the park through a Live Oak Hammock, and continue through scrub to the very large (but shallow, only 2-3 feet deep) Lake Hancock, known for having one of the densest Osprey nesting areas in the state and a very large alligator population. We did see alligators popping up and down all over the lake, so we backed off the shore, especially since this is mating season and they can get a bit aggressive.

Right now, folks can come and hike through the reserve for free, but a multi-million dollar nature center is being planned, so there may be a cost in the future. Chuck

told us that one afternoon he spotted 42 species of birds in the reserve, and 165 species were found by birders watching one morning a week for a year. Polk County is one of the best places to spot bald eagles and we did spot a few, one with her chicks in a nest. Eight endangered species live in the area. Right now, a lot of Sand Hill Cranes can be seen, as their population is exploding. You can get fairly close to them, and they don't seem skittish around people. We also spotted some Bobolinks, which Chuck said was unusual, as they only migrate through the area one week in the spring, and one in the fall. (Visit Chuck's website — www.polkcountybirds.com — for birds that can be found in the reserve, also a print-out bird sheet if you go birding yourself.)

Some folks take night hikes in the reserve, but we, the chicken-hearted, are not



One of Lake Hancock's residents.

keen on running into any of those mating gators!

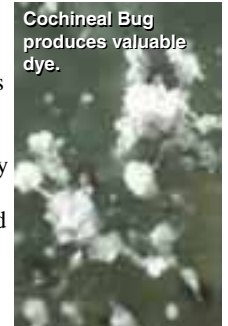
Next stop was the Babson Park Audubon Center, which sits on only 3 1/2 acres, but contains much of Central Florida's ecosystem. At first glance, the Florida "scrub" as it is called, is not a thing of beauty - grasses, low untamed plants and trees living in the mostly sandy soil — but it's beauty is appreciated in close inspection and the ecology of the system that has made it thrive for eons.

An odd little creature that inhabits this land is the five-inch long Florida Sand Skink, which is found only in the Lake Wales Ridge area. It looks like a snake, but has little legs. He "swims" under the surface of the sand. We didn't see any, as they are rarely seen, but we did see their tracks here and there. The sand skink has no known relative. One of the most valuable critters in the delicate ancient ecosystem is the equally ancient Gopher Tortoise. He digs a tunnel that can be as much as 30 feet long, which, amazingly enough, is used by other animals in traumatic times (fires and other threats) to wait it out. Unknown by science is how these natural enemies (mouse, snake, fox, etc.) can co-exist in the same space during these times. Some 300 species have been recorded using a gopher tortoise hole at one time or another.



Gopher Tortoise, necessary to eco system.

Another interesting creature of the Ridge area is the Cochineal Bug. This tiny bug lives in a white waxy substance (that he produces) on the Prickly Pear Cactus, and was once as valuable as gold to Native Americans and traders. The bugs produce red-colored carminic acid that wards off attacks from predators, and when people dry the bugs out, a red dye is produced. It was used for such diverse things as Native American textiles, the red coats worn by the British, and the Catholic cardinal's robes. The value comes from the fact that you only get one drop of dye from each bug. Cochineal is



Cochineal Bug produces valuable dye.



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Hurricane damage is all part of nature at the Tiger Creek Preserve.

still used today to dye some red-colored beverages, candies, medicines, and lipstick. (This may be more information than you care to know!)

Tiger Creek Preserve is another area to enjoy the natural history of Florida. Most of the entire creek has been preserved, as well as the surrounding habitat that encompasses 5,000 acres. Many of the plants here are rare and endangered — such as the Blazing Star, Scrub Plum, Pygmy Fringe Tree and Carter's Mustard. One of the reasons for their survival is their adaptation to living in sand and ability to withstand the intense weather conditions. For most of the year, there's no water, and a lot of the plants have more going on underground than above. The preserve also protects sand skinks, gopher tortoises, the Florida mouse, indigo snakes, gopher frogs and scrub jays. Deer, bobcat, otters, wild turkey, and quail can be found in the preserve.

The visitor's center in the preserve is interesting in that it uses "firewise" construction and landscaping. Located in a highly flammable area, it is built to stave off fires. The roof, siding and soffits are all made of non-flammable materials, and windows are tempered glass. A 30-foot space around the building is kept free of dense vegetation, and landscaped with less flammable native plants. Trees are spaced and pruned keeping the lowest limb 8 feet from the ground. Since we are the lightning capital of the



Captain James Erskine

world, it seems like a good model for homebuilders to follow. All of the state's preserves hold controlled fire burns to clear out overgrowth. If nature doesn't do it first, man takes over.

Lake Kissimmee is the 3rd largest lake in the state (35,000 acres), and the state park there has almost 6,000 acres of great fishing, birding, camping, boating and hiking.

We took a pontoon boat ride, captained by James Erskine, through Tiger Cove and Tiger Creek. It is a wonderful experience to view just natural Florida as far as you can see, and spot great bald eagles soaring in the sky, watching along the shore line for gators (was that a stick of wood or a gator snout?)



Wild Turkeys in Lake Kissimmee State Park.

and seeing wild turkeys run and fly in front of you. We saw the occasional airboat go by, and folks fishing for croppie and bass. Captain James told us that there are currently 15 nesting bald eagles in the park.

All this nature and hiking makes one hungry, and we sure did have some good ol' Florida home-cookin' during our trip. We try to stay away from chains when traveling to get the flavor of the area, where the "locals" like to eat.

Overlooking Lake Shipp in Winter Haven, is the Harbor Side Restaurant, a very casual seafood place with huge portions, and if timed right, a beautiful sunset over the lake.

A big local favorite is the Cherry Pocket Restaurant in Lake Wales, which is a funky fish camp eaterie that has the best battered fried food around - light and flaky. Also, the biggest tastiest piece of carrot cake we've ever seen.

Downtown Winter Haven has Tanner's Pub, where we had a delicious Steak Diane and a Chocolate Lava Cake dessert.

A bit more upscale is Christy's Sundown Restaurant in Winter Haven, where Mr. Nick Christy has been the owner for 56 years. A colorful fellow, he makes the rounds to see if everyone is enjoying themselves.

The food is delicious, with the Coconut Cream Pie being legendary in these parts — you have to order it ahead of time to make sure they don't run out.

For breakfast everyone heads to the Cypress Cafe, where you can get pretty much anything you can think of for breakfast, and



Christy's delicious Surf & Turf.

then some. Our hands-down favorite dining experience, however, was lunch at the Say Amen Cafe in Winter Haven.

This is a small, quirky, and homey soul food restaurant with REAL southern cooking.

Dorie Lewis and her Mama, Artie Hawthorne, cook up the best Fried Green Tomatoes we've

ever had - the lightest batter over just-right, not tart tomatoes. Their battered mullet is another local favorite. This is where you come for the best homemade Sweet Potato Pie this side of Heaven.



Dorie Lewis, owner of the soulful Say Amen Cafe.

Lake Wales Ridge is Florida's most endangered habitat, with only 10% of the original scrub left, being lost to developers (who are still sniffing around at that 10%.) Better get out there and experience it before the condos take over. Hopefully enough people (and the government) will support it so generations to come can see and experience the *really* old Florida.

If You Go...

Central Florida CVB - www.sunsational.org

Babson Audubon Center - 863-638-1358;

www.ridgeaudubon.org

Best Western Admiral's Inn -

www.bestwestern.com

Captain James Erskine, Southland Scenic

Water Tours - 863-638-2295

Cherry Pocket Restaurant -

www.cherrypocket.com

Christy's Sundown Restaurant - 863-293-0069

Circle B-bar Reserve - 863-534-7377

Cypress Cafe - 324-6385

Harborside Restaurant - 863-293-7070

Lake Kissimmee State Park - 863-696-1112

Say Amen Cafe - 863-318-8877

Tanners Pub - 863-294-7220

Tiger Creek Preserve - 863-635-7506



The serene waters of Tiger Creek.