



Wekiva Wilderness Trust—Newsletter

October, 2022

WWT News

Girl Scouts Love State Parks

On September 9, over 100 Girl Scouts participated in the 2022 Girl Scouts Love State Parks event at Wekiwa Springs State Park. Park Services Specialist Val Hahn, who organized the event in the park, declared it “a great success!”

“We had 114 participants come out and make a huge difference! In addition to other trash, we collected 1,069 cigarette filters in one hour,” he said.



Val's Breakfasts

If you haven't already attended one of Val's volunteer breakfasts, it is worth making the effort to do so. Apart from delicious, scrambled eggs and pancakes, it is a great way to meet other park volunteers who you might not otherwise get to know.

At the last breakfast, among other volunteers, we met campground hosts who volunteer at Fechtel, one of the top horse-riding areas in the state.



Chef Val (holding pancake turner) and volunteers in the Youth Camp dining hall



Fechtels Tract Barn and Parking

The Fechtel Tract is part of Lower Wekiva River Preserve State Park. Visitors are welcome to bring their own horses in for the day or for horse riding and camping. The park offers 26 miles of multi-use trails that take riders and their horses through open pastures, mesic and hydric hammocks, and over seasonal creeks and streams.

At the horse barn area, which is a mile from the Fechtel Gate at the end of Swift Road in Eustis, equestrians have plenty of room to park their trailers. Amenities include stables and open paddocks, bathroom with shower, picnic areas, mounting block and water troughs for the horses, and primitive overnight camping.

Many of the facilities were actually built by the Florida Trailblazers, a central Florida equestrian club, which for many years has held fundraisers to pay for improvements and more facilities at Fechtel.

Survival Class

We held our first post-Covid survival boot camp at Rock Springs Run State Reserve on September 10. We had a great bunch of participants. Many thanks to Neal from REI who came out to talk about backpacking stoves and water filtration systems. The group learned how to forage for food and water, how to braid natural materials into rope or to make baskets, how to build fires and shelters as well as some field first aid and orientation skills.

Participants then split up into groups and had to build a shelter in one hour able to accommodate them all and, hopefully, keep them dry.

The six-hour boot camp should have ended at 3:30 pm, but just after three, the heavens opened, and we all got drenched. So, we called it a day. Two members, however, retreated to their shelter and despite torrential rain, did not get wet. They had done such an excellent job in thatching their shelter with palmetto fronds, that it was waterproof.



The waterproof shelter.



Pictured at left is a primitive basket which took about three minutes to weave and was then used to collect beauty berries which were ripe and in abundance.

Historic Ethel Hike

On November 5 we will be conducting our first Historic Ethel Hike at Rock Springs Run State Reserve. Already nine people have signed up. The walk will cover the ground where the township of Ethel once flourished a hundred years ago. All that remains is the small fenced-off cemetery, but we now know so

much about Ethel that we can locate where the school was, as well as the railway station, store, and almost all of the homestead cabins. Eventually, interpretive panels will tell the full story of Ethel and historic markers will be placed at sites of special interest.

If you want to learn more about Ethel, there is a free e-book that can be downloaded from the www.wwt-cso.com website.

Future Events

The Wekiwa Wilderness Trust Meetup Group continues to go from strength to strength. We now have 1,161 members. We need to come up with programs to keep them interested and engaged. We are planning to offer more hikes at Wekiwa Springs and Rock Springs and restart the tram tours at Wekiwa. We would also like to resume Discovery Hour and launch an outreach program with speakers willing to go out of the park and speak to organizations, homeowners' associations, church groups and so on.

If you have ideas/suggestions about future events and programs or are interested in helping us with this, please let us know at info@wwt-cso.com

Nature News

Vultures

Two species of vultures make Florida their home: Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*), with bright red heads, and Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*), with black heads. The heads of both species are featherless, a useful feature for birds that eat carrion. It is thought the bald heads also help with thermoregulation.



Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*)

Although long considered birds of prey, according to both DNA studies and behavioral traits they are more closely related to the stork family. Their long legs and toes are made for walking, not grasping prey, similar to the storks. Like the storks, in hot weather they stay cool using urohydrosis, which simply means spraying liquid excrement on their feet.

Both species are monogamous, mating for life. They do not build



Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*)

ests, but will use a hollow stump, a depression in the ground or a saw palmetto thicket for the female to lay her eggs. She usually lays two eggs, but sometimes three. Both males and females tend the baby birds, which have a long incubation period of several months. Because their weak feet are not conducive to carrying food back to the young, the adults gorge on carrion and carry it in their crops to regurgitate for the young. After fledging, young vultures spend up to eight months foraging with and being fed by the adults.

sight to cherish. Turkey Vultures are lighter. They fly early and fly low, using their keen sense of smell, unusual among birds, to locate carrion. Black Vultures greet the day a bit later, catching thermals to spiral high. Lacking a great sense of smell, they depend more on their eyesight, frequently following Turkey Vultures to meals. Vultures prefer to eat freshly dead animals, but they will also devour putrefied dead things loaded with toxins and pathogens that would probably kill anything else that ate them. It is also not unheard of for them occasionally to take live prey, such as baby birds or newborn helpless mammals.

A “kettle of vultures” circling gracefully against a blue sky is a

Often misunderstood, sometimes maligned, vultures are important ecologically. They efficiently clean up dead animals that would otherwise rot and be a source of disease. Moving dead creatures from the roadway to a distance off the road can help them do their jobs without danger of becoming road kill themselves.

Flower of the Month

Seminole False Foxglove (*Agalinis filifolia*)

There are 17 *Agalinis* species native to Florida, at least two of which are found within the boundaries of Wekiwa Springs State Park—Seminole false foxglove (*Agalinis filifolia*) and purple false foxglove (*Agalinis purpurea*). Many species are similar in appearance and hard to differentiate but, in most cases, the habitat will provide clues to identification. Seminole false foxglove occurs naturally in sandhills, flatwoods, coastal scrub and xeric woodlands. Purple false foxglove is a wetlands plant.



The plant has a densely leafy but delicate and airy appearance. The stems are reddish, many branched and about three feet tall. Leaves are alternate, somewhat fleshy, narrow, sessile (without a leaf stem) and involute (edges rolled up and inward).

The pink to lavender flowers are bell-shaped with five lobes. The throat of the flower is covered with pink to lavender dots. Fine hairs cover the outer surface of the flower and sometimes the inner surface as well. The lobe edges appear fringed.

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Seminole false foxglove blooms in the fall and attracts many pollinators, including bees and butterflies. It is also the larval host plant for the common buckeye butterfly.

Seminole false foxglove and all other *Agalinis* species are members of the Orobanchaceae (Broomrape) family. Members of this family are parasitic, living on nutrients in the roots of other plants.

Look for Seminole false foxglove growing beside the trail from Sand Lake parking lot toward trail marker #32 and in other dry and sandy habitats.

