



## Wekiva Wilderness Trust Newsletter

### March, 2024

### News

February has been one of the busiest months I can remember with so many great things happening and volunteers proving time and again, how necessary they are for the smooth running of our award-winning state parks. These are some of the achievements our volunteers have chalked up.

#### Exploring the Corridor Week

This week-long event (January 27 to February 4) was the inspiration of the Florida State Parks Foundation and Live Wildly as a statewide public volunteering drive held at 40 of Florida's award-winning state parks. Each of these parks is within the Florida Wildlife Corridor and that includes Wekiwa Springs and Rock Springs Run State Reserve.

"Volunteers are critical to our mission, and we appreciate every last one of them," said Florida State Parks director Chuck Hatcher. Florida's 175 state parks are supported by more than 10,000 volunteers who contribute more than 1 million hours of service each year.



"There may be no better way to celebrate the beginning of the year than to volunteer at your favorite state park," said Julia Gill Woodward, CEO of the Florida State Parks Foundation. "Explore the Corridor Week' offers great opportunities to spend more time in nature, meet new people and fellow parks enthusiasts, and make positive contributions to your local community."

Each park was asked to hold an event that featured one or more elements of park maintenance, beautification, or resource management, and under the

direction of PSS Brent, Rock Springs Run State Reserve was selected for beautification.

Volunteers planted native shrubs along the Historic Ethel Trail and that beautification has continued with picket fencing to protect the plants and the trail's interpretive signs.



### Real Florida 5K/10K Race

By the time you get this newsletter, we will have completed our 37<sup>th</sup> annual Real Florida 5K and 10K race. This is one of our major fund-raising events of the year and thank you to all our volunteers who got up really early to help with the event.



## Paint Out

Paint Out is now in full swing. We have about 25 nationally acclaimed artists staying in the youth camp (February 25-March 3) and all their art is on display in the marquee galleries at Wekiva Island. If you have never been to view their work, you really should. The artists donate 50% of everything they sell and because this is a charity event, their paintings are offered at well below what they would be asking in galleries. Wekiva Wilderness Trust and Keep Seminole Beautiful co-organize this event (in its 18<sup>th</sup> year) and share in the profits. There is a very lively auction on Wednesday, February 28, and a Gala Dinner under the stars on Saturday, March 2.

## Historic Ethel Trail and Heritage Festival Event

We are gearing up for the official opening of the Historic Ethel Trail on Saturday, March 9. The East Lake Historical Society, kindly agreed to move their annual Heritage Festival to Rock Springs the same day to make this a bumper celebration for all the family.

The Heritage Festival is from 10 AM-3 PM with the official trail opening ceremony from 11-11:30 AM.

There will be guided walks and tram tours aboard the Queen Paula. The festival will have exhibitors, vendors, crafters, live music, food, children's games, storytellers, and ladies from the Taveres Theater Society dressed in period costumes.



**Outnumbered! Don and the East Lake Historical Society's Heritage Festival Committee.**

## Prescribed Burns

Brent and his team have been busy with prescribed burns, especially at Rock Springs and Neighborhood Lakes, one of the many parcels of park-managed land. Great care was taken to protect the headstone of Anthony Frazier as the surrounding area was burned. The pictures to the right and below show careful maintenance of the prescribed burn.





### Junior Rangers Club

Another great Junior Rangers Club meeting was held in February and the emphasis was on food. Brent and helpers organized a cultural cookout with swamp cabbage, hardtack, and savory squash at the campground circle.

“Special thanks to our volunteers who transformed this area to make Junior Rangers and campfire programs happen here for future events,” said Brent.



JOIN US FOR  
**JUNIOR RANGER CLUB**  
 IDENTIFYING INVASIVES

FREE

FRIDAY, MARCH 8TH, 2024 5:00PM-6:00PM  
**WEKIWA SPRINGS STATE PARK**

LEARN: TO IDENTIFY INVASIVES  
 EARN: SERVICE STAMP  
 GIVE BACK: SHORT COMMUNITY TRASH CLEAN-UP  
 PARTICIPANTS UNDER 18 MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY AN ADULT

PLEASE BRING WATER & CLOSED-TOE SHOES  
 DISPONIBLE EN ESPAÑOL

SPONSORED BY  
 WEKIWA WILDERNESS

FLORIDA STATE PARKS

EMAIL FOR LOCATION AND TO RSVP:  
 Brent.saulsbury@FloridaDEP.gov



The March Junior Rangers Club is on Friday, March 8 and is all about learning to identify invasive plants.

## Blue Springs Manatee Festival

Wekiva Springs staff and volunteers are also active outside the park. Brent and volunteers manned a booth at the annual Blue Springs Manatee Festival. This Festival attracts thousands of visitors.



## Nature News

**The Nature Center is Delighted to Announce. . .  
Our adorable new ambassador has at last arrived!**



Darth Gator was born August 28, 2023. He is a bold, chirpy, and robust six month old alligator.

Right now, he is getting acclimated to his new habitat, but soon he will be making appearances to help educate visitors about American Alligators, an iconic denizen of Wekiva Springs State Park, Rock Springs Run, and the Wekiva River.

**Welcome, Darth Gator!**

## Flower of the Month

### Shiny Blueberry (*Vaccinium myrsinites*)

The heath is starting to bloom! On a recent very short walk from Sand Lake parking and half way around the lake I found three species in the heath family (Ericaceae) already blooming or in bud stage. These included shiny blueberry (*Vaccinium myrsinites*), high bush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), and rusty staggerbush (*Lyonia ferruginea*). The most prolific bloomer right now is shiny blueberry. As spring progresses many other species in the heath family will bloom.

Shiny blueberry is a low growing (1 to 2 ft. tall and wide) evergreen shrub which flowers heavily in the spring. Its common name refers to the shiny dark green leaves. Shiny blueberry grows in mesic (moist) pine flatwoods, sandhills, scrubby flatwoods, dry prairies and scrub habitats in full sun to part shade.

Flowers are white to whitish pink, urn-shaped and borne in clusters. Sepals vary from green to dark pink. The flowers attract a variety of pollinators. The alternately arranged leaves are elliptic to ovate with entire margins. They are glossy green on top. In full sun some of the leaves take on a reddish hue. The undersides of the leaves have red glands that require magnification to see.

Flowers attract a variety of pollinators. By late spring and early summer, the small, round purplish-black berries are ready to eat. The berries are consumed by birds and other wildlife and serve as a sweet trailside treat for humans as well. Leave some for the bears!

