

Fall

2021

Newsletter



From the editor:
Zack Westmark (Park Ranger)

One of Myakka's most valuable characteristics is its biodiversity. Any wildlife photographer would likely admit that. But survey a sample of visitors on the meaning of biodiversity and the results will be scattered all over like grass seed. That's because biodiversity is the foundation of our very existence; a really big deal.



Healthy ecosystems have been likened to airplanes and webs. But while visiting Myakka, think of this healthy ecosystem as a bike. Like an airplane/ecosystem, a bike is an amalgamation of components (species) that each serve a purpose (niche) and collectively construct a machine that is beautifully functional. But a bike, like a healthy ecosystem, improves human health and thus is a more symbolic representation of a desirable ecosystem. Plus they are more fun to ride!

Read on to learn more about recent efforts to protect the park's biodiversity, our "Bike Myakka! for Biodiversity" National Public Lands Day event, and a vignette of one acclaimed avian species you'll see at Myakka. This Fall edition also reveals the locations of skunk ape sightings and historic descriptions of Myakka from early explorers. Enjoy!

Can't get to the park as often as you'd like? Need a Myakka fix? Follow us on social media:

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Tag @FriendsOfMyakkaRiver or use #MyakkaMagic for a chance to to be featured!

Also in this edition...



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Park Update

The Myakka Massacre

by Zack Westmark (Park Ranger)

On Thursday, October 21st two helicopters buzzed over the park's sky like dueling airborne chainsaws. One chopper was murdering invasive Para grass and West-Indian marsh grass. Invasive plants basically destroy native plants, which wildlife depend on.

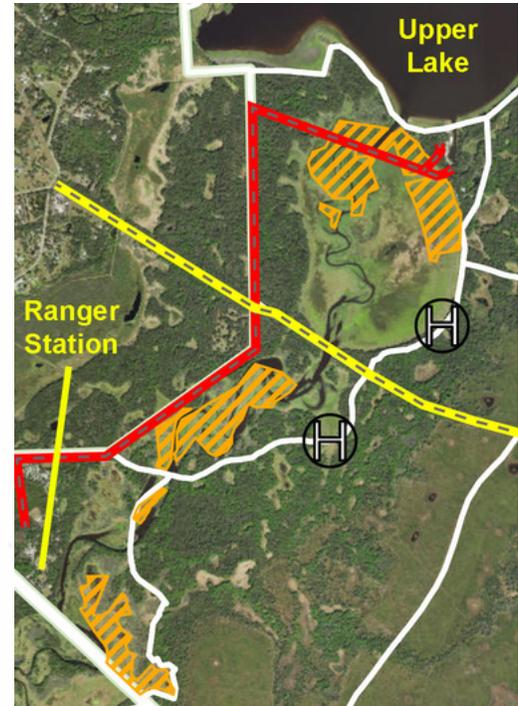
The aerial plant removal mostly occurred in Big Flats Marsh, so visitors can expect to see "skunk ape piles" of dead grass near Ranch House Road. But many visitors are aware that in spring, gold, white, and purple wildflowers occupy the same area.

Removing these invasive grasses also creates habitat for many subjects of the Myakka wildlife photographers. "The river area provides mudflat and mudflat edge from which black neck stilts, spotted sandpipers, and other bird species obtain their food," says Wild and Scenic River Biologist Chris Oliver.

The joint effort between Florida Park Service staff and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Aquatic Habitat Restoration Enhancement Section treated approximately 174 acres of invasive grasses in about four hours. Such an area might take park staff a month with terrestrial equipment, plus think soil impacts and daily fuel expenditures. "Aerial treatment is the most efficient and ecologically friendly method to control invasive plants," says Park Manager Steve Giguere.

Removal of the Upper Lake weir could help restore the Wild and Scenic Myakka River's natural hydrological regime which native plants evolved to depend on. The Park Service is in the process of awarding a contract to complete the work this spring (2022) pending cooperative rainfall patterns. Stay tuned for more information in the next newsletter.

Where was the other helicopter? Removing around 150 invasive feral hogs, as part of a United States Department of Agriculture initiative to minimize crop damage caused by the animals. Hogs would just as soon destroy endangered ground orchids or Tampa mock vervain as they might sweet potatoes or tomatoes, so the activity helps Myakka's wildlife by protecting plants; the base of the food web.



Map depicting locations of aerial invasive plant removal



Black-necked stilts are one of several bird species whose seasonal habitat can be choked out by invasive grasses. Photo by Miri Hardy

Friends Update

Bike Myakka! for Biodiversity: Riding for a change.

Article and photos by Miri Hardy (volunteer)

This year's theme for *National Public Lands Day*, the nation's largest single-day volunteer event for public lands, was "More ways to connect to nature". And, as *Bike Your Park Day*, which encourages exploring parks by bicycle, is celebrated on the same day, we at Team Bike Myakka! suggested combining a stewardship project at the park with a fun, and informative, guided bike ride, in an event we coined "Bike Myakka! for Biodiversity."

One of the ways many connect to the unique beauty of Myakka is through cycling. With Bike Myakka!, an initiative of Friends of Myakka River, we aim to build and sustain such connections in a meaningful way, to the benefit of future generations and our own. In keeping with our mission, we planned a service component to our event, but augmented it with a guided bike ride, to offer participants a deeper dive (or ride, as the case may be) into exactly *why* invasive plants are such a big issue at the park and how this threat came to be.



On what was a picture-perfect day in the park, my team, one of two, posed for a shot at the end of a beautiful, and thought-provoking, 7-mile guided ride through Myakka River State Park.

"Our service projects have always had a learning component to them" Michelle Keirse, Park Services Specialist, told me. "Bike Myakka! for Biodiversity was the first in awhile where that was the main focus." By spending more time connecting with Myakka through recreation, while also acquiring a deeper understanding of the threats these delicate ecosystems face, she hopes that such events can inspire positive change in participants, perhaps even more so than would result from an event focused solely on service.

So on September 25, 2021, bright and early, event participants, many of them biking Myakka for the first time, as well as numerous Park Rangers and volunteers, gathered at the South Pavilion, ready for a day of biking and invasive plant pulling. Once fortified by healthy snacks, courtesy of Friends of Myakka River, we headed off in two groups, for a 7-mile slow-paced guided ride down Myakka's scenic Park Drive.



A Great Blue Heron, foraging in Big Flats Marsh, a floodplain marsh for the Myakka River, where we discussed how invasive plants can alter habitats, to the detriment of our native plants and wildlife.



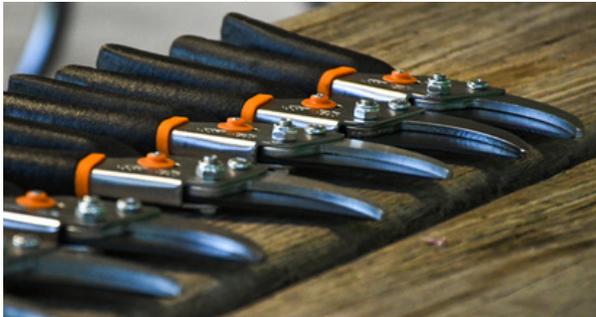
We discussed how Caesar weed grows so dense and tall, it chokes out native plants. With burr-like seeds, which easily get caught on animals or clothing, it spreads aggressively and quickly!

Making several stops along the way, we discussed what biodiversity is and why in fact having a variety of life at Myakka matters. We reflected on the value of Myakka's native plants, as the critical base of Myakka's delicate ecosystems, and how invasive plants and litter negatively impact Myakka's health. Importantly, we also discussed what we can do to help.

The opportunity to experience Myakka in this different way, in the company of like-minded individuals, was enjoyed, as well as appreciated by participants. "I liked the sense of camaraderie - how, by the end of the day, we had made our own little community." mused one participant.

Jarred Wilson and Mark Steinwachs, new members of Friends of Myakka River, especially enjoyed our stops by the Upper Myakka Lake. Serendipitously, the area was closed to cars, due to high water. With few people around, no traffic to contend with, and an abundance of wildlife about, our discussions about Myakka were interrupted only by a few loquacious American Crows. "We were excited to get out on a bike ride and hear from some experts about plants in the park" Jarred and Mark told me. But the event exceeded their expectations: "The conversations were thought provoking and gave us a deeper appreciation of the work that needs to be done to lessen and reverse our impact on this place" they reflected.

Not by chance, Caesar weed featured heavily in our program. It is so noxious, that it is considered a Category I invasive by the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council, meaning it's damaging our habitats and displacing native plants. And, it is abundant at Myakka: Once you learn to identify it, as did our participants, you start seeing it everywhere!



Healthy snacks, gloves and new tools, thanks to Friends of Myakka River, made our service project easier, and safer!

And after a high-energy day of riding, talking, and then impressively helping remove over 50 lbs. of invasive plants from the park, we ended our event with a haiku-writing session, to capture our thoughts and feelings about our experiences. You'll find a selection of our haikus on page 10.

"During the event, we learned new information many were not aware of..." said Sandra McFarland Bernardi, volunteer and Board Member, with a smile. "But the request to write a haiku, was kind of scary!" To everyone's relief, she added, "...it turned out to be a fun exercise and I loved listening to everyone's contribution -- we had some good bike riders and writers."

Indeed! Good bike riders, good writers, **and** great people! Thanks to all who helped make this event a big success. We look forward to seeing you, and many more, at our next event! To be added to our Bike Myakka! mailing list, for advance notice about upcoming events, drop us a line at BikeMyakka@gmail.com. Until then, see you in the park!

Interested in helping with invasive plants removal? Or otherwise keen to help out in at the park?
See: <https://www.floridastateparks.org/get-involved>



On a great day for making formal, as well as informal, connections, Friends of Myakka River Lifetime Member Bill Jones and Board Member Sandra McFarland Bernardi share reflections post ride.



For Mark Steinwachs and Jarred Wilson, who attacked Caesar weed with a vengeance, being Friends of Myakka River Members means knowing that they are a part of helping with the extra programming (like this event) and equipment that the Friends provide to help protect Myakka.

Sandhill Cranes

by Lynn M. Stone (volunteer)

The Florida Sandhill Crane is one of Myakka River State Park's most impressive birds, large, loud, regal, and at times seriously animated. At a distance, one might mistake it for another tall, grayish bird of the park, the Great Blue Heron, but the crane's red crown, a patch of bare skin spiked with hair-like bristles, is diagnostic.



In fact, the heron and crane belong to different bird families, as comparing their behavior makes clear. Both species fly with their long legs trailing in flight, but flying herons fly with their necks tucked into an S-shape. Cranes fly with necks stretched out. In the heron's world, time stands still and patience is a virtue. A heron locks itself into a motionless crouch, like a big cat, waiting for prey to swim within reach of its rapier beak.

Heron are stalkers. Sandhill Cranes, in contrast, are walkers. If a crane doesn't find prey through serendipity - a luckless snake, for instance, gliding across its path - the bird takes a hike, high-stepping along Myakka's lakeshore or into its open prairies in search of a meal. Because Sandhill Cranes are omnivores, they have a varied diet of seeds, roots, and the meaty stuff, too. In the park, however, cranes typically favor a carnivorous diet, such as grubs, insects, frogs, aquatic invertebrates, snakes, and salamanders.



I recall a pair of cranes with a salamander on the shore of Upper Myakka Lake. The cranes had discovered - probably unearthed - an Amphiuma (one of the siren group of salamanders), a rarely-seen giant salamander that masquerades as a portly black sausage. The cranes vigorously jabbed the Amphiuma until it was lifeless and properly softened (think cube steak). An Amphiuma is a really big gulp for a crane and undoubtedly one of the largest critters it will ever swallow. But Myakka cranes are far more likely to devour tiny invertebrates than trophy salamanders.

In another memorable encounter with foraging Myakka cranes, I armed myself one bright May day with a long telephoto lens and shadowed a pair of adult cranes as they led two nearly fledged offspring on a trek across prairie lavishly spiked with showy Florida Tickseed (*Coreopsis*), the state wildflower. The adult cranes snatched one Eastern Ribbon Snake after another from snarls of wild grass. Perhaps this was the cranes showing off, one-upping the human, because the only snakes I saw were those that the cranes proffered to their juveniles, who unhesitatingly took the writhing serpents into their gullets. (The experience did make me wonder how many snakes I must have passed unseen and if any might have been of the venomous persuasion.)

A mature Florida Sandhill Crane is imposing. It stands nearly four feet tall, providing a wide angle view, so much the better to eyeball both prey and predators. A male may weigh 14 pounds and have a wingspan of six and one-half feet. Attempting to differentiate the sexes is likely a fool's errand, unless the two are close to each other, when the male's larger size is the giveaway. Otherwise, the sexes are virtually identical.



The mates share nest-building, teaching the chicks to hunt, and incubation of the eggs, usually two but occasionally one or three. Both sexes participate in winter courtship “dances” that lead to pair-bonding and mating. From a human perspective Sandhill Crane dances are great theater. Wings flapping, the birds bound up in light-footed touch-and-go's, bow, and engage in noisy crane conversation.

Among other attributes, Sandhill Cranes are well-known for their longevity (up to 36 years in the wild) size, beauty, and voice.

Long before they fly into view, trumpeting Sandhill Cranes can be heard from more than two miles away. Their most familiar call is an extended bugle-like, gar-roo, almost deafening at close range; it's one of nature's most iconic sounds. The cranes' (very) modified Pavarotti shtick is a by-product of hundreds of thousands - perhaps millions - of years of evolution, which has culminated in an elongated trachea and other anatomical adaptations that allows a sandhill crane to access at least 10 vocalizations, from a quiet “purr” to the familiar bugle.



It's not unusual for park visitors to see Sandhill Cranes along the shores of Upper and Lower Myakka Lakes, or along the park drive and beyond. Spring and early summer visitors often see adult cranes leading offspring.



Florida Sandhill Cranes nest in late winter and early spring. Their nests are typically a foot-high mound of vegetation in a shallow marsh pond.

Crane chicks can scramble off the nest 24 hours after hatching. Adult cranes lead the chicks into their new world of marsh, prairie, and hammock edge, pausing frequently for the young to nap and eat. Over the next two or three months, by mimicking its parents, a chick learns to forage by itself, although the parents continue to parcel out supplemental edibles. About 11 weeks after hatching, juvenile cranes can fly. They leave their parents to fend for themselves at approximately 10 months of age.

Florida Sandhills are resilient and have adapted reasonably well to a changing environment. They forage on golf courses, roadside grass, croplands, and even suburban neighborhoods that sprout “Crane Crossing” signs. Not surprisingly, resident Sandhills in Myakka Park are quite tolerant of passing vehicles, bicyclists, anglers, walkers. Rather than flee visitors who stray too close, a crane may turn the tables and use its stature and icy stare to intimidate the intruder.

With their broad wings, long landing gear, and unique brand of music, the state’s resident Sandhill Cranes can continue to enhance Florida’s wild - and not-so-wild - lands and big skies. They just need wise stewardship from their human overseers.

Interested in contributing to our next newsletter?



We'd love to hear from you!



**Submit your ideas for Myakka related articles, poetry or photo essays to:
Zachary.Westmark@FloridaDEP.gov**

Staff Spotlight

Myakka's 2021 Florida Conservation Corps: Carlton Scott and Kellyn Ursin

by Zack Westmark

The AmeriCorps team at Myakka is akin to our late season wildflowers; they sprout up every year in February, grow (as employees) throughout the summer, and then blossom in the fall before vanishing in December.



Carlton and Kellyn collecting LakeWatch samples

This year's round go by the names of Carlton and Kellyn. They help the park by surveying for and removing invasive exotic plants plus assisting with additional resource management activities; like EagleWatch, FrogWatch, LakeWatch, and prescribed burns.

Carlton joined the Myakka team in February and soon learned how to operate (and break) resource management equipment like ATVs, herbicide units, and wildland fire trucks. He is armed with a degree in Forestry from the University of Maine which can be traced back to his embryonic development in Catonsville, Maryland (a Baltimore suburb.)



Carlton's early career in conservation

Frequent family vacations to state parks throughout New England set the stage for Carlton's revelation in 8th grade environmental science class that he wanted to work in conservation. High school summer meant working the ranger station at his neighborhood green space; Patapsco River State Park. Many a Myakka volunteer who has worked in our ranger station can attest this shows dedication. College in Orno, Maine afforded the opportunity to intern with a land trust, where he collected forest measurements to monitor biodiversity while ensuring conservation easement use compliance.

Kellyn, also a Maryland transplant, hails from a military family and thus grew up all over the eastern United States. At seven years old, she sailed from Virginia Beach to the Panama Canal with her family. Throughout her early years, recreating in the Adirondack and Appalachian Mountains was common. Thus the calling towards conservation crept in during elementary school.



Kellyn admiring native plants Photo by Miri Hardy

Kellyn previously worked protecting natural areas as a law enforcement ranger for Maryland State Parks and on the horticultural side of conservation at a state operated plant nursery. She is working towards a degree in Environmental Science from Oregon State University, and appreciates the flexibility of online learning.

Of Myakka the pair agree that "the wildlife is great" and the various natural communities make working here interesting. Both feel that they have gained valuable professional experience via hands on learning at the park combined with many of the formal training opportunities available to Americorps service members.

What is the best part of a term at Myakka? For Carlton it was fire, particularly when trees are engaged (burning.) Kellyn's take homes have been learning about the plants of Florida Dry Prairie and rescuing baby raccoons from a dumpster.

Carlton soon begins a new job with the Florida Forest Service, while Kellyn will continue serving until December.



Carlton searching for invasive plants

Haikus by Bike Myakka! for Biodiversity Participants

Photos by Miri Hardy

In a haiku, a poem's first line has 5 syllables, the second 7, and the third 5.

Clean up Myakka
free up native plant spaces
make wildlife happy

Blue skies and clouds
Alligators, ducklings and mama
Show me to Myakka

Caesar weed's prolific
Invasives will rule the world
Pull to help the park

When the river floods
wildlife seems to come alive
sharing a secret

Biking in the park
Plants and birds easy to see
I am so sweaty



*Liatris (aka Blazing Star)
and a Western Honey Bee*



*A White Ibis happily
surveys a flooded marsh*

Gators swimming by
Beautiful old trees with moss
Feels like home to me

Cicadas buzzing
Sweat sticking down my clothing
Ibis calling loud

Connected to land
Sky as far as I can see
Nature at its best

Weeds are getting pulled
Native plants are rejoicing
Insects are singing

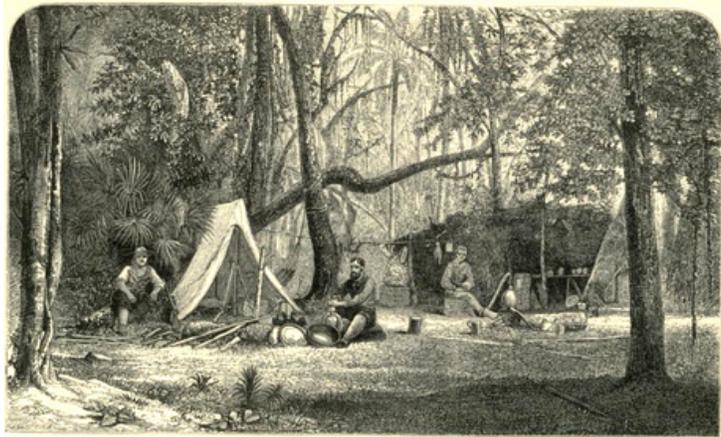
Myakka Magic
Songs of the wind tell stories
Troubles flow away

Myakka Memories

"Wild Life in Florida with a Visit to Cuba"

introduction by
Paula Benschoff (volunteer)

"Having procured, for a consideration of six dollars a day, a wagon and mule team with an intelligent youth to drive and guide us, we started in the middle of February for the Myakka lakes, situated some 25 miles inland to the SE of Tampa Bay, a part of the country where we were assured large game was abundant, and the turkeys so numerous that they could be knocked off the trees by the hundreds. We were at the same time warned that we should have to rough it in the severest sense of the term, a warning which turned out perfectly true, and free from exaggeration, which is more than I can say for the account of the turkeys."

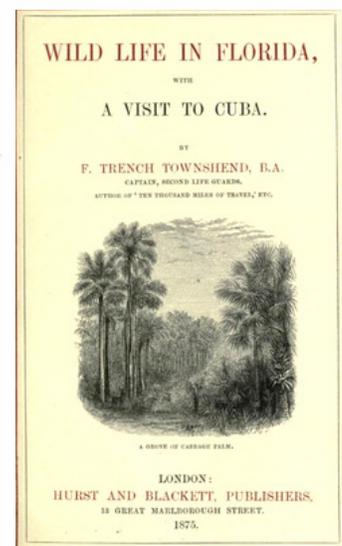


Engraving titled "Camp in Miakka Swamp"
from "A Wild Life In Florida"

Anyone who has stopped by the Visitor center to watch the Myakka Movies will find these words quoted from Captain French Townshend's 1874 account of his travels through Florida familiar. The book provides a description of our State as seen through the eyes of a European traveler seeking sport and adventure in the wilds of Florida. Despite some objectionable attitudes towards wildlife (hunting bobcats for sport), opinionated descriptions of Florida crackers and local residents, spirited exaggerations, and a list of questionable if not erroneous statements, the book includes a fascinating description of Myakka.

Below are some excerpts from Captain Townshend's adventures in the Myakka Lakes area. They make me realize the decline in abundance of animals I perceive over the past four decades pales over the changes over the past 147 years. I was especially surprised to see the mention of the grey wolf and the abundance of parakeets, both species now extinct. (See the end of this article for comments about the wolf). I love the description of the expanse of prairie that covered all the interior of southern Florida north of the Everglades. And there is the reminder that for whatever reason, vultures have always been numerous in the Myakka region.

"Our daily walk in search of sport was to the Upper Myakka Lake, about a mile distant from the house, through a pine-forest with undergrowth of palmetto and pau-pau."



Book containing historic
descriptions of Myakka

"The pools left by the overflow of the lake we found swarming with alligators; in one not fifty yards in diameter I counted 35 of these hideous reptiles ranging from eight to twenty feet in length. It made us at first rather nervous, when wading after duck through the water and mud up to our waists, to know that the next step might be on the back of an alligator lying buried in the mud, with the probable result of losing one or both legs, but impunity from such accidents quickly made us bolder. On the lake we found some dozen different varieties of duck, though the flocks were already beginning to migrate to the north; otters were occasionally met swimming through the water-lilies, and large numbers of them are trapped every season on both the Upper and the Lower or Vanderipe Lake."



"Pau pau" in Myakka's FL dry prairie



"...the next step might be on the back of an alligator..."

"Through the pine-islands the great sand-hill cranes stalked majestically, their deep whoop resounding for miles through the air, as they flew away disturbed by our rifle-bullets. We came across no four-footed game, except a solitary grey wolf, which in company with some hundreds of the disgusting but useful turkey-buzzards was gorging himself on the rotting carcass of a cow."

"In the early morning we were daily roused up in our camp about a half hour before sunrise, by such a chorus of birds and insects, as was truly marvelous. The deep resounding whoop of the sandhill crane, the cry of bitterns, herons, and ibis, the confused quacking of large flocks of wild duck, the chattering of parroquets, the melody of a thousand songbirds, the hum of millions of insects, all combined in a sudden burst of sound that would have roused the seven sleepers. As the sun quickly mounted above the pine-tops the various sounds would gradually become hushed..."

"The silence of the mid-hours of the night was broken by the hoot of owls, the cry of night birds, and the more savage voices of the wolf, the panther, the ocelot, and the alligator; so that during the mid-day heat alone is there silence in the forests and swamps of Florida..."



Sandhill crane by Rosalie Coddington

Swamp Ape Encounters

by Anne Cederberg (volunteer)

Of the Curious Kind

Out past the ever-spreading boundaries of Sarasota, in the wilds of “Old Florida” where fewer humans set foot, lives...a mystery.

In the deepest, darkest woods, amongst the Cabbage Palms and Oaks, the tangle of Palmettos and wild grapesit lives and breathes and feeds the fertile imaginations of many visitors and residents alike. It is a creature so big, so hairy...so... well, STINKY...that the thought of it brings terror to the minds (and noses) of all who contemplate its existence.



Ranger Ira Goggans captured this photo on a dreary, drizzly overcast afternoon

It's the Florida Swamp Ape, of course, also known as the Skunk Ape, or the Florida Big Foot. Legends of its existence have been around for decades or longer, Florida's own version of the Sasquatch. For some, the Swamp Ape is absolutely real. They've seen and...er... smelled it. In fact one of the most well known Skunk Ape tales comes out of the Old Miakka area, just north of the park. In 2000, a woman took several Swamp Ape photos and sent them to the Sarasota Sheriff's Department. Several other residents in that vicinity claim to have caught a glimpse of the Swamp Ape or heard its spine-tingling howls in the night. One resident used to take groups out in the dark looking for it.

Some locals affectionately call it “the Mookie” (rhymes with “cookie”). And I heard Native Americans believe in it, having seen it making its way through the Everglades.



*Photo submitted to Sarasota County Sheriff in 2000
By Tarbtano35 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=110383695>*

“Myths abound about the skunk ape at MRSP. But what is the real story? Myakka certainly seems like prime Skunk ape territory, with its vast acreage, wild lands and remote places. The park has been on the radar of Big Foot investigators for years. To get a straight scoop, I spoke with Paula Benshoff, former Park Ranger, and long time resident in its surrounding area. Paula knows the park better than anyone I can think of.

Paula had a few tales to tell. As a new ranger, she spent a lot of time learning about the history of the park from old timers who had known it for decades. One of the interviewees had actually worked at the park, and he told a tale from the 1960's, when the wilderness preserve was not open to the public. That lack of accessibility probably added an air of mystery to the preserve. What was out there? Why couldn't people go? Staff gave the public a chance to find out when they planned a special surprise.



Artwork by Anne Cederberg



Volunteer Rosalie Coddington's skunk ape sighting

In those days the park held barbecues at the south pavilion for staff and visitors. They'd catch and roast a feral hog and serve it for the main dish. It was announced that there would be a special surprise at the upcoming barbecue. When that day arrived, rangers brought a guest from the Preserve....the Swamp Ape himself— or at least a reasonable facsimile—a ranger dressed in an ape suit, who was paraded through the crowd on the leash!

One year, a Canadian film company, producing a show that taught children how to use the scientific method, came to the park to show kids how to look for facts to support the existence or non-existence of the Swamp Ape. Paula was the scientist they interviewed. They would ask specific, scientific questions, which she would answer. She didn't comment on whether or not the Swamp Ape was real, saying, "I guess it is a mystery. I've never seen one myself." We'll never know what the children concluded, as the program only aired in Canada. and hasn't been available online.

A few years back, in nearby Myakka City, a resident claimed to see the creatures. He baited them to draw them in, stringing apples on his clothesline, (which must be a real treat, a northern fruit for a southern being). He said the bait worked and the story of his triumph went viral and brought lots of folks out to the park to look for the Swamp Ape. The craze was in full swing!

"Finding Bigfoot", an Animal Planet show, came to the park to film an episode called "Squatchin' in the Sunshine State". Its hosts worked with local Skunk Ape expert at what they called "the notorious Big foot spot, Myakka River State Park." Around that time, a video was made of a supposed Swamp Ape running across the Big Flats area. Rangers later that day caught a young man in an ape suit and escorted him out of the park.

Paula received a call from the Ranger Station that a visitor claimed to have seen a Swamp Ape. A good professional, she took down the details on a wildlife observation form. A young father and his son had heard about the Swamp Ape, and came to the park to see one. And that they did, almost right away! On the nature trail, one of the most crowded places in the park... We'll never know what it was they really saw or heard...

I worked at the park during that time. I even saw the Swamp Ape dance at one of the Friends' concerts! In all fairness, the music was really danceable. And I must say, for a Swamp Ape, he had pretty good rhythm. (And the guy inside the suit must have had a good sense of humor, and a high tolerance for sweat!)

On a hike on Fox's High, I saw the clear imprint of a Swamp Ape footprint—a huge foot with five toes, looking remarkably human... yet... not. Especially when I looked closely and saw the words "Made in China" emblazoned on the heel. I am afraid the scariest part of some of these stories, are the lengths people will go to for a bit of fun.



Miri Hardy found this photo of the skunk ape on a mysterious abandoned trail cam



The skunk ape was once spotted crossing SR 72 in broad daylight. Photo by Anne Cederberg

As silly and obvious as some of the sightings seem, there are others that are more... mysterious. Unexplainable. There was a Park Service employee who swore up and down that he had seen a Swamp Ape down in the Everglades, and was on the lookout for one here. He started finding mysterious patches of large, 5' x 6' grass beds and decided it must be a Swamp Ape. The name "Swamp Ape beds" stuck with the other staff, and more were occasionally found. Paula saw them as well. No one could figure out what could have made them, although a visitor reported seeing wild hogs come out of one.

My job is not to prove or disprove the existence of the Mookie, just to provide a bit of fun. Who doesn't love a good mysterious tale this time of year when the nights grow longer and darker and jack o'lanterns peer out of windows? As for me, I have to agree with Paula. I guess it's a mystery. I've never seen one myself.