

Summer

2021

Newsletter



From the editor

Zack Westmark (Park Ranger)

Don't you love summer in Florida? Sure, there are as many degrees of mercury as there are skeeters swarming our socks. But the curious cumulonimbus clouds pique our visual vicissitudes and cook up cool showers to create closure after a hard day's work.

With heavy rains, river levels rise and Myakka magic results. Read on to learn more about this natural process, and next time a particularly precipitous yet benign blob of tropical moisture visits Sarasota, consider escaping to Myakka; and make sure your kit contains a camera.



Post tropical storm Elsa: High-water events at Myakka are pure magic! Photos by Miri Hardy (volunteer)

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



@FriendsOfMyakkaRiver

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

Also in this edition...



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Park Update

How flooding makes Myakka *article and photos by Zack Westmark (Park Ranger)*

Tropical storm Elsa's rambunctious rain bands dropped about 4 inches on Myakka's main entrance during the evening and mornings of July 6th and 7th, yet a foot and a few inches fell on the Myakka River's headwaters (source/upper watershed.) On the morning of Friday July 9th it came like a tidal wave.

The Wild and Scenic Myakka River is entirely rain fed, so water levels fluctuate wildly by season. High water is considered catastrophic by some, but at Myakka River State Park, flooding is an essential process and evokes the ambiance of an extended holiday. The park drive is closed to motor vehicles because 5,000 pounds of force on the submerged asphalt causes it to crumble like a cracker.

The park drive remains open to bicyclists, kayakers, and pedestrians, who may revel in Myakka Magic.

Devoid of car clamor, wildlife wander wherever. You might witness something surreal; a bobcat ascending the canopy tower seeking a scenic vista, alligators swarming the concession building as if queued for cuisine, or a fire ant mound floating in mid-air (watch out for this if you do visit during high water!)

The park's famed fauna depend on flooding. Alligators, several species of turtles, and wading birds monopolize Myakka largely due to seasonal high water. These conditions also create refuge for

the threatened West Indian manatee, especially when red tide ravages coastal waters. If you see one, please report it to park staff and make note of any identifying characteristics, like scars.

Many wildflowers along the park drive exhibit annual life cycles, essentially a flood insurance policy. The plant "knew" it wouldn't survive the inundation so it transforms into a dormant version of itself (seed) each year until abiotic conditions become more favorable.

Elegant epiphytes have adapted to thrive here another way; by clinging to boughs high in the ornate oak-palm hammock, well above seasonal high water. Several are endangered or threatened; the cardinal airplant, pineapple airplant, and the needle-root airplant orchid.

Experiencing Myakka during seasonal flooding reminds us why the river is wild and scenic, and why we must protect it for future generations.



Myakka's iconic Coreopsis "Field of Gold" became sunken treasure following tropical storm Elsa. Many wildflowers have evolved annual life cycles to persist after these stochastic events.



Swamp milkweed (Asclepias perennis) - annual wildflower occasionally found along the park drive.

Friends Update

Introducing Bike Myakka!

Article and photos by Miri Hardy (volunteer)

A new initiative of Friends of Myakka River

During these tumultuous times, many have discovered the joys of biking Myakka. And with more bikers showing up in the park than ever before, the need for additional bike amenities quickly became apparent. "Visitors were unloading their bikes at the park, then asking staff whether they could borrow an air pump!" Park Ranger Zack Westmark recalled with a smile. To provide this essential bike amenity, he reached out to the Friends of Myakka River.



Bill Jones, a frequent biker at the park, gets tips on using the new bike work station at the South Pavilion Parking Area from Ranger Zack Westmark.



Bike Myakka! routes were marked in advance, to aid navigation. Bikers can still spot, and use, route markings along Main and North Park Drive!

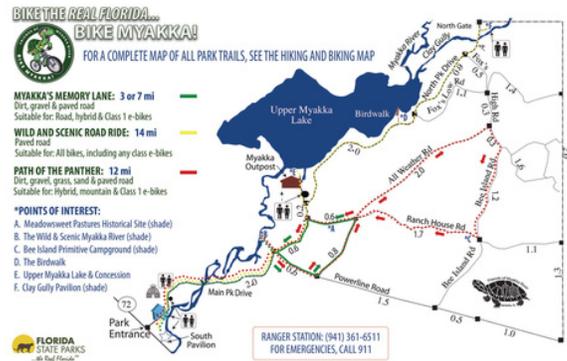
The conversation about improving the biking infrastructure in the park resonated with the Friends. "There is a different feeling when you are surrounded only by nature..." reflected Miles Millwee, President of the Friends, who himself bikes regularly in the park. He also noted that "One of our goals is to get people to appreciate nature...to get more people out of vehicles and onto trails. And bicycles are a great way to do that." Therefore, to help support biking in the park, the Friends agreed to not only fund a new bicycle work station in the South Pavilion parking area, but also provide upgraded bike parking at multiple sites in the park.

The new amenities, as well as the over-riding goal to encourage biking in the park, also created momentum for introducing bike-centric programming. To that end, Friends of Myakka River, in collaboration with the park, sponsored a special event named Bike Myakka! Day, to celebrate National Bike Month, which aims to encourage people of all ages to get out and bike.

Bike Myakka! Day, which attracted 50 bikers to the park, many for the first time, took place at the park on May 22, 2021. It was a fun day of free, self-guided bike activities, designed to connect bikers with the unique beauty of Myakka. With 3 special routes, to suit all biking abilities, color-coded maps, a 20-item Myakka-themed photo scavenger hunt, prizes, swag and refreshments, the event was planned to provide a fun, engaging and educational way for bikers to connect with the unique beauty of Myakka. And it did!

Stacey Mazza-Gilkison enjoyed Bike Myakka! Day with her husband Mike and a group of friends. Though she's hiked at Myakka many times, she never thought to bike. Like many participants, she enjoyed our Scavenger Hunt, which added an element of mindfulness and focus to their adventure at the park: "...even though you might be in nature, your mind is elsewhere," she reflected. "You're thinking of your to do list, or this problem you need to solve. But the Scavenger Hunt really made you stay in the moment. It made you open your eyes and really see what was around you".

As is usually the case at Myakka, there was indeed plenty around to be seen! Wildlife sightings that day were frequent (and included wild turkey, barred owls, feral hogs, white-tailed deer and the always popular American alligators). But wildlife wasn't the only star: With both *Coreopsis* and the vivid purple *Pluchea odorata* in bloom, our native Florida plants turned quite a few heads that day!



Our Bike Myakka! color-coded map with 3 routes, to suit all bikes and riding abilities, is available at the Ranger's Station, while quantities last.



Something purple": Bikers spot a suitable item for the Bike Myakka! Scavenger hunt along the "Wild and Scenic Road Ride" route.



Stacey Mazza-Gilkison, her husband Mike, and friends Chris and Betsy Pecor and Cindy Pace, enjoyed challenging themselves riding through Myakka's stunning backcountry, on our "Path of the Panther" route.

Aided by our color-coded map, and guided by freshly painted road-markings, many riders ventured to parts of the park they'd never been to before. "Biking in Myakka is always different", Elizabeth Bowers, who attended with her husband Dave and 14 year old granddaughter Norah, told me. "The back trails were interesting and challenging...(we enjoyed) going from grass to gravel and seeing things like the burning areas that we never knew existed." Indeed, zones treated with fire during prescribed burns were a source of intrigue and wonder for many riders.

And with volunteers and Park Rangers available for impromptu interpretation, many conversations were had about the role of fire in Myakka's unique ecosystem, as well as about other fascinating topics related to the Real Florida. For many of the bikers, such interactions were a highlight of the day, as they were for park staff and volunteers.



Biking down "Myakka's Memory Lane", Elizabeth and Dave Bowers, and their granddaughter Norah, were intrigued by the many areas treated with fire.

"Bike Myakka! Day made me feel more connected to the park." Stacey reflected. "We saw more of it than we've seen just hiking, and got a more in depth view of what the park has to offer. We were actually IN the park, not just driving thru." Due to this new appreciation, she plans to become a volunteer. And, Stacey and Mike are now members of Friends of Myakka River!



And for all bikers who were left wanting more, we have great news!

SAVE THE DATE for our next event: **Bike Myakka! for Biodiversity, 9/25/21**

With Park Rangers as our guides, we will celebrate "National Public Lands Day" and "Bike Your Park Day" by enjoying a slow-paced 7-mile loop on Park Drive, stopping to learn about Myakka's rich history, and to remove invasive plants and litter.

Details coming on Facebook (@FriendsOfMyakkaRiver) and Instagram (@Bike Myakka) Or, contact us at BikeMyakka@gmail.com, to get on our email list for updates.

American White Pelican

article and photos by Lynn M. Stone (volunteer)

The American White Pelican is sometimes referred to as Florida's "other" pelican, a nod to the popularity of its cousin, the coast-loving Brown Pelican, whose fondness for fish scraps at marinas and piers has endeared it to tourists. In Myakka River State Park, however, where sightings of Brown Pelicans are unusual, lucky observers may just find that "other" pelican.



White Pelicans at Myakka River State Park

That the white species has become increasingly familiar to Floridians is testament to the species' expanding continental population. Once a breeding bird almost solely in the prairie provinces of Canada and in the American West, it has reclaimed portions of its former breeding range (Wisconsin, for example) and pioneered new nesting sites around the Great Lakes.

Highly migratory, White Pelicans like Florida's winter climate and quiet waters. Coastal bays and coves and freshwater ponds and lakes fit the bill, literally, and Myakka's two interconnected lakes are sweet landing pads for some of these migratory birds.

Large numbers of southbound White Pelicans from northern nesting colonies in the West and Midwest begin to disperse throughout the Florida peninsula - as well as into other southern locales - in late October; they depart Florida in March and April. White Pelicans don't nest in Florida, and only a few non-breeding birds, remain in Florida for the summer. The best time to observe White Pelicans in Myakka is during mid-winter, but be forewarned: White Pelicans are transient and opportunistic; their fidelity to Myakka's lakes lasts only as long as the pickins' are abundant.



White Pelicans have earned notoriety for their stunning eye appeal and communal foraging behavior. Even at great distance, the birds are mesmerizing as they spiral upward, glinting like ice chips, into high thermals.

Closer to earth, as a skein of the birds parachutes to splashdown on Upper Myakka River Lake, they are even more compelling. One marvels how a bird engineered with a 9-foot wingspan on a 16-pound chassis can turn, tilt, accelerate, and brake with such elegance.

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To appreciate the size of a White Pelican, check it out with its brown cousin, itself a big bird. Seeing the two together is a highly unlikely happenstance at Myakka, but a reasonable expectation along the Florida coasts, where browns and whites share sand bars and marinas.

Based on wingspan, the White Pelican is the largest of Myakka's birds, exceeding the Sandhill Crane, which stands like a giraffe, but falls short in wingspan and weight. If one measures bird size by poundage, Wild Turkey toms may exceed 20 pounds, typically heavier than White Pelicans. (A possible exception: a 30-pound White Pelican reported in 1958.)



You can meet several bird species at arm's length in Myakka. The White Pelican is not one of them. White Pelicans on open lakes are typically stand-offish. Still, with a long telephoto or binoculars, you can still observe their unique fishing strategy close-up. White Pelicans are among the few vertebrates that hunt communally; that is, they depend upon each other for a meal.

In Florida both pelican species live almost live almost entirely on fish. Brown Pelicans make spectacular, crashing dives into the sea. In contrast, White Pelicans practice various levels of group coordination to herd fish into an ever-tightening circle of rimmed with triple-E webbed feet and huge, dipping beaks.

A White Pelican trawls its distensible gular pouch or lunge into the milling fish. And, yes, the amazing pouch can hold more than the bird's "belican," some three gallons of water, which the pelican rapidly drains before tossing its head back to swallow its take. (The pouch does not function as a food cache.)

As a White Pelican transforms from relatively drab winter plumage into brighter plumage at the outset of breeding season, a flat, sail-like protuberance develops on its upper mandible. Pelican observers at Myakka won't see the protuberance at the height of its growth, nor the frilly head plumes that adorn breeding plumage; White Pelicans migrate north too soon.

The White Pelican is a remarkable conservation success story. It survived plume hunting, DDT, and even the Feds' liaison with fishing interests to eradicate it from Yellowstone National Park in the 1920's for its presumed impact on trout.

Today, in government vernacular, it is a Species of Least Concern, a most extraordinary turn of events for an extraordinary bird.

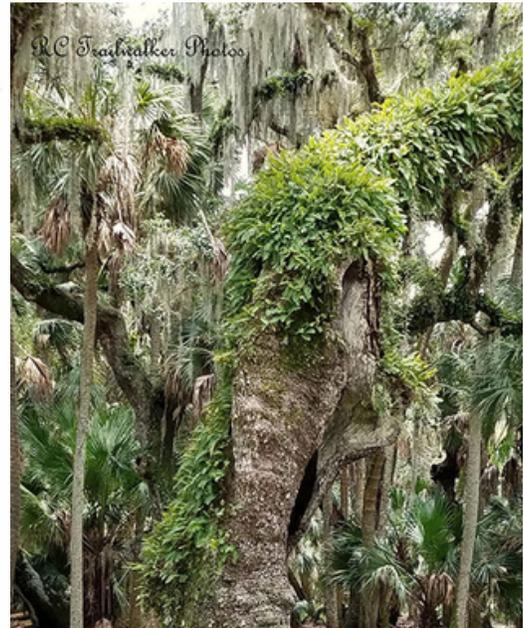


Myakka's Rare Creatures

text and photos by Rosalie Coddington (volunteer)

Two of my favorite things at Myakka are trees and wildlife. I have discovered these two can at times be found in the same thing. You can find them if you keep your mind open and your eyes wandering high and low.

Lose yourself in nature and find my discoveries or maybe some I haven't found. If you really try you may see an elephant or a two headed dragon.



Myakka's magic is everywhere. I hope you take a walk in nature and discover something rare.

What do you see in these photos?



Staff Spotlight

Ranger Ira Goggans

by Zack Westmark
(Park Ranger)

Ira is a name you are likely to hear radiating from a staff radio. That's because one of our newest park rangers does it all. Ira seems to attain "the big 5" every day; evenly distributing an eight hour shift into administration, maintenance, protection, resource management, and visitor services. One hour he may call to inform the ranger station that a remote back-country campsite pitcher pump has been repaired, then ping from the opposite corner of this 37,000 acre park to parse out a plant identification.

Ira Goggans was born and raised in Sarasota. Growing up, his parents brought him to Myakka many times, and camping in the Blue Ridge mountains four times a year. He learned of land that was earmarked for all to enjoy, so these early life experiences likely lead to his new calling at Myakka.



Photo by Miri Hardy

After graduating from Booker High School, Ira earned credentials in culinary arts and marine mechanics from Manatee Technical College. After touring the United States for a year as a bass guitarist, Ira immediately got into long-haul trucking because he wanted to make a living seeing the country.

Six years of trucking afforded the opportunity to traverse all of our country's great states and most of western Canada. Trucking could be exciting too. One morning, just outside Belforsch, South Dakota, about an hour before dawn, an eerie fog settled on the road and iced almost instantly. Ira slowed his rig to 20 miles per hour, but was abruptly alerted that the truck's wheels were not spinning. He somehow managed to pilot the pontoon to a rest area.

While trucking could be thrilling at times, Ira grew restless of driving through beautiful places without the chance to explore them. He also missed his community in Sarasota.

As a Park Ranger, Ira embraces the calling of public service. He is motivated by the satisfaction of providing an important resource to the community and encourages more young people to consider a career in public service.

If reincarnated as a plant, he'd be poison ivy, so people will stay away. After a cheerful chuckle, his choice was changed to the cypress tree because he hails the habitats they occupy. We hope his career at Myakka will be as interesting and long lived as these graceful gymnosperms.



Photo by Miri Hardy

Volunteer Spotlight

Shirley and Larry Holwegner

by Anne Cederburg (volunteer)



Shirley and Larry Holwegner are first time Myakka River State Park volunteers. Larry, is originally from Minot, North Dakota and Shirley is from Spokane, Washington.

They arrived at the park mid-May and stayed through the first week of August.

The couple became full time RVers 9 year ago, when they realized that “life was short and it was time to see the country. So we took the big leap,” Larry explained. They’ve since circled the country six times and hit all fifty states. “We don’t have any one favorite place,” they both agree. “If you don’t like the scenery, just move 20 miles!” Their travels have taken them to our area before on many occasions, when they spent a few winters kayaking the Myakka

River while staying with friends at Myakka Valley Ranches. While some feel a tad nervous kayaking amongst the wildlife, Shirley explained, “The Myakka is one of our favorite rivers - **because** of all the gators! They don’t bother you when you’re out there.” They both are very interested in history and learn a lot as they travel. Given their love of history, they especially enjoyed the tram and boat tours here at Myakka River State Park.

One of the gifts of life on the road is spontaneity. “Sometimes we choose the path we’ll travel the day before.” At times when traveling they have a specific destination in mind and drive directly there. Other times “we like to stop and smell the roses.” Their most recent place to stop and stay awhile has been our park.

In the four months they spent here, they worked very hard keeping what Larry said is one of the best and well kept parks he’s seen, in good shape. Their territory was Big Flats, Clay Gully, the Lake, the Bird walk, Canopy Walk, and Fisherman’s Loop. Their tasks included keeping the bathrooms spotless during these COVID times, the grounds picked up, taking water level readings, keeping picnic tables cleaned...and they were also on raccoon duty, trying to keep them out of the dumpsters. They ended their time at the camp as Palmetto Ridge campground hosts where they cleaned dozens of sites between visitors and maintained the restrooms.

We’re glad we can free up the Rangers so they can do more important work”, Shirley reflected.

In their free time, Shirley enjoyed the sunsets on the boardwalk, the scenery in general, and especially the wildlife. “I’m in awe of the animals, even the raccoons coming out the dumpsters!” And they both are fascinated by Myakka's birds.

We thank them for spending the summer in support of our park and visitors.

Primitive Camping at Myakka

article & photos by Sandra Bernardi (volunteer)

The life of a volunteer at Myakka River State Park is not what you might call “stressful,” but according to the Attention Restoration Theory (ART)¹, any time spent out of doors will “restore our attention, improve our performance on tasks, and improve our resistance to and recovery from stressful life events.”



Bee Island campground at dusk

In a nutshell, ART proposes that exposure to nature is not only enjoyable but can also help us improve our focus and ability to concentrate. And so it was that Jane Hogg and I decided to backpack to Bee Island primitive campground on April 28, 2021, on a night of a waning full moon. Again, as volunteers at Myakka, we don't really suffer from a nature deficit as we are surrounded by some of the most spectacular Florida environment, but we set out to do what we love to do—hike and camp—and, in the process, practice ART.

If you are unfamiliar with primitive camping at Myakka, a quick Google search can give you all the info you need to plan an adventure.

There are six primitive campgrounds with three campsites at each campground. Hiking distances to the campgrounds range from 2.2 miles to 13.9 miles and you must plan to get to your site with plenty of daylight to set up camp and enjoy your surroundings.

Since it was only a 5.4 mile hike to Bee Island, Jane and I set out in the afternoon. We took several detours along the way and still had lots of time to set up camp, gather wood, and settle in for a nice evening of whatever Myakka held in store for us. As it turned out, we saw very little wildlife and only two other humans who were navigating the sugar sand on bikes.



Jane Hogg

In the middle of the night, however, a pack of coyotes ran by, yipping all the way. That was cool.

We woke early to what seemed to be our private acreage, had a quick breakfast, broke camp, and hiked back to our cars. We were completely restored. I believe ART is a fact and Jane and I proved it. Come hike Myakka to restore your own nature deficit.

1: Kaplan, S. 1995. The restorative benefits of nature: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15:169–82. doi:10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2. [Crossref], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]