

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.