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# Palmetto



Dancing With Pines • Pine Hyacinth • I Remember Rosemary • A Conversation With Ellie Whitney

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*Pine savanna. Photo by Anne Malatesta*

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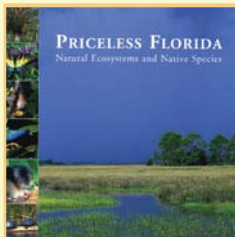
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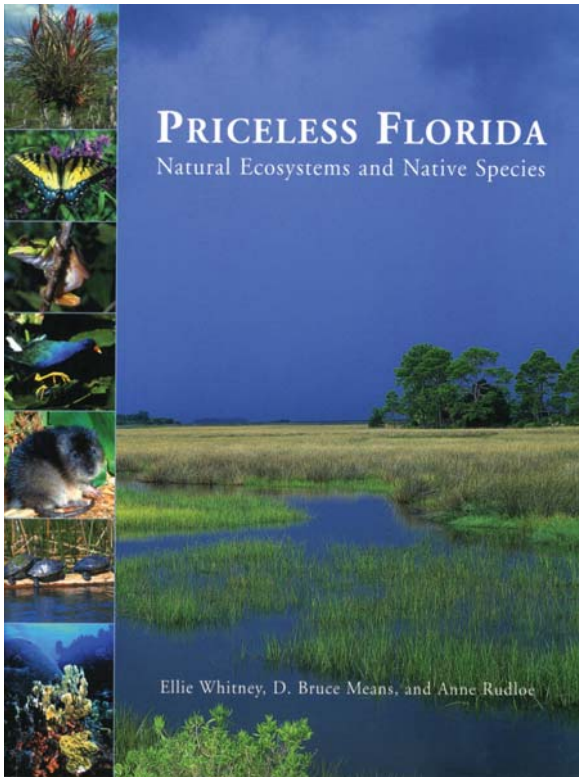
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**Editorial Content:** We have a continuing interest in articles on specific native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for submittal guidelines, deadlines and other information.

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# A Conversation with Dr. Ellie Whitney

*Florida-based writer Michael Wisenbaker interviews Dr. Ellie Whitney about her role in creating PRICELESS FLORIDA.*

*Priceless Florida: Natural Ecosystems and Native Species* was released in 2004 and already in its second printing. It provides a compelling read on Florida's native plants and animals and the environments in which they live, and includes chapters covering every natural area found within the Sunshine State. *Priceless Florida* reveals how soils, rocks, water and landforms come together to shape Florida's flora and fauna and vice versa. It also highlights how some of the world's most endangered species and ecosystems depend on our careful stewardship.

*What motivated you to take on the Herculean task of being the lead author of Priceless Florida?*

Frustration and a great feeling of sadness. Like most Florida residents, I'm originally from "someplace else" – in my case, New York City. But I wasn't a city person; I loved the out-of-doors and living things. I'd majored in biology in college and graduate school, and I'd spent summers in the Vermont and New Hampshire woods, the Adirondack Mountains, at the beach, and in the German and Swiss Alps. So, I had both book learning and outdoor experiences that instilled in me a love of the natural world and wilderness.

Then I got plunked down in Florida in 1970 because my husband took a job here. I felt very much out of place, and for years, I felt cut off from all the beautiful natural places I remembered elsewhere. Except for occasional trips to the beach and watching the birds that visited our feeders, I saw nothing natural here in Florida, and certainly no place wild. The feeling of being cut off from nature was like loneliness: I wanted a sense of connection with the earth, and couldn't find it here.

That changed when I took a series of courses at Florida State University called "Exploring Florida's Wilderness" taught by Bruce Means and Anne Rudloe. Each course involved about eight evenings of lectures and eight all-day field trips to north Florida's forests, swamps, streams, marshes, and estuaries. Those courses met a deep need in me. I began to understand what the natural world really is like. I should say "worlds," really, because each type of ecosystem is a world in itself: a salt marsh, a pine grassland, a seagrass bed, each has its own enormously diverse populations of interacting living things.

There were four courses in the "Exploring" series, but I took them six times. I repeated two of them because I simply couldn't get enough of the field trips into fascinating places about which my earlier book learning had taught me nothing. After the end of each course, I'd grieve, as a weekend would approach and I'd have no field trip to look forward to.

The writing of *Priceless Florida* began by accident. When the wilderness courses were over, I began to organize my notes. (It's hard to take legible notes when you're standing up to your armpits in a mucky swamp and holding your clipboard up over your head.) As I worked at that, I discovered there were great gaps in my understanding of the ecosystems we'd visited. Then I became a pest, over and over again asking my teachers, Bruce and Anne, to explain things I hadn't understood. They patiently answered my endless questions. They even read my attempts at putting my understanding on paper and set me straight where I was wrong. One thing led to another, and before too many years had gone by, I had something like a book.

As the book progressed from draft to draft, other factors besides the need for connection became motivators that kept me going. I gained a satisfying sense of mastery over some of the material; that felt good. Also, the subjects were fascinating and inspiring. In an age when everyone is bemoaning the ways we humans are ruining so many parts of the planet, I was privileged to be immersed in natural, unspoiled areas. People who read parts of the book seemed to enjoy it. And I had a sense that the book might be important to many people who, like myself, were new to Florida and out of touch with nature.

## About the Authors and Illustrator

**Ellie Whitney** grew up in New York City, was educated at Harvard and Washington universities, and has lived in Tallahassee since 1970. She has taught at Florida State and Florida A&M universities and has authored some two dozen college textbooks on health and related topics. She contributed weekly columns on environmental matters to the *Tallahassee Democrat* from 1990 to 1995 and she has spent some 35 years exploring outdoor Florida and studying its ecology.

**Bruce Means** grew up in Alaska, has a Ph.D. in biology from Florida State University, and is president of the Coastal Plains Institute and Land Conservancy, a nonprofit center for research and education on the ecology of the southeastern U.S. Coastal Plain. For more than 20 years he has taught FSU field classes on the ecology of Florida. He has led ecotours on four continents and has more than 220 published scientific and popular articles, some of which have appeared with his photographs in *Natural History*, *National Wildlife*, *International Wildlife*, *BBC Wildlife*, *Fauna*, and other magazines. He stars in six *National Geographic Explorer* documentary films.

**Anne Rudloe** has a Ph.D. in biology from Florida State University. She and her husband Jack Rudloe live in Panacea, Florida, where they have run the Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratory (GSML) since 1963. GSML supplies live marine animals to academic scientists, and since 1990 has also served as an independent nonprofit environmental education center. The Rudloes teach the public about coastal ecosystems and biological diversity through live exhibits. Approximately 16,000 visitors participate in GSML's educational programs each year. Anne Rudloe's writing has appeared in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian* magazine, and numerous scientific journals.

**Eric Jadaszewski** was born and raised in rural Florida where he studied horticulture and commercial art. He owned a native plant nursery in Florida for 16 years, and now lives in rural New Hampshire where he owns and runs a retail garden center with an emphasis on native plants.

### *What was the hardest thing about writing the book?*

Two aspects were especially difficult. Deciding how to organize and present all the ecosystems of Florida was a challenge. I consulted many authorities and references and made about two years' worth of false starts before settling on The Nature Conservancy's scheme used by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory.

The other thing that was hard was that none of us, and no one else, was an expert in all the areas we covered. Florida is a huge, very diverse state. People who know south Florida's ecosystems well may know very little about north Florida and vice versa. The east coast is very different from the west coast. And ecologists each tend to specialize in uplands, or wetlands, or aquatic or coastal ecosystems; they can't know it all. Too, ecology itself is an extremely complex subject, encompassing as it does so many other disciplines in its synthesis – geology, paleontology, botany, zoology, microbiology, chemistry, meteorology, oceanography, and many more. I guess you could say we were fools, rushing in where any sensible person would fear to tread.

### *State boundaries are not natural boundaries so why didn't you choose a biogeographic region rather than Florida's state boundaries to define the scope of the book?*

Because people identify with their state, not with their biogeographic region. And they feel they own their state. Floridians can take pride in the natural wonders of Florida, and once they understand what treasures we have here, they may well want to be better stewards of this place. Then, too, many decisions about the state's lands and waters are made by the people of the state.

I have a fond dream that some day every state will have a book like this and everyone who resides in the state will have to/want to learn what's in it. Doctors who treat the human body first have to learn its parts and how they work to maintain life. Shouldn't we who exert impacts on our state's ecosystems first have to learn what they are, how they work, and what they do for us?

### *From start to finish, how long did it take to complete the book?*

It took sixteen years. I made a first, tentative outline for the book in the spring of 1988. The final draft was accepted for publication in the spring of 2004.

### *How involved were your coauthors, Drs. Means and Rudloe?*

Very involved. Bruce served as our expert on upland, wetland, and freshwater aquatic ecosystems. He allowed me to freely adapt parts of all his other publications, and he read and critiqued every part of the manuscript many times. Anne served as our expert on marine and estuarine ecosystems. She wrote several chapters and parts of chapters and reread and corrected the final draft.

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*How difficult was it for the three of you, not to mention the many editors, photographers and others, to put together this magnum opus?*

It was a big job, but I wouldn't call it difficult. I took responsibility for putting it all together into a seamless whole, and for obtaining the services of several editors in succession, each of whom contributed excellent ideas and criticisms. Bruce and Anne contributed many photographs and I traveled the state for more than a year to collect photos from some ninety other photographers. I also took on the task of doing the layout and composition, arranging the pages as you see them in the final version. I was lucky to have ample free time. I retired early from outside full-time work and I live alone.

*What primary audience do you hope to reach beyond the environmental community with Priceless Florida?*

I'm sure every author would like to think that "everybody" should read their book, and I am no exception. I believe the lands and waters and natural communities among which we live are vitally important to our well-being and health. I believe that besides "environmentalists," legislators, planners, attorneys, judges, hunters, fishermen, schoolteachers, economists, developers, builders, preachers, writers, photographers, artists, and people of many other stripes would benefit from gaining the perspective on our environment that this book offers. And I believe they would find the subject beautiful and pleasing.

*Knowing what you know from already having created this book, what would you do differently if you were starting from scratch?*

That question makes me laugh. Had I known that it would take a full sixteen years out of my life, I might have hesitated to take it on at all! But I'm glad I didn't know, because the reward of seeing it print makes all the effort worth while.

Someone else might know of a better way to go about attempting a task like this, but I don't. If a book or a course is not already there to teach you a subject, then you pretty much have to begin by making something up out of whole cloth. Of course you research the available

literature, but to put together a big picture, you have to do some synthesizing, and you're bound to make mistakes. At least, though, you end up with something you can show someone and ask for criticism. Then you have to do it over. I went through that dozens of times with every part of this book – a sort of successive-approximation process. But how else can you do something no one has done before?

It seems inefficient, but I think most authors would agree that 'writing' is mostly a process of 'rewriting.'

*Do you believe that Priceless Florida will change the way the public thinks about our state's fragile natural communities?*

I hope so. I hope they'll be more proud and protective of what we have here.

*Generally speaking, are you sanguine about Florida's future in the 21st Century and beyond?*

Sometimes I am, Mike, and sometimes I'm not. I've lived long enough, now (67 years), to have seen many apparently hopeless cases come out well, even though I couldn't see how that was possible at the time. In the case of Florida's ecosystems, it all depends on how much we value them. I've heard it said that we love only what we understand and we value only what we love. If we understand what treasures we have here, we will love them, we will value them, and we will take care of them. 🌺

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**Priceless Florida: Natural Ecosystems and Native Species**

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Illustrated by Eric Jadaszewski.  
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