

Round the Year on Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary

by Judith Buhrman

Part Three: Spring

Rudely interrupted in its search for a crayfish by our noisy approach, the raccoon scrambles onto the road and flees toward his only hope for safety, a lone sabal palmetto. This is my kind of 'coon. No urban punk with an attitude and a studied indifference to vehicles, this is a wild animal with a healthy fear of anything human. It scrambles up the trunk, rotating as we pass, to keep the tree between itself and us. Our last sight of it is one masked eye peeking around a bootjack to see that we are really departing. It's good to be back in the Sanctuary.

We are perched atop the newest and one of the most important tools in Sanctuary Manager Scott Hedges' management kit — a swamp buggy. It gives him access to virtually every corner of the property while inflicting minimal damage on plants and none on the soil profile, all-important factors in matters of sheet-flow of water. Improbably wide tires roll over vegetation without crushing, and the vehicle will hold a large water tank for fire management, as well as other equipment, and move through all but the deepest marshes with serene impunity. This homely and serviceable chariot will be our transportation on this splendid April day, as Candy Weller and I take the Grand Tour.

Scott's task for the day is to check more than two dozen groundwater-monitoring stations scattered about the property. One of our first stops is a small section of pine flatwoods adjacent to a good-sized water lily (*Nymphaea odorata*) marsh. This type of marsh retains surface water more than three-quarters of the year, save in times of drought, and often has expanses of open water, as this one does. Turtle heads dot the open water

surface and dragonflies patrol the air. Occasional grunts signal the presence of the aptly named pig frog; cricket frogs provide a running commentary. Profusely blooming pickerel weed (*Pontederia cordata*) surrounds the open water, a misty blue ring punctuated by constellations of snowy *Sagittaria* species. In the pines, titmice squeak, cardinals and Carolina wrens declare territorial rights, and a white-eyed vireo vehemently protests our incursion. At the edges, we find lance-leaved violets scattered among the grasses.

Mosaic has become a cliché to describe Florida's interlocking and intergrading ecosystems, but nowhere is the truth more apparent than in this Sanctuary, part of the once vast Kissimmee marsh complex. Marshes, ponds, hammocks, swales, and sloughs abound on all sides.

Some of these areas cover several acres, others are urban lot-sized. Some of the oak hammocks are quite large, the great live oak limbs supporting butterfly orchids (*Encyclia tampensis*) and numerous tillandsias. Also present are dahoon holly (*Ilex cassine*), laurel oak, (*Quercus hemisphaerica*), and myrsine (*Rapanea punctata*), as well as wonderfully gnarled and twisted Walter's viburnums (*Viburnum obovatum*), some reaching toward 6 meters (20 ft) in height. Generations of leaf mould form a spongy carpet on the ground, on which there is little to be found save saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), many with four- or five-foot trunks.

Our main preoccupation riding through these hammocks quickly becomes staying aboard the buggy. Its high profile puts us well within the grasp of overhanging limbs, and "Down!" is the word for the day. "It's

even more fun when you run into a wasps' nest," says our jovial tour guide. Our dives for cover take on a new urgency.

There are cabbage palm hammocks, too, ranging in size from six or eight to several dozen palms. These hammocks convey an entirely different feeling from the grotto-like live oak hammocks. The wax myrtles and saw palmettos on the edge give the impression of walls, and the large fronds, of a roof high above. To enter one and walk among the columnar trunks feels for all the world like coming into a ruined monument of a long-vanished civilization.

Here and there are hardwood swamps with willow (*Salix caroliniana*) and tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*), and it is there we see occasional solitary, scarlet torches of *Asclepias lanceolata* rising from standing water.

And there are marshes a-plenty. Maidencane, pickerelweed/sagittaria, thalia, and sawgrass/buttonbush marshes share a substrate of organic soil and moderately long hydroperiods. Gray ghosts of last year's St. John's-wort (*Hypericum* spp.) mark the sparsely vegetated hypericum marshes, which are sandy, low spots with bladderworts (*Utricularia* spp.) and beakrushes (*Rhynchospora* spp.). Subject to short hydroperiods, these often border deeper, organic-soil marshes.

All these wetlands support, if not a great diversity, a great number of animals. Amphibians are the most obvious, being heard if not seen, even at midday. Among them are the beautiful southern leopard frog, squirrel tree frog, and oak and narrow-mouthed toads. Snakes include cottonmouth moccasin, crayfish, red-bellied swamp, and water snakes. Moments after Scott Hedges mentions the king rail as a common bird, we come upon two of them, strolling down the trail before us, nonchalant

as barnyard chickens.

The Sanctuary is criss-crossed with tire ruts, a legacy of prior human use, and it is very clear from animal tracks in the ruts that critters love a roadway as much as people. We see raccoon, deer, bobcat, opossum, spotted skunk, and rabbit tracks, fresh and clear, as well as others not readily identifiable.

As day's end approaches, we finally emerge onto the prairie, and I am again struck by the quality of light here. New leaves on the usually unremarkable gallberry (*Ilex glabra*) have the look of liquid pewter. Flower colors seem more intense, the sky a deeper blue. Most of the winter visitors have gone, but we flush a covey of bobolinks, passing through on the journey from South America to their breeding grounds in the northern third of the United States.

Bachman's and grasshopper sparrows are staking out their territories, but none step up to sing this evening, and we get only fleeting glimpses. (Avon Proving Grounds has a population of the Florida grasshopper sparrow, and wants to learn to manage for it; and The Nature Conservancy, in cooperation with the Air Force, has begun a study on the Sanctuary of the birds' territorial size, habitat selection, and response to fire.)

Spring on the prairie does not approach the eye-popping splendor of the autumn floral display. Basal leaves and rosettes of the fall bloomers are abundant, but relatively few flowers are present. There are polygalas (*P. lutea* and *P. nana*), hat pins (*Eriocaulon* spp.), and numerous ladies'-tresses (*Spiranthes vernalis*); a few of the ericaceous shrubs are still in bloom, but the blueberries (*Vaccinium myrsinites*) have already set fruit. We have come too late for grass pinks (*Calopogon* spp.), and so must settle for crow poison (*Ziga-*

denus densus). As stalwart and erect as palace guards, the flower heads rise above the surrounding wiregrass in a spectacular display, each head bearing a multitude of snowy blossoms that turn pink as they age. They provide just the right finale for this day.

What strikes most forcefully from all we have seen this day is the enormous capacity of the Sanctuary to retain water. What has been for me an environmental article of faith — that wetlands are important — has been transformed by the experience of this vast, placid domain of water.

For some reason I think of resurrection fern as I start the car for the long journey home.

If you would like to contribute to the management fund of the Sanctuary, send a check made out to National Audubon Society Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary Management Fund, to Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary, 14425 NW 248th St., Okeechobee, FL 34972. If you would like to help in other ways, or schedule a field trip, call Scott Hedges at (813) 467-8497.

Judith Buhrman is president of Pinellas Chapter of FNPS. The final article — Summer — of this four-part series on the Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary will be in the next issue of The Palmetto.



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