

Footloose in the Fakahatchee

A Longing for Wilderness

by Roger Hammer

"Deer ... led us through a dream world of gray cypresses and silent Spanish moss and soft knee-deep watery sloughs ... I stood and stared and could not believe that I held orchids in my hands."

— Marjorie Kimman Rawlings in *Cross Creek*, 1933

Artwork by R.P. Elliott



Reproduction of a water-colored drawing by R.P. Elliott, an artist who specializes in Florida imagery. This is classic Fakahatchee, with royal palms towering over a swamp thick with pond apple trees, cypress, strangler fig, and all manner of ferns and epiphytic plants.

The mystery and haunting beauty of Collier County's Fakahatchee Swamp are seductive. They draw those of us who love the place forward and stir strange apprehensions just before taking that first step into the cool, reddish-brown water that floods the understory. I suppose the apprehension is because of the real and imagined dangers that the swamp harbors. It is one of the very last Florida frontiers, and that is why I have spent so much time there, and why I keep returning. It is why I spent five days in 1975 wading its entire eighteen mile length, sleeping in a jungle hammock suspended above the swamp water. Bear with me while I explain this bit of personal esoterica.

Nowhere else on earth can one find such a diverse assemblage of tropical plant species growing in harmony with more cold-tolerant temperate species. Some are on the southern edge of their range, others occur no farther north in Florida. The trees themselves are veritable air gardens. The

branches and trunks of tropical trees such as pond-apple, *Annona glabra*, and temperate species like pop ash, *Fraxinus caroliniana*, are

festooned with epiphytes, themselves mostly of tropical origin. And among the temperate and tropical plants skulk endangered Florida panthers, black bear, and Everglades mink. Where else can your footprints mingle with those of panthers, bear, and mink? Then there are the birds — wood ducks, eastern bluebirds, and purple gallinules are my favorite. There are amphibians, turtles, fish, the requisite alligators, a grand array of both harmless and venomous snakes, and countless insects and spiders. There are river otters, raccoons, marsh rabbits, white-tailed deer, unwelcome feral hogs, and more. Yes, there are even leeches.

The Fakahatchee represents a remnant of breathtaking wilderness spared from development as recently as 1974 when it became officially known as the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve. It is a lush botanical show-

place that includes samples of almost every landscape found within the Big Cypress National Preserve to the east. One can wan-

der for hours, even days, through unnamed sloughs without seeing the same view twice. And each slough beckons the visitor — intruder if you will — to explore further, penetrate deeper, and search out the secrets hidden deep inside. A rich variety of orchids (46 species), bromeliads (13 species), and ferns (43 species) grace the swamp. Many are found in the Fakahatchee and nowhere else in Florida.

The Fakahatchee seems at peace with itself, but the picture is deceptive. The system has been drastically altered and is but a fragile mimic of its former self. Logging threatened the swamp between 1944 and 1952 when a complex network of tramroads was dredged to facilitate removal of large cypress, *Taxodium distichum*, by rail. Most of the tramroads are now nearly impassable, long ago overgrown with thick vegetation, including royal palms, *Roystonea elata*, that tower like sentinels above the upper canopy. The trams appear every 1,600 feet through the swamp, and there is a deep ditch on either side of each raised bed. Massive cypress stumps, now bedecked with terrestrial orchids, ferns, liverworts, and mosses, stand in mute testimony to the logging. They are also popular lounging places for fat cottonmouth water moccasins.

A graded dirt road, known as W. J. Janes Memorial Scenic Drive, bisects a portion of the swamp and leads to an ill-fated housing project envisioned by the Gulf American Corporation that threatened to drain the Fakahatchee's lifeblood — its water. Janes Drive was built in 1963 through the efforts of Winifred J. Janes, a County Commissioner from nearby Copeland. To drive on it is to travel on what once was one of the old tram beds that traversed the swamp during the logging days. But those who do nothing else but drive its length miss the point, and leave without ever realizing or understanding the natural wealth tucked away in the wilderness that surrounds them.

The diversity of life that calls the Fakahatchee home is remarkable. A lucky observer may find a swamp wolf spider clinging to the side of a tree with a dead crayfish in its mandibles. This large, brown, hairy

spider runs underwater where it seeks its prey, either fish or crayfish. No, this is not your everyday spider, then again this is not your normal swamp. The infinitely dangerous cottonmouth water moccasin abounds, and will intimidate any traveler by belliger-

stands only about 4 cm tall and periodically produces impossibly small crimson flowers. I once showed this plant to a friend and, after a close inspection, he asked "When does it flower?" Feeling apologetic for the orchid, I humbly answered, "It is flowering!"

Another extraordinary floral inhabitant, and arguably my favorite Florida wildflower, is the ghost orchid, *Polyrrhiza lindenii*, which blooms at the height of mosquito season. This leafless species is nothing more than roots on a tree trunk radiating outward like spokes on a wheel. Each year, principally in July, a large, snow-white flower emerges on a thin spike looking, for all the world, like a leaping albino frog suspended in mid-air. If you dare to brave its habitat at night, you will be rewarded with a most intoxicating nocturnal perfume. On more than one occasion, I have stretched my jungle hammock between two trees in the interior of the Fakahatchee and spent blissful evenings sipping rum in the company of flowering ghost orchids.

Serenity pervades the Fakahatchee, and nighttime in the summer rings with the songs of chuck-will's-widows, the lonely, plaintive calls of limpkins, and the nightly fantasia of lightning bugs. Screech owls whisper their soft, monotone trill, and barred owls loudly ask "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" throughout the night. These are periodically interrupted by the

deep, throaty hoots of great horned owls and a raucous cacophony of frogs. The night-scented orchid, *Epidendrum nocturnum*, advertises its white, spindly flowers with an exotic fragrance that summons sphinx moth pollinators. Not to be outdone, a vining orchid, *Vanilla phaeantha*, zig-zags high up tree trunks to show off its large, yellowish-green, ephemeral flowers that open before daybreak and close by mid-morning. And mid-morning signals the opening of two other enticing swamp blossoms, the white water-lily, *Nymphaea odorata*, and its blue-flowered relative, *Nymphaea elegans*. Gaudy pink flowers of Bartram's marsh-pink, *Sabatia bartramii*, adorn the open, sunny, wet prairies surrounding the swamp.

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A rare native bromeliad, *Guzmania monostachia*, is at its height of abundance in Florida within the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve.

ently staying put and facing you, flinging its mouth wide open when approached, revealing the white lining that gives it its common name. It is a polite warning, well worth heeding.

And there are the plants. Some of Florida's rarest botanical treasures take refuge here. One, a minuscule epiphytic orchid, *Lepanthopsis melanantha*, took me five years of exploratory missions into the deepest recesses of the swamp before first laying eyes on one. In our lives there are important moments that linger in our memory long after they happened. For me, finding this unassuming little orchid was one of them. Its tiny stems were protruding from a moss-laden trunk of a pop ash tree in an exceptionally deep, remote slough. This orchid typically

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Visit the Fakahatchee. It's an experience that I would recommend for anyone with an adventurous spirit, and for every Florida politician. It arouses in its visitors the fundamental passion for wild Florida. It holds stories of bears and butterfly orchids, of alligators and alligator lilies, of mink and marsh mallows. And you will emerge exhausted and muddy and spiritually invigorated, with a deeper respect and better understanding of its secrets. You will take with you a human message that we should all live in concert with Florida's swamps, not in conflict with them. Swamps are special places that need to be known intimately, yet to me, knowing the Fakahatchee intimately matters less than simply knowing that it's there. ✨

REMINDER FROM THE AUTHOR: All of Florida's native orchids are protected and should never be removed from their natural habitat. It is common sense, backed by public law, that we should leave wild orchids and other native plants where we find them so they may be discovered and admired by future explorers.

IF YOU GO

The entrance to Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve is 2 1/2 miles north of Tamiami Trail (US 41) or about 14 miles south of Alligator Alley (Interstate 75) on State Road 29. A sign advertises the entrance to Janes Scenic Drive. A ranger station is located a short distance down on the right where visitors can receive information about the preserve. Guided swamp walks can be arranged between November and February by calling the preserve at (941) 695-4593. For the faint of heart, there is also a short, elevated boardwalk at the southern terminus of the swamp on Tamiami Trail seven miles west of SR 29. It is advertised by a sign on the south side of Tamiami Trail.