



Wekiva Wilderness Trust Newsletter

May, 2024

News

April was another very busy month with a lot of great events. It is wonderful to see more and more companies wanting to come into the park with their staff to help maintain the park.

If we keep this up, we will certainly need to recruit more volunteers and boost the membership of the Wekiva Wilderness Trust.

Easter Bunnies



On March 23, WWT was represented at the People of Wekiwa Springs (POWS) annual Easter Egg Hunt. POWS represents homeowner associations surrounding the park and was a great event to spread the word about the park, WWT and the Junior Rangers Program.

This family-friendly event took place on the corner lot of Votaw and Thompson Roads and attracted a great crowd. Everyone enjoyed a morning filled with candy, crafts, music and engaging activities – and, of course, learning about the WWT and volunteer opportunities in the park.



To give back to the community, people attending were asked contribute to POWS ongoing clean-up efforts by bringing a bag of pine bark mulch to help maintain and beautify communal spaces in the area.

Wekiwa Swim Club lunch

On April 11, members of the Wekiwa Swim Club hosted a lunch for rangers and volunteers at the Shop. The club's members are those hardy folks who swim at Wekiwa every morning, come rain or shine, and the lunch was their way of saying thanks to those who help protect and preserve the park. It was a really good, well-attended event. The food was excellent and it was a great way for everyone to get to know each other. We should hold this type of event more often.



Members of the Swim Club

Nature Center Brainstorming Lunch

Nature Center volunteers met for a brainstorming session over lunch in the park on April 14. Also present was Dr. Andrew Kushnir, our globe-trotting vet, who spoke about some of his latest animal adventures. He checked out our animal ambassadors, before joining everyone for lunch with Henry, his very well behaved boxer.

He has strong ties to Ukraine (his father is from there) and at the beginning of the Russian invasion he got three tiny lion cubs out of Ukraine to safety at a zoo in Poland, bottle fed them for weeks, and got them to a big cat sanctuary in the U.S. Last year he treated chimpanzees at a sanctuary in Uganda, and he just recently returned from Costa Rica where he took care of orphaned sloths. He will be coming back in a few weeks to do a more thorough examination of our animals.



Nature center volunteers with Brent



Dr. Kushnir and Henry

Eco Rangers at Wekiwa Springs

Wekiva Elementary School chose Wekiwa Springs as the venue for its six-week long 2024 Eco-Rangers program. The first meeting took place on March 29 with the 'Sandhill Express Tram Tour' where participants learned about the park, its history, and the Junior Rangers Club.

The April 5 session focused on plant structures, including the lifecycle of pinecones and the diversity and evolution of living organisms because of Florida's climate. The April 12 meeting focused on the wildlife of the Wekiva River Basin and on April 19, the Eco-Rangers were taught how to identify and deal with invasive plants. Brent was in his element on April 26, when the children learned about prescribed burns and why they are so important.

The final program on May 3 focused on birds and why they choose the habitats in which they live.



Eco-Rangers looking for invasive plants



Eco-Rangers at the source of Wekiwa River

Ethel

The Historic Ethel Trail has been officially open for just under two months and we estimate that about 60 people a week are using the self-guiding walk brochure to hike the 1.5 mile loop through what would have been the center of the Ethel township.

We are still working on building two 1880 style cabins near the trailhead but have to find an architect or civil engineer who can produce construction plans in order to get a planning permit. Although the cabins themselves are very basic and relatively easy to build, they must be constructed to meet modern-day regulations and codes. The challenge is to design them in such a way that they still look like 19th century cabins. This requires hiding all the additional materials needed to comply with codes.

Survival Bootcamp

Another successful survival boot camp was held at Rock Springs Run State Reserve on April 6.



Participants learned how to find water, food, light fires, and other basic survival skills. In hands-on sessions, they braided rope from natural materials and made baskets from palmetto fronds. As always, the class was then broken into small groups and tasked with building a shelter in just one hour. It had to be waterproof and large enough to accommodate all the members of the group.

The shelter above demonstrates what can be achieved in a relatively short time when people work as a team.

What is fascinating is that the sort of shelter pictured above is exactly what the early settlers would have built when they first arrived in Ethel after the Civil War. They had to clear the land, chop down the trees and fashion them into logs before they could start building their cabins. The first thing they did on arrival, therefore, was to build an A-frame shelter with branches and thatched with palmetto fronds and that was their home until the cabin was built.

We have a letter from one settler to his wife, who had remained in Georgia with their children until their cabin was finished. In it he wrote that it was sometimes difficult to sleep in his shelter because of the snakes slithering through the thatching over his head!

Publix Workdays

Many thanks to the cheerful and hardworking folks from Publix who spent two days (April 23 and 24) in the park beautifying and landscaping various public areas, repairing boardwalks, and picking up trash under Brent's supervision. About 150 people took part in this two-day "giving back to the community" which benefited Wekiwa Springs State Park and Rock Springs Run State Reserve.



Publix employee participants



Publix at Sand Lake



Beautifying the parking areas



Repairing the boardwalk

Puzzler

For those of you who don't know the difference between a crocodile and an alligator, the crocodile is the one next to the alligator.



Nature News

Flower of the Month

Swamp Leather-Flower (*Clematis crispa*)

This month's flower is the beautiful and unusual swamp leather-flower (*Clematis crispa*). I first encountered this flower many years ago while kayaking on Rock Springs Run. It took my breath away then and continues to do so every time I encounter it. Besides in the swamp that borders Rock Springs Run, swamp leather-flower grows in the swamp near the spring pond and sometimes can be viewed from the boardwalk wet to dry trail.



Swamp leather-flower is a smooth, twining, many angled, climbing or trailing perennial vine. Its distinct nodding flowers are pinkish-purple and mildly fragrant. It has no petals. What appear to be petals are actually four petal-like sepals. The sepals are fused at the base, giving the flower a bell or urn shape. The sepals separate and curl back and up as the flower opens. Sepal margins are thin, wavy, and crisp (referring to the species name, *crispa*). There are many stamens. Flowers are solitary and borne on naked angled stems. They are showy but not usually numerous. Leaves are compound, oppositely arranged on the vine and usually have three to five leaflets. Each leaflet is linear or ovate in shape and has smooth, untoothed margins.

Swamp leather-flower occurs naturally in floodplain forests, wet hammocks and riverine swamps. Flowers typically bloom in spring and summer and attract a variety of pollinators. The seeds provide food for many birds and small wildlife.

The genus name *Clematis* is from the Greek *clématis*, or "climbing plant." The common name, leather-flower, refers to the flower's fleshy sepals. *Clematis crispa* is also known by the common names: curly clematis, curlflower, curly virgin's bower, (all referring to the curled-back sepals), and marsh clematis.



Clematis crispa viewed from below.

Note the numerous stamens which nearly fill the inside of the flower.

Puzzled?

Six differences between an alligator and a crocodile:

1. Snout:
Alligator's snout is wide and rounded, shaped like the letter U.
Crocodile's snout is narrow and pointed, shaped like the letter V.
2. Teeth showing with mouth closed:
Alligators show only the top teeth.
Crocodiles show 5 bottom teeth.
3. Size:
Alligators reach about 14 feet long.
Crocodiles reach about 17 feet long.
4. Weight:
Alligators weigh 500 to 1000 pounds.
Crocodiles weigh 800 to 1000+ pounds.
5. Color:
Alligators are dark green or black.
Crocodiles are light green, brown or light grey.
6. Environment:
Alligators prefer fresh water and live in Southeast USA from east Texas to North Carolina.
Crocodiles prefer salt water and live in South Florida south into the tropics.

**Darth Gator, Nature Ambassador, lives at our Nature Center.
Stop by and visit.**