VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: JESS KARCHER, FTA THRU-HIKER

FOOTPRINT Magazine

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FOOTPRINT

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: JESS KARCHER, FTA THRU-HIKER

BRIDGES
Building and Replacing

Fires Burn Across Florida

Florida Trail Association
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OUR MAGAZINE

The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,300-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida's own National Scenic Trail.

OUR GOAL

To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association business; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS

Contributors are welcome to submit items for our various departments as well as trail and association-related news. Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

MEMBERSHIP

If you’re not already a member, join now. As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The Footprint magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. Call toll-free 877-HIKE-FLA for more information.

ADVERTISING

Reach a highly targeted demographic of Florida outdoor enthusiasts by advertising with us or becoming a regular sponsor. Your advertising dollars directly support production and publication of this magazine and assist the Florida Trail Association in fulfilling its mission. Call 877-HIKE-FLA or email fta@FloridaTrail.org for more details.

Deadline for articles for the Spring issue of The Footprint is May 15, 2017.
President’s Message

Experiencing The Magic of Nature

Shoes Off!

Experiencing The Magic of Nature

Leslie Wheeler
FTA President

…. Earth’s crammed with heaven, and
every common bush afire with God; but
only he who sees, takes off his shoes…..

~EB Browning

I’ve always loved this quote, because
it reminds me to take the time after
the work of trails and meetings to take
off my shoes and experience the magic
of Nature. Several years ago, I was at
Torreya State Park after a visit with some
of my Florida Trail buddies. Everyone had
left, and the parking lot was empty. I just
didn’t want to leave yet, so I walked a
bit into the woods enjoying the quiet. As
it started to rain, I spotted a large group
of deer grazing just a few yards ahead of
me. It was magic moment watching them
in the mist. I was reminded that my small
universe is nothing compared to the
expanse of Nature.

I have been connected to the FTA in
so many ways and with so many friends.
From my first outing with the Western
Gate Chapter and scouting trail on Eglin
to working with the Trailblazers on the
IDIDAHIKE and beginner backpack
trips, the FTA and the Florida Trail have
become integral parts of my life. I love
that we have all kinds of members from
all kinds of backgrounds. Our common

thread is the love of exploring Wild
Florida by footpath.

And now I am more connected than
ever, as I respectfully accept the position
of President. This new responsibility is a
bit daunting considering the shoes I have
to fill. Carlos Schomaker has served for
the past 5 years as de facto executive
director with dedication and vision.
Carlos is but one person among the
many of you who have been so devoted
to FTA and the Florida Trail, and I will
try my very best to remain focused on
our mission. My goals for my term are
simple:

◆ over-communicate to members
regarding news, events, issues, etc.
◆ review administrative processes
and policies
◆ continue to work with chapters to
build an increasing member base
◆ continue to work with the USFS
and our other partners to protect
our trails and
◆ fundraise! We still do not have reliable
funding for a professional executive
director, and relying on volunteers
is unsustainable.

What is my vision for the Florida Trail
Association? We build the trails that can
connect people to their magic moments
in Nature. Our Florida Trails System,
reliably maintained by our volunteers,
is a unique resource for the public. Our

trails help those in need physically,
mentally, and spiritually in ways that we
will never know. On our trails, anyone
can find a place in the woods where
they can take off their shoes, breathe,
listen, and find peace. At the end of the
day, I hope everyone in Florida will find
time to take off their shoes somewhere
along a trail built by The Florida Trail
Association!

Leslie has been a member of Florida Trail
Association ever since she went with the
Western Gate Chapter on a field trip to
Garcon Point and observed rare pitcher
plants on her hands and knees over 20
years ago. After she moved to Jackson-
ville, she became active in the North
Florida Trailblazers Chapter serving as an
officer. She has been on the Board since
2001, first as a Director, then as Secretary. She considers her time serving at the
state level as a learning experience and is
grateful for the opportunity to meet many
members of our great organization.

Leslie has a BS Biology from Millsaps Col-
lege, and a Specialist in Blood Banking at
Ochsner Hospital in New Orleans. She
earned a Master of Healthcare Admin-
istration from Tulane University. She is
happily retired from full time work as a
Transfusion Services manager, but stays
employed part time. She also is on the
Friends of Talbot Islands State Park board,
and on the Institutional Review Board of
Jacksonville University.
Florida Trail Association is a Proud Partner with Warrior Expeditions

Warrior Expeditions supports combat veterans transitioning from their military service by thru-hiking America’s National Scenic Trails.

Visit WarriorExpeditions.org for more information
This summer, FTA is partnering with the USFS, land managers, and Framing Our Community to begin a comprehensive survey and assessment of major infrastructure found on the FNST. Beginning in the Panhandle, we’ll be working together to conduct safety and engineering inspections of bridges and elevated boardwalks. The primary goal, of course, is to ensure that our infrastructure is free of safety hazards. Additionally, by documenting the condition of the infrastructure, we can identify areas that require maintenance or upgrades.

View of the old “Demon Bridge” across Alaqua Creek. If all goes well with permitting and planning, FOC will be working with the Choctawhatchee Chapter to construct a complex replacement bridge this fall.

This issue of the Footprint features poetry from Lola Haskins. Lola has been published in 14 books (none of them self-published – find her work in your local independent bookseller or online) and is an Honorary Chancellor of the Florida State Poetry Association.

Lola writes, “Most of these poems have to do with things I saw on FTA hikes.” She is motivated to conserve wild Florida: “My dream is that poetry can energize people into action in a way that facts can’t, and I’ve been hoping my books will remind people how beautiful Florida is – which is the first step.”

We wholeheartedly support Lola’s work and believe you will enjoy experiencing it here.
FOC and FTA staff admire the new Cypress Creek Boardwalk.

our existing structures we can begin to plan and budget for the formidable task of future maintenance needs and repairs.

Many of our volunteers will recognize the trail workers of Framing Our Community from collaborations on projects such as the Fender and Two-Penny Bridges across Econfina Creek, the recently completed Cypress Creek boardwalk on the Choctawhatchee River section, and the upcoming Demon Bridge replacement across Alaqua Creek. Ian Barlow and his crew have tremendous expertise in building complex bridges and other structures in remote field locations, and they’ve worked with the USFS on major trail infrastructure projects all over the country. Together with FTA volunteers they’ve tackled some of the biggest and most challenging access issues along the FNST, and the bridges and boardwalks we’ve constructed are now themselves scenic highlights of this trail system. By combining our experience and skills we can ensure that our bridges are constructed to the highest standards, and that the Florida Trail remains safe and accessible for growing numbers of trail users.

One of the difficulties in managing and maintaining trail infrastructure is simply being aware of what’s out there; we can’t fix problems we don’t know about. There are innumerable major and minor water crossings on the FNST with various types of structures spanning them, ranging from simple log crossings to complex suspension bridges. Florida’s humid climate is tough on infrastructure—all of these structures require regular maintenance, and eventually repair or even replacement. For the past several weeks the Panhandle Region Trail Coordinators and Section Leaders have been gathering and submitting preliminary information about the condition of bridges and boardwalks within their sections, and together we’ve begun to piece together a picture of infrastructure needs throughout the region.

The next step will be for the FOC’s team to begin the process of visiting these locations to conduct more detailed inspections. Minor repairs will often be tackled immediately, and larger problems will be scheduled for repair work in the coming months. In some cases repairs may be as simple as cleaning deck boards and tightening fasteners; in other cases, significant amounts of rotted timber will have to be replaced, abutments will need to be rebuilt, and additional structural enhancements will need to be constructed.
FOC and FTA Staff perform a bridge inspection in the St. Leon wilderness of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

In preparation for these site visits, the FTA's Regional Representatives recently attended a training session with FOC staff and bridge engineer Art Johnston—the architect behind many of previously mentioned FNST infrastructure projects. Over the course of three days, we examined a number of bridges and boardwalks of various types in Nokuse, Econfina Creek, Sopchoppy, and St. Marks. We learned how to methodically examine and evaluate the structural condition of bridges and boardwalks, identify typical defects, compile our findings into comprehensive reports, and identify needed maintenance and repair work. The information we gather will ultimately be stored in a database which will allow us to prioritize maintenance work and develop a long-term plan for addressing additional infrastructure needs.

Another question we’ll be continuing to consider during this survey is how best to approach future infrastructure needs. With limited resources, we need to ensure that we have the capacity and expertise to continue maintaining and replacing the bridges and boardwalks of the FNST. In some cases, it may be beneficial to explore reroutes that minimize the amount of infrastructure needed, as was done in the Econfina Creek section. We can also explore the possibility of constructing durable trail improvements such as turnpikes as an alternative to boardwalks; such hardened surfaces can last significantly longer than timber structures, and are largely impervious to the constant threats of water and fire damage.

Do you have a concern about the safety of a particular bridge or boardwalk in the Panhandle Region? Is there a section of the FNST that you feel could use additional infrastructure improvements? Interested in helping your Chapter with infrastructure construction and maintenance? Contact me at adamf@floridatrail.org! Inspections and maintenance work will be ongoing throughout the summer and into the fall, and there will be many opportunities for FTA volunteers in the Panhandle to get involved with these projects.

FOC staff members Shilo Stuart-Pope and Julio Larregui on a newly constructed segment of turnpike in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

Art Johnston describes the engineering complexities behind the design of the Monkey Creek Bridge in Sopchoppy.

FIRST LIGHT
by Lola Haskins

I’m walking under arched oaks
whose draped mosses are dreams

I might have had when i was
a child, before I had seen moss

when suddenly, in a rush of wings,
a hawk lands

on the branch ahead.
I breathe like a falling wave.
Fires Burn Across Florida

One reason it can be so hard for the FTA staff and the US Forest Service to plan chainsaw trainings in the fall is because of what the USFS calls Fire Borrow – when fires in the Western US require the staff and funding from the rest of the country, including our three National Forests here in Florida. However, this past Fall was the first year in many when this was not as big an issue. In fact, the tables have turned and due to the major drought that Florida is experiencing this Spring, our state is now doing the borrowing.

The unseasonably warm and dry weather is creating perfect conditions for fire throughout the entire state, and the FNST has not gone unscathed. Fires have raged across the state, dwarfing the national tally since the beginning of the year. However, thanks to the excellent land managers that we work with, our staff and the general public have been notified appropriately throughout this fire season. The majority of trail closures are in South Florida but there are massive fires burning across the state.

The biggest impact to the trail is definitely being felt in Big Cypress National Preserve where a series of fires have forced the intermittent closure the entire FNST on the preserve. At the time of writing, there are still fires burning and wildland firefighters are working hard to control the blazes. The Cowbell fire has everything north of I-75 closed, the Parliament fire, the largest in the preserve, forced the precautionary closure of the FNST on the rest of the preserve. The Hotline fire west of Oak Hill Camp, the smallest at only 8 acres, did not close the camp but advised the public to be on high alert.

As a precautionary, the South Florida Water Management District has closed all district managed campsites in its 16 county district during the state’s fire season. Even with campers using approved gas stoves, the risk associated with them during such dry conditions is not worth it.

Other fires around Lakeland and Orlando have burned off and on, but none of them caused the closure of the FNST except for in the Chuluota Wilderness Area to the east of Orlando.

Active fires or not, a huge step taken by many counties in the state is to enact fire bans to ensure that more wildfires are not started by human activity. As you can see from the map, the
The majority of the counties that host the FNST in south, central, and north Florida are currently banning any form of fire. The largest fire burning in Florida is the West Mims fire. This large lightning-caused fire is straddling the Georgia/Florida line and is burning across 140,000 acres. There are currently 725 personnel from across the United States working to control the fire using a variety of methods including multiple aircraft and also ground crews. While not extremely close to the Osceola National Forest, the fire is having a major impact on the resources of the National Forest. The area between the Okefenokee Swamp and the Osceola National Forest represents the largest wildlife corridor east of the Mississippi River and the nation’s largest freshwater wetland, featuring the Okefenokee and Pinhook swamps. If this fire continues to grow south it could definitely impact the FNST, but for now it remains a good distance away.

**Firewise FTA**

When you are out on the trail during times of extreme drought such as we are right now, please remember that your actions, even well intentioned and thought out, can have devastating effects on our wild spaces. Heed the cautions of local authorities and land management agencies, have open fires in designated locations, and only use approved camp stoves in designated areas. Even during times when fires are allowed, make sure to follow Leave No Trace principles for minimizing campfire impact: have water nearby, make sure the coals are cool to the touch before leaving the area, and clear the surrounding area of debris. As FTA members, volunteers, and staff we are the role models for how to treat the trail and also public lands.

**Multi-Region Chainsaw Course**

May in Florida tends to bring the first heat and humidity of the season and for our out-of-town firefighting guests the heat was oppressive. At the recent FTA hosted chainsaw training in late April, the class met up with some firefighters from the Bridger-Teton National Forest who were barely making it even in the dry April conditions. It should serve as a reminder that we here in Florida are a tough crowd to be able to withstand our summers! This multi-region training hosted by the Osceola National Forest was instructed by Dennis and Greg Helton. Dennis is the former US Forest Service Region 8 and 9 Chainsaw Program Manager and is also the owner of Helton Logging. His teaching style, along with his son Greg, was appreciated by the 17 participants who all reported an excellent course. As usual, FTA volunteers were instructed in bucking and limbing techniques which they will use to help clear the FNST of downed trees and limbs.
In 2012, Sean Gobin returned home from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan as a marine tank commander. As a means of raising money for disabled veterans, he convinced a fellow veteran to hike the 2,168-mile Appalachian Trail with him. Along the way, Sean realized that the experience was also helping him decompress from his service.

Recognizing the therapeutic effects of long distance hiking, Sean founded Warrior Expeditions in hopes of helping other veterans “walk off the war.” The organization supports combat veterans transitioning from their military service by sponsoring their participation in a long distance outdoor expedition. This includes gear, equipment, supplies and community support.

The program has facilitated veterans on thru-hikes of National Scenic Trails throughout the country. So far, the program has provided support for veterans hiking six of the eleven National Scenic Trails – the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, Continental Divide Trail, the Arizona Trail, Ice Age Trail and Florida Trail.

During the 2016-2017 hiking season, Warrior Expeditions sponsored local volunteer Jess Karcher of Ft. Lauderdale and Brian Faye from Orlando to thru-hike the Florida Trail. Many Florida Trail enthusiasts have enjoyed following their journey on social media. Jess regularly posted updates on his adventure, and always tagged the #FloridaTrail to make sure we never missed a post!

Hikes like Jess’ make our work worthwhile and expand our understanding of what the trail can offer. After Jess returned home, we asked him to take a moment to share his experience with our membership. We hope you enjoy reading Jess’ reflections on his experience and flipping through the very best of the thousands of photos Jess took on the trail!
passion, however, is on the trail. I have done several sections of the Appalachian Trail. For the past year and half, I have volunteered with the Florida Trail Association. I am also an administrator for the Florida Hiking Syndicate and a member of the Happy Hoofer chapter.

What do you love about hiking?
Being able to disengage from everyday life. Breaking out of the normal routine and immersing myself in exploration. I enjoy being out in nature and personally think hiking is the best form of medicine.

Why did you choose to thru-hike the Florida Trail?
I chose to hike the Florida Trail after volunteering on multiple FTA working parties. Through volunteering, I discovered that Florida has unique, diverse and beautiful ecosystems. It lit a flame in me to want to discover more... and that is when I decided I had to do the thru-hike.

How did you get involved with Warrior Expeditions?
After my service, I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD makes even the slightest issue or problem more difficult to deal with. So from personal to work life, it was all hard to cope with. To help myself heal and take a step toward a better future, I decided to get more involved in hiking. I searched the internet for veteran hiking groups and Warrior Expeditions popped up. After doing some intensive research into the organization and meeting a couple of hikers from previous years, my mind and heart immediately determined that I had to be part of it. The basic idea of the Warrior Expeditions is to do what Earl Shaffer (the first Appalachian Trail thru-hiker) did; when asked why he had hiked the entire Appalachian Mountains, he responded that he wanted to “walk off the war.”

My personal experience with the Veterans Affairs hospital— their groups, individual therapy sessions and the multiple medications they had me on— was that they were not helping me at all. I ultimately became a walking zombie. Although these treatments might work for others, it was unsuccessful for me and I needed another route to take. Through all my trials and tribulations, I ended up finding that nature was my therapy and it worked every time I was immersed in it. Plus, what better way to experience this type of therapy than with fellow veterans.

When did you start and end your hike?
I started on January 6th, 2017 and finished on March 17th, 2017. Even spending over 2 months on the trail just didn’t seem long enough, and I wanted to go on even more!

How did you prepare for your hike?
I prepared for this hike by picking the brains of previous Florida Trail thru-hikers. I asked tons of questions and they happily gave me any information and tips they could provide. I even
The Florida National Scenic Trail is a federally-designated, non-motorized, recreation trail that meanders approximately 1,300 miles across some of the most beautiful, unique landscapes in the entire country.

For up to date information visit the U.S. Forest Service online at http://www.FS.USDA.gov/FNST
attended the FTA Trail Skills Training in 2016, and that provided me with a lot of know-how as well. When it came to my physically training to hike this type of terrain, I would just volunteer on every FTA working party that I could. I also took several trips up to the Appalachian Trail to get my legs strong by hiking the mountains. A lot of people don’t expect the terrain on the Florida Trail to be as challenging as it is.

Describe your best day on the trail.
This is a hard one to answer. In all honesty, everyday had something special in it. The diversity of the trail’s ecosystems and how fast it changes in just few yards is absolutely amazing. Every day you see different wildlife in its natural habitat and I cannot forget the awesome fellow hikers I met along the way. The feasts we had at camp after we left a town or just spending time around the fire while my friend, who’s trail name is “Hot Pants,” played his ukulele. These things that I experienced on a daily basis made for the best days on the trail.

Describe your most challenging day on the trail.
Road walks. I do not know one hiker who loves a road walk, unless you’re heading into town and you have cheese burgers on the mind. Road walks just wear you out.

What was your favorite part of the trail?
I have a few: Big Cypress, Ocala, Aucilla River, Big Shoals and the Pensacola Beach walk, which was an awesome way to finish my experience on the trail.

What plants and animals did you encounter on the trail?
I ran into a wide variety of plants along the way which I am still learning the names of. As for animals, I saw a bobcat, alligators, a black bear and her cub, lots of deer, more birds than I could name, different types of snakes - venomous and non-venomous, hundreds of bugs, and critters like squirrels and mice.

What fueled your hike?
What fueled me was my determination to be a thru-hiker. That, and the fact that the trail was full of surprises with its terrain and wildlife. It fed me to want to see more every day.

What is your favorite piece of gear? Why?
My tent! After a long day of hiking it was nice to have a place that I could spread my gear in, sit, relax, read, or Instagram my pictures while being sheltered from the rain and bugs, which will eat you alive given the chance.

What is your trail name and how did you earn it?
“Swamp Ape” is my trail name. I got my name from the start of the trail due to my awesome beard. Fellow hikers said I looked like the Swamp Ape with it. Into my first week of the trail, while getting resupplied at a gas station on the Miccosukee reservation, I was talking to two Law Enforcement Officers. Suddenly, this gentleman jumps out his truck and runs over to the officers all excited, saying on the top of his lungs “I am the one who called the police! I saw a Swamp Ape on the side of the road and it was this guy hiking!” while he points at me. It signed, sealed and delivered my trail name.

Would you attempt another long-distance hike?
Absolutely I would!!! When it comes to a thru-hike nothing compares to it. Your only purpose is to get up and hike every day, all the while being with a great hiking community out in nature. That disconnect that you get while on the trail from all of the world’s problems and stresses puts your mind, body and soul into a Zen state.

What did you learn from your thru-hike?
I said it before and I say it again: Nature may not get rid of your problems and symptoms that you may be suffering from permanently, but it is by far the best therapy for it. I also learned that there are lot of really great people in this world.
who have opened hearts and that are truly caring. Of course there are others that will judge you on your appearance, especially if you are just walking off the trail into a town. People will look at you and treat you differently because they assume you are homeless, but having to deal with that firsthand, I have learned to never judge a book by its cover... ever.

**Do you have any advice for the next class of thru-hikers?**

Just go!! Get out there!! Do it!! Take a chance! Hike your own hike and don’t be afraid to explore the parks and towns you walk through. Each day will create a memory. If you see an area you love, simply take a break set up camp early. Explore that area and enjoy it while you are there and in the moment. Never turn down a hot meal or a hot shower, and always look out for your fellow hikers... always!! Now go WANDER!!

Thanks so much to Jess, Warrior Expeditions, and all of the other thru-hiking and day-hiking citizens that find beauty, peace and inspiration on the Florida National Scenic Trail.

To learn more about Warrior Expeditions, visit warriorexpeditions.org.

**From Wikipedia.org:**
“The skunk ape, also known as the swamp cabbage man, swamp ape, stink ape, Florida Bigfoot, Louisiana Bigfoot, myakka ape, swampsquatch, and myakka skunk ape, is a hominid cryptid said to inhabit the U.S. states of Florida, North Carolina, and Arkansas, although reports from Florida are most common. It is named for its appearance and for the unpleasant odor that is said to accompany it.

Reports of the skunk ape were particularly common in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1974, sightings of a large, foul-smelling, hairy, ape-like creature, which ran upright on two legs were reported in suburban neighborhoods of Dade County, Florida. Skeptical investigator Joe Nickell has written that some of the reports may represent sightings of the black bear (Ursus americanus) and it is likely that other sightings are hoaxes or misidentification of wildlife. The United States National Park Service considers the skunk ape to be a hoax.”
Hair slicked back like a businessman’s, you glide towards shore, waddle up the muddy slope, slide down, do it again. Bored? Only if we’re fools.
Wild Horses—and Alligators—
couldn’t keep me from cycling
the Gainesville to Hawthorne
Rail-to-Trail.

I’m sure you’ve seen the viral video
of the horse stomping the alligator, right?
Well, about two miles from that social
media sensation my friend, Mike, and I
began our journey near Payne’s Prairie
State Park in Gainesville which would
take us on a 16-mile, scenic bike trip to
Hawthorne.

I’ve been biking for many years and
completed the Jacksonville-to-Baldwin
trail numerous times, but I’d been
looking forward to doing the Alachua
County version since I did the first five
miles from the Hawthorne end about
11 years ago. I wasn’t disappointed,
especially since I had my reliable friend
accompanying me. In fact, last summer
I bought an extra mountain bike just
for these occasions, since my outdoor
companions either: 1) have lame bikes
(that would be Mike). 2) live out of town.
3) or just cycle to humor me, so they
shouldn’t have to spend several hundred
dollars on one.

Borrowed bike, new bike, no bike,
just go there, even in the middle of
summer, because 90-95% of it is shaded,
even at mid-day, although you might
want to take it easy (if you’re well into
middle-age like me) the first few miles
because there are some serious hills and
90-degree turns from around Mile 2 to
Mile 4. Since there are some intense
cyclists on the trail going up to 30 mph
make sure you stay to the right… always
(when we stopped once to adjust Mike’s
brakes we mistakenly took more than
half of the trail instead of pulling off to
the side. Big mistake).

Since I’ve already mentioned Mike
several times, let me tell you about him.
We first met in fall of 1976 when, after
a long day of surveying he saw me and
a couple other guys throwing the javelin
during track practice as he was driving
home. I was standing there between
tosses when this big guy, covered with
mud after spending all day hacking his
way through a swamp, picks up a spear
and hurls it farther than all of us. After
that, he had a 37- year career, setting
numerous Master’s Track & Field records
in the javelin throw, and is currently the
world record-holder in the 50-54 year
old age group. In spite of that, he is the
most humble guy I know.

However, his throwing prowess—he
also pitched for Jacksonville University
where he was their ace with a 90+
mph fastball—is not what his friends
know him for. Mike is…let’s just say
he’s not like most people. He doesn’t
own a cellphone (also, the number 7 on
his landline is not working—bummer),
didn’t open a checking account until he
was 25, has ordered milk at Hooter’s,
and never turns on the heat at his
house (if you go over to Mike’s house
during winter, BRING A JACKET). One
more thing, his response to almost
everything—global warming, pulled
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Celebrate and get the word out with our Sport-Tek® PosiCharge® Competitor™ Tee. The ST350-tee is what Alachua County Firefighters wear for comfort.
About two miles west we parked our bikes at the beginning of the La Chua Trail, and I was surprised with how many visitors there were—several were international judging by their accents. I assume the viral video spawned many new visitors for this area. When I visited this area 5 ½ years ago there was only about 30 people there, mostly bird watchers, and there was no raised platform around the Alachua Sink, a pond about 20 feet below sea level. On my previous visit I also ran down the trail by the sink and almost stepped on a water moccasin I didn’t see because of the high grass. However, now the area is sandy and you can see where you’re walking. There are also several signs warning about the wildlife there, which I’ve seen more frequently since the fatal alligator attack of a toddler at Disney last year.

The platform continues for about a ¼ mile, and when it ends you can continue walking on a trail (it’s more like a dirt road) with the creek feeding the sink on your left and the prairie on the right. In the water and on the banks I saw at least 40 alligators, with more likely hiding in the hundreds of floating lily pads. The largest alligator was about 10 feet long, about the same size as the one that got stomped on in the video, which made me wonder if it was the same reptile. Then, I found the area where the attack occurred. It was a part of the trail far from the water and where I doubt the wild horses see any alligators. Why the gator was on the trail at all is a mystery—since the creek embankment is about five-feet high. Alligators are notoriously lazy, so it had to go to a lot of trouble to get near the horses, and there was also no water on the other side of the road.

We walked for about another 10 minutes when we encountered three wild horses blocking the road, and since several tourists were on the other side of them we stopped so we wouldn’t scare them.

Being the pragmatist that he is, Mike said “We might as well head back.”

“Wild horses couldn’t drag me any farther,” I replied.

For more information about visiting the Gainesville area go to: www.visitgainesville.com or call (352) 374-5260.

The main trailhead is located at 3300 SE 15th Street in Gainesville at Boulware Springs City Park, and from downtown Jacksonville its about a 1 ½ hour drive. For more information about the trail go to: https://www.floridastateparks.org/trail/Gainesville-Hawthorne
Fred Davis and I determined that replacing Bridge 4 in Jonathan Dickinson State Park (JDSP) was a priority for this Spring. Even after our efforts to repair the boardwalk in 2016, the structure was in a state of collapse in some areas. This boardwalk, called “Bridge 4” by park staff, gets steady use from hikers and runners year round and we wanted to complete the replacement before the heat and rains of summer made the task unbearable.

After a couple of preliminary surveys by Fred, Bill Helfferich, and myself, we came up with a plan and a bill of materials. We would need to raise nearly $3,000 and about 10 days to complete the project. Thus the “Donate a Plank” campaign was launched just before our April chapter meeting. This became an immediate success and as the word spread the money came rolling in. Down To Run (learn more at downtorunshop.com) had just completed a run in JDSP across the old boardwalk and, after hearing of our campaign to raise funds, chipped in $1,000. In total we raised almost $4,000.

Scott Lunsford and I got the project started on a Monday with a day of demolition of the old boardwalk. That first day we got about half of the planks removed and stacked for the park staff, under the direction of Mark Nelson and Tom Brown, to haul away for disposal. We were back at work on Wednesday when the lumber was delivered to us at JDSP. We split into two teams. Scott, with Bev Barta, and Tony Rawson continued with the demolition, while Fred, Bill, and I cut the lumber to size in the maintenance yard. By the end of the day the old structure was stacked by the road ready to be hauled away and we had 400 planks, 48 stringers, and 24 “H” structures ready to be assembled. Thursday morning, when the team assembled, the park staff had delivered the planks and stringers to the site. So, all we needed to start assembling the boardwalk was to build the “H” structures. With the willing hands of Scott, Bill, Fred, Duncan Berges, Kent Rimey, Roy Moore, and myself, we completed the task by late morning and transported some of them out to the site. Duncan and Kent made several round trips to bring the last of the components to the site. Meanwhile, our intrepid team started to assemble the base structure. We got all but 6 sections done and ready for planking. Saturday mornings team saw a new set of players. Bill, Duncan, Roy, and myself were joined by Kent Lemmon, Ryan Lusk, Steve Meyers, and Eric Wasser. While Bill and I finished up the last sub frames, the rest of the team went to work laying the planks. All that and we finished just after midday. Great job folks.
ENOUGH

by Lola Haskins

The Hieroglyph for soul is a crane.

The way dawn candled their wings as they arced down
singly because even birds must land alone
The way their legs descended from their bodies as if someone were drawing them
The silences as they floated
toward the field then the cries vast as an ocean as far as you could hear

and myriads of shadows feeding in the early light.
What is Leave No Trace?

It seems these days that everyone is promoting Leave No Trace (LNT) ethics to minimize our impact on the environment and protect our fragile and healthy ecosystems. People love to talk the talk, but when it comes down to it, not everyone walks the walk.

As we prepare for the fall hiking season, it’s good practice to review the seven core principles that form the code of ethics. These principles were developed by the LNT Center for Outdoor Ethics to protect the outdoors and teach people how they can enjoy it responsibly.

Learn About LNT:

But isn’t my impact small? What harm could come from my environmental footprint? And why should I follow the LNT code of ethics? These questions often arise as we talk about LNT. Although it may seem like our impact is small, our accumulated impacts lead to an ever increasingly large environmental footprint, and this is where we run into problems.

Mankind is the biggest threat to our natural worlds, yet, it’s important for us to interact with it. Getting out in nature not only allows us to tune into ourselves, but it also helps us develop a greater appreciation for the natural world that surrounds us.

Although it seems counterintuitive, interaction with nature will actually help protect it. This is why LNT is important in the enjoyment and sustainability of our wildlands.

LNT is meant to expand and enrich our natural experiences, while protecting the Great Outdoors for future generations to come. Over the next seven months, each E-Blaze LNT article will highlight a different principle of the LNT code of ethics.

The seven LNT principles are:

- Plan Ahead and Prepare
- Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
- Dispose of Waste Properly
- Leave What You Find
Minimize Campfire Impacts
Respect Wildlife
Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Practice LNT:
As you read each article, ask yourself how your environmental footprint affects our wildlands, and what steps you can take to mitigate your personal impact. These articles will also help convey why the Florida Trail is important to both individuals and to the nation, and how everyone that enjoys it can be a part of history to protect and preserve America’s wildlands.

Earlier this year, Gretchen “Dirty Bowl” Matt did a thru-hike of the Florida Trail to promote LNT. She completed this hike through Granite Gear’s Grounds Keepers Program, and provided us with practical applications of LNT principles on the Florida Trail. Through her blog and through photos documented on Instagram, Gretchen allowed us to see LNT in action!

Her experiences will be used to show how these principles can be easily applied to your next adventure on the Florida Trail.

We hope that these articles will inspire you to #OptOutside to better connect with Florida’s unique wildlands, and that you’ll be sure to #LeaveItBetter by applying the LNT ethos.

Meet the Author!
Blake Weinard was a student at the University of Florida, where she double majored in Sustainability Studies and Sociology. She will graduate December 2017.

The sustainability studies major aims to empower students to go out into the world and promote sustainability through a range of disciplines. As part of her final course work, Blake acquired a spring internship at the Florida Trail Association. This final project was meant to give students a better feel for what it is like to work in the field of sustainability. Blake hopes that her contribution to the FTA will better promote the tenets of sustainability on the Florida Trail.

Currently, Blake is finishing up her final semester at the university. When she’s not advocating for the environment, Blake enjoys listening to her extensive vinyl collection and practicing her photography.
When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at www.floridatrail.org. Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND GIFT FORM

ORDER BY PHONE 877-HIKE-FLA OR ONLINE AT WWW.FLORIDATRAIL.ORG

Name ___________________________ Daytime Phone Number _______________________
Address ___________________________ Email _____________________________
City ___________________________ State ______ Zip ______

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

Please mark one of the boxes below if you are joining or renewing your membership in the Florida Trail Association:
☐ Trail Steward ($35)
☐ Trail Builder ($50)*
☐ Trail Advocate ($100)*
☐ Trail Protector ($500)*
☐ Trail Champion ($1000)*

*Includes spouse and children under 18.
☐ I do not want my address shared with FTA-affiliated organizations

Employer/Occupation ___________________________ Daytime Phone Number ______
Spouse Name ___________________________ Email _____________________________
Spouse Occupation ___________________________ Ship membership package to ______
Number of children ___________________________ The Footprint magazine? ______
I learned about the Florida Trail from ___________________________

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☐ Annual Fund ☐ Endowment Fund ☐ Trail Protection Fund ☐ Map Fund
My gift is In Memory of ___________________________ In Honor of ___________________________

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5415 SW 13th St., Gainesville, FL 32608

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