COMMUNITY
The Florida Trail Program Cultivates a Community Connection

FIVE MILLION STEPS

Diversity in Outdoor Recreation

Tallahassee Chapter of Outdoor Afro

Gordon Johnson's Legacy
Marjorie Pugh taking a break
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Cover photo: Gordon Johnson along the Pahokee section in 2006, photographer unknown.

Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association (FTA) develops, maintains, protects and promotes a network of hiking trails throughout the state, including the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (commonly known as the Florida Trail). Together with our partners we provide opportunities for the public to hike, engage in outdoor recreation, participate in environmental education and contribute to meaningful volunteer work.
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

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Community
by Alex Stigliano, Florida Trail Program Director

The Florida Trail is so much more than a recreation resource. It is a crucial connection within and between wildlands and rural landscapes. It is an important conservation project in Florida—the 4th fastest growing state according to the US Census Bureau. And most importantly, it is the manifestation of a community of people from Florida and around the world. These folks belong to numerous socio-economic backgrounds and demographic groups, they use the trail in a number of different ways, they contribute to the preservation, promotion, and maintenance of the Florida Trail in various ways, but they all share one thing: a passion for being outdoors.

Our partnership with these enthusiasts is at the center of our work. That is why we here at the Florida Trail Association say we’re “building more than trails.” The growing community of Florida Trail users and maintainers is an inspiring coalition of citizens. Individuals who join our organization in working to fulfill its mission are beloved and crucial to our success. Finding a fitting way of recognizing those folks who go above and beyond is a challenge because these all-star members contribute their time, talent and treasure without expectation or reward. Even so, we want to award those that give so generously.

That brings me to a request. Won’t you please take a moment to visit our nomination webpage (tinyurl.com/2017ftanomination) before January 31 to recommend someone for one of our several award categories? Award winners will be announced at the FTA’s Annual Meeting on April 7, 2018.

In the meantime, please enjoy five unique articles in this edition of the Footprint that spotlight members of this community:

- A Boy Scout who installed/replaced 30 signs in the Ocala NF for his Eagle Scout Project.
- A trail maintenance volunteer who grew up skateboarding abandoned pools in Orlando who now works as a Systems Engineer for the US Air Force Space Command.
- A hunter who supports our Indian River Chapter volunteers with their work on the Florida Trail in Bull Creek WMA.
- A young man, raised in Nigeria and the United Kingdom, who is working to increase the diversity hikers on the Florida Trail.
- An impactful Florida Trail Association member who walked around Lake Okeechobee 20 times, a total of roughly 2,180 miles!

These are just five marvelous individuals that comprise the mosaic of thousands of people (including YOU!) that are engaged in our mission.

Thank you every one of you. Your continued membership keeps our programs moving!

Alex Stigliano

The Vermilion Flycatcher is an annual winter visitor to Florida. Here’s one in St. Marks Wildlife Refuge pondering which way to wander on the Florida Trail.
~ photo by Karen Wiles

The ladies in GirlsWhoHikeFlorida recently explored Little Big Econ State Forest.
~ photo by Girls Who Hike Florida

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Footprint Fall 2017

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“So you’re hiking around the lake?”
The lone customer at Old Habits, an Okeechobee watering hole, perched on a quaking barstool. “I’ve heard they’ve got a committee working on putting a paved trail on the dike, for bicycles and horses.”

Gordon Johnson, leading a group of hikers through a rare November heat wave on a 109-mile walk around Lake Okeechobee, looked at the fellow and said “the trail has great potential. It was hot out there today and there are no trees. You should go out there and build some shelters and plant some trees. We need shade.”

The man scratched at his chest. “You don’t need trees. Just find a partner who is taller and bigger than you, and make her walk on the sunny side.”

Awed by Okeechobee
Some people just can’t sit still, especially in retirement, and so it has been for Gordon Johnson. We’d see him pop in at regional and annual conferences, at special events, and of course at his beloved Big O Hike. So it was a surprise and a bit of a concern to the regulars, especially our friends from the Loxahatchee Chapter, when this long-time Florida Trail Association volunteer, who’s been actively involved since the late 1970s, didn’t show up in Okeechobee this November.

At the Big O Hike kickoff, past FTA President Paul Cummings shared his memories of how FTA’s longest-running annual group hike began. “It started with two old folks…who used two cars to hike around the lake.” The couple, Hank and Irma McCall, did their hike in 1991 to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. Paul’s wife Sherry, a long-time volunteer with the Loxahatchee Chapter “read it in the newspaper, and said ‘why don’t we do that?’ Next time we had a meeting, Gordon said ‘I saw that article, why don’t we do that?’ The next thing we knew we needed someone to lead it, and Gordon was the one.”

Gordon led Paul, Sherry, and 18 other hikers around Lake Okeechobee in
Gordon Johnson and Paul Cummings receive their final completion certificates for the Big O Hike, marking 20 consecutive years - five million steps - of walking around Lake Okeechobee on the Florida Trail.

1992 as a series of long day hikes, and the Big O Hike was born. Eight people made it all the way around the lake. Within a couple of years, 150 people showed up for the Big O Hike kickoff. “A lot of people were impressed with being able to have such a rugged adventure, yet still swim in the pool and sit in the hot tub at night,” Gordon said. It didn’t hurt that he and other volunteers organized group activities, including pontoon boat rides, agribusiness tours, and meals out at local eateries.

Gordon acted as trip leader for the first three years, but continued to play a supporting role, arranging activities, doing promotion, and eventually overseeing an annual talent show. Over the years, regulars for the hike came and went, but Gordon and Paul kept walking around the lake, until closures by the Army Corps of Engineers made it no longer possible to walk a complete circle safely. By 2011, the 20th anniversary of the Big O Hike, both Gordon and Paul retired their records of 20 consecutive circuits of the Okeechobee section of the Florida Trail. That’s roughly 2,180 miles, about the same distance as the length of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, or five million steps.

Granted, the Florida Trail around Lake Okeechobee is much flatter than the AT, but as many have learned, it’s no easier on the feet. “You need good boots and thick wool socks,” said Gordon, to walk the 9-day, 109 mile route.

Why walk around Lake Okeechobee? For one, it was in his backyard. It had great views from the dike. And it made a loop. “Where else,” said Gordon, “on what trail, with trail map in hand, can you view with the naked eye where you were two days ago and where you will be” in two more days?

The culture around Lake Okeechobee also intrigued him. “I planned we would go around town and country and interview locals,” said Gordon “and I’d make a program on it.” As it turned out, “We were too tired to do that. However, I did get some good interviews.”

The beauty of this little-known Florida landscape beckoned as well. His most glorious morning in Florida came along one of the treks. “Between Clewiston and Belle Glade, the fog was as thick as oatmeal. It didn’t dissolve for two hours. Everything was smothered with glistening dew.”

It was the type of moment that Gordon would capture with his camera and with words, with the hopes of sharing its joy with his next audience.

Life Inspires Art
Growing up in Embarrass, a Finnish enclave in the Mesabi Range of Minnesota, Gordon Johnson was the youngest of a family of eight. “We were Finnish youngsters with radiant faces that glowed from a summer of sun and a lifetime of saunas,” he wrote in his memoir, Life Was Good: Voi, Voi. It was on the family farm where he learned to love the woods, where “tall majestic spires of jack pine, birch and poplar trees brushed the sky.” He would find a place where he could “crawl into the hollow of a charred stump…and wonder
if Chippewa children had played in that same stump.”

While attending business school in Minneapolis, Gordon was inspired by the way visiting Finnish students were amused at American life. “Since I spoke Finnish, they were quite open to talking about the good and bizarre aspects of life in the United States,” said Gordon. “One student remarked ‘It’s hard to understand why girls wear curlers and look ugly all day so they can be beautiful at night, when it’s too dark to notice them anyway!’” Using a Nicormat 35mm slide camera and Sony tape recorder, Gordon photographed and choreographed a multimedia show he called “Minnesota Finns.” He toured the presentation to Finnish cultural centers throughout the United States before knocking on the door of the United States Embassy in Finland in 1969. They sent Gordon packing—right across the Finnish countryside on a lecture tour.

Finding Loxahatchee
In 1976, Gordon Johnson arrived in Fort Lauderdale in the middle of winter—when the sun never rises in parts of Finland—and zeroed in on the Finnish-American community of Lake Worth. Because of his success with presenting slide shows and working on commercial photography projects in Finland, he signed up for courses at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale. By day he worked as a court reporter, transcribing a constant stream of almost-unbelievable stories. Evenings were spent in studies. He joined the Loxahatchee chapter of FTA “to get away from the scandals of criminal court. The woods were my outlet.”

He quickly became a busy FTA volunteer, using his creativity for the benefit of the organization. He got involved in special events like regional and annual conferences—and the Big O Hike, of course. His “Prairie Home Companion” takeoff ‘A Trail Home Companion’ was a hit back in the day when FTA conferences often had humorous skits as entertainment. With experience on the flute and the bowed psaltery, a type of dulcimer played with a bow, he played to an appreciative crowd at many events. He led hikes, gave presentations about the Florida Trail statewide to civic groups and other FTA chapters, and promoted the trail on radio and television. In 1989, writing lyrics that spoke of respect for the earth, he found fellow musicians to add their instruments and voices. The result was “Song of Florida Trail,” a fundraising album featuring “The Florida Trail Song,” an anthem for FTA for many decades.

One of the first hikers in Florida to use Nordic poles for walking, Gordon also brought that tradition from where they were invented, in Finland. Today, the collapsible poles – found under
brand names like Leki and Komperdell— are a mainstay for backpackers and day hikers who want to put off worrying about knee replacement in the future. “Look at how a baby starts to walk, moving forward in jerky steps,” said Gordon. The Nordic poles “are an offshoot of that motion, mimicking a child’s first steps.”

Completing the Circle
We kicked off the 26th annual Big O Hike this November on a sad note, for Sherry Cummings had passed away earlier in the year, and we were there to be there for Paul. It was Paul Cummings who tracked down Gordon, no longer in his home in Oxford but in a nursing home in his Finnish-American community in Lake Worth. He was able to visit. When two more of Gordon’s old friends from FTA stopped in to see him on December 16, they were told that Gordon had passed away the day before. He was 82 years old.

“It was just before dark, and I was walking alone,” said Gordon, of one morning on the Big O Hike. “Clyde (Hopkins) walked up next to me just as the sun started coming up, reflecting in the Rim Canal. I started noticing a rainbow that made a complete circle, and in it was Clyde’s shadow. It followed us for a little while.”

Gordon’s circle was the beauty of nature, the friends he’d made through FTA, and the lake that called his name every year until this one. “I will always count it my privilege to have walked the entire 109 miles of the Big O with Gordon, on the dike, before the construction began,” said Clyde, when we shared the news. There are many of us statewide who are proud to say we’ve walked with Gordon on his journey.
The conventional adage of how to eat an elephant typically ends with the routine answer of, “one bite at a time.” Now, if the question is, “how do you complete the Florida Trail,” the answer must surely be, “one mile at a time.” Here in the North Florida region of the FNST that is exactly what is taking place. Currently there are four significant improvements to the trail in the works that will permanently close nearly 12 miles of road walk and create 4 miles of new Trail. Mile by mile, the FNST is closer to completion and in this case it comes solely from partnerships between FTA staff and volunteers, private land owners, and our public land manager partners. No acquisition dollars and no new easements are needed for any of the relocations which only adds to the sweet satisfaction of successful gap closure. With so many gaps remaining in the Florida Trail, the best way to approach these areas is through creative trail routing and quality partnerships amongst FNST stakeholders. Two of these trail relocations will be open to the public early in 2018 and are described below. Stay tuned for more very exciting developments in gap closure!

Chinsegut Wildlife and Environmental Area
Located in the Brooksville area, Chinsegut offers hikers a beautiful walk through a property that is managed for wildlife habitat creation and protection as well as environmental education. This new section of trail will lead hikers though 2 miles of upland pine forest, sandhill, mesic hammock and basin marsh. Chinsegut also preserves one of the few remaining stands of intact old-growth longleaf pine in Florida. The unique character of this pine forest and the variety of other natural communities support a diversity of associated wildlife including common native plants and wildlife, as well as rare and imperiled species such as the gopher tortoise, Eastern indigo snake, wood stork and Sherman’s fox squirrel. Rare plants include Atamasco lily, Florida mountain-mint, Florida spiny-pod, milk-vine, stalked adder’s tongue and Treat’s rain-lily. This trail relocation will eliminate 1.7 miles of road walk.

Silver Springs State Park
County Road 314 in Marion County is known for being a dangerous pedestrian crossing, especially near the Sharpes Ferry Bridge. Currently, the FNST connects the Cross Florida Greenway to the Ocala National Forest via a 3.1 mile road walk along CR 314. However, beginning in January 2018 hikers will be rerouted, for the very first time, inside Silver Springs State Park boundaries. This new section will eliminate over 1 mile of road walk and create 2 new miles of forested trail, cutting the current road walk by one third. Silver Springs State Park is most famous for its beautiful water features, glass bottom boat rides, 1960s glamour, and of course, monkeys, but this new section of trail will unfortunately not traverse near those main attractions, although this is something we will look into in the future. The new trail will utilize the very southwestern park property and consist of a seldom used woods roads which are only open as access for park employees.

Chainsaw Training
Very successful chainsaw trainings took place this fall on the Ocala National Forest, in St Marks National Wildlife Refuge and at the Florida Atlantic University’s Pine Jog Environmental Education Center. 36 FTA volunteers either recertified or took this class for the very first time. We love expanding our pool of certified sawyers and some of the
newest members of this group are sure to bring a lot of talent and commitment to operating chainsaws on the FNST. Moving forward we hope to have at least two chainsaw trainings in each region every year. In the past two years there have been three hurricanes that touched down on the FNST and each has wrought devastation to different parts of the trail. We will need our saw program to remain strong and busy to meet the challenges that come our way.

Completed Volunteer Work Parties

Fall is nonstop maintenance in the North Region every year with Volunteer Work Parties that often segue from one into another. To date, there have been five staff-supported work events completed, and during those work parties 93 miles of trail was maintained. Lots of hard work makes for happy, worn out volunteers ready to enjoy the good times and excellent meals shared with friends.

A motley crew of happy sawyers

New volunteer Nick Espinosa uses a Suwannee Sling to clear trail in the Juniper Wilderness on the Ocala National Forest

This mower gets a well-earned break along the 6 miles of Hopkin Prairie on the Ocala National Forest

FTA’s own Community Outreach Coordinator Van Tran gets some quality saw time and earns her first USFS chainsaw certification
Mind the Signs
Recently, Marion and Lake Counties saw the installation of trail crossing signs at most of the major county maintained highways. With two separate permits, FTA installed crossings at eight locations with assemblies a quarter mile on either side of the trail crossing, totaling sixteen separate signposts. There will be more of this to come in the region which is all part of an effort to improve safety for hikers and motorists as well as increase awareness of the trail’s location in rural areas. This project was generously funded by a REI grant.

UF student, Taylor, Taggart wields the mighty 30 inch bar hedge trimmer during the Hoton Creek VWP

Just another foot to the left and this shelter would have been pancaked by a large oak

Hurricane Irma Highlights
Hurricane Irma caused some serious damage across the region but here are a few highlights!

The Iron Bridge Shelter, one of only a few shelters on the entire FNST, was damaged by a large oak tree. If the tree had fallen just to the left the damage would have been catastrophic. Repairs were made in December.

Nearby in Rice Creek Conservation Area, a tornado must have ripped through the area causing the worst trail damage to any section of trail in the region, potentially in the state. Massive trees stacked high and spread thick across the trail for several miles created a challenging situation. Sawyers either had to stand knee deep in a swamp or find footing on a narrow puncheon. This is exactly why the FTA needs highly trained and skilled sawyers! Major kudos to Abe Christian and Margaret Nonnemacher for their unbelievable dedication to Rice Creek!

It's rare to find logs that need to be double cut, meaning cut from both sides of the log, because they are so large.

Rockstar volunteer Abe Christian stands alongside CR 445 near Alexander Springs on the Ocala National Forest with a newly installed trail crossing
Mayowa Ogunjobi is the Tallahassee chapter leader for Outdoor Afro, a national non-profit organization celebrates and inspires African American connections and leadership in nature. At the July 2017 Florida National Scenic Trail Coalition Meeting, Mayowa shared with coalition members his thoughts on why this issue exists and how state and federal agencies and other organizations in outdoor recreation can attract more diverse users. Recently, I met with and interviewed the Tallahassee Outdoor Afro leader to learn more about the organization, its ideas on diversity, and Mayowa’s background in outdoor recreation.

Growing up in big cities in Nigeria and the United Kingdom, Mayowa spent much of his time reading books about nature and the outdoors. After moving with his family to Tallahassee at the age of thirteen, he “couldn’t understand how a place could have miles and miles of wilderness in the backyard of a city” and quickly realized his new home’s potential for outdoor activities. From mountain biking in Tom Brown Park to paddling on the Wacissa River, Mayowa has always felt like Tallahassee was a great place to grow up, learn about the outdoors, and realize his fantasy of what the wilderness can be like. “It makes me feel alive,” he says, “and I feel really fortunate to share that with other people.” Mayowa joined Outdoor Afro to “serve the black community in one way or another” and to help other black people celebrate their own experiences outdoors.

Founded by Rue Mapp, the organization has expanded into 26 states around the United States with close to 100 chapter leaders, and growing.
swimming, or even yoga in the park. Using social networks like Facebook and MeetUp, the organization seeks to reach more people with its message. Within the African American community, Outdoor Afro is providing resources that support and encourage people of color to engage in outdoor recreation.

Mayowa encourages state and federal agencies to consider barriers associated with being black in the outdoors by speaking from his own experiences and those of other Outdoor Afro members and leaders. It took confidence, he remembers, to take up mountain biking and explore rural spaces on his own as an adolescent in Tallahassee. Discomfort from feeling unwelcome in the outdoors is a poignant memory from Mayowa’s childhood. He believes outdoor recreation programs should work to help people understand that the wilderness is not a place to be afraid of and is not a place in which they do not belong. State and federal agencies should acknowledge the lack of color in outdoor recreation with honesty, genuine concern, and practical changes.

Throughout 2017, the USFS has been working with the FTA and other members of the FNST Coalition to incorporate practical elements into the new 2018 FNST 5-Year Strategic Plan to achieve this goal. With input from individuals like Mayowa, and partnerships with organizations like Outdoor Afro, the USFS intends to increase the diversity of hikers on the Florida Trail.
Eglin Air Force Base and the Florida National Scenic Trail

As most of our membership is certainly aware, each section of the Florida National Scenic Trail is managed and maintained as a three-part collaboration between the US Forest Service, Florida Trail Association, and individual land managers. Here in the Panhandle, one of our longest sections of trail passes through the Eglin Reservation, an expansive Air Force testing and training base. Our volunteers have had a long and productive history of working with Eglin land managers to route the trail through this scenic area. Approximately 250,000 of Eglin’s 464,000 acres are conditionally available for recreational use, and the Florida Trail provides an ideal way to access this resource. Hikers can explore the largest contiguous acreage of old-growth longleaf pine in the world, spot the elusive red-cockaded woodpeckers, and enjoy a variety of striking ecosystems along the various streams and ravines.

Recreational access to Eglin is administered by the Jackson Guard, the natural resources management unit of the military reservation. The staff of Jackson Guard are the primary point-of-contact for FTA staff and volunteers working on the Florida Trail, and they have been indispensable allies in our work to build and maintain the trail. Jackson Guard provides materials and supplies, supports trail maintenance events, provides storage for tools and materials, and represents the interests of recreational users to the greater Eglin command structure. Recently Jackson Guard has implemented several important changes in the access and permitting systems for the Florida Trail within Eglin, and now is a good time to provide a comprehensive review of the rules and regulations. This information will also be available in a Notice to Hikers posted on the FTA website.

Accessing the Florida Trail within Eglin
The Eglin Reservation is divided into a series of administrative units known as Tactical Training Areas (TTAs); while some sensitive areas are perpetually...
off-limits, many are available for use by hikers, hunters, and other recreational users. An overview of the various units and permitted uses of the base can be found in the Eglin Outdoor Recreation, Hunting and Freshwater Fishing Regulations booklet available at https://eglin.isportsman.net/Regs.aspx.

Additionally, even TTAs open to recreational use are occasionally closed due to military training and testing; this is done for the safety of recreational users. These closures are published on the Public Access Map (PAM), an online chart showing the current statues of each TTA. Access is further regulated via a permitting system.

Hikers and trail maintainers wanting to access the Florida Trail in Eglin must: 1.) purchase an annual recreation permit; 2.) consult the Public Access Map daily before entry. A separate camping permit is also required for overnight use of any designated Eglin campsites. Permits can be purchased on the Jackson Guard website at https://eglin.isportsman.net. Applicants must create an account, watch a safety video about unexploded ordinance, and are then able to purchase general recreation permits for $20 and camping permits for $5. Hikes must have their permits and a photo ID with them while on the reservation. There is a separate permitting system in place for thru-hikers; details are described below.

After obtaining a permit, hikers must also consult the Public Access Map before entering Eglin. Jackson Guard updates the PAM every afternoon and forecasts closures for the upcoming 3 days; this information can be accessed via the Jackson Guard website at https://eglin.isportsman.net, as well as by phone at 850-882-0007. These forecasts are generally reliable, however, unscheduled closures can occur; for this reason hikers are required to check the PAM every day and must follow the instructions of any posted signs or military personnel encountered while on the trail. Please keep in mind that the military training missions always take priority over recreational use of Eglin Reservation, and hiker access is a privilege that can be revoked.

A great resource available for trail users traveling along the Florida Trail within Eglin is the Avenza App. This smartphone app, available for both iPhone and Android devices, allows users to access a GPS-enabled map that indicates your current location within the reservation. This lets you easily identify your location relative to the various TTAs. To install the app, follow the link and instructions located at http://jacksonguard.com/.

New Tactical Training Areas

While the above-described system generally works well to govern access to the Florida Trail, the safety closers of TTAs can be burdensome for some trail users, particularly our volunteer trail maintainers and long-distance hikers. It is difficult for FTA leaders to schedule future maintenance events without guarantees that the trail will be accessible on a particular day. Thru-hikers traveling through Eglin are also faced with the uncertainty of not knowing whether the trail will be passable on their arrival date; unexpected closures can force them to take "zero days" while they wait for a unit to re-open. There has also been a general increase in closures due to a continued increase in military training and testing.

With all of these concerns in mind, the FTA staff and Choctawhatchee Chapter volunteers have been advocating for the creation of new administrative units along the border of Eglin that could potentially be less impacted by military
training missions occurring further within the reservation. The Florida Trail is already routed close to the reservation boundaries, and our understanding has been that this location places it generally outside the area of safety concerns for most types of missions. However, the size and shape of the existing TTAs has mandated closures even in cases where the Florida Trail route is outside of potential safety impacts. Together with Jackson Guard we began to examine the possibility of addressing this issue by creating a trail corridor within its own TTA.

Because of these discussions, we are happy to share that the Eglin command structure has added a new TTA, J-35, to the Choctaw North area. Spanning sections of what was previously J-26, J-28, and J-29, this new TTA should allow our trail maintainers and Florida Trail hikers to access this area even when TTAs further south around LZ-EAST are closed. An agreement has also been reached to allow trail maintainers to reliably access the trail in Brier Creek East, site of the ongoing Alaqua Bridge project. The FTA is incredibly appreciative of the efforts made by Jackson Guard and Eglin security personnel to implement these changes, and we look forward to future discussions on how we can keep the Florida Trail accessible while maintaining user safety and respecting the priorities of military training and testing.

Permitting For Thru-Hikers
In addition to working on improving and simplifying access to the Florida Trail for all our trail users, the FTA staff and volunteers have been advocating for an improved permitting system specifically for thru-hikers. Long distance hikers face the unique challenge of having to plan on overnight camping and non-stop travel through the entirety of Eglin. In the past hikers have relied on assistance from trail angels to procure necessary permits from Jackson Guard, particularly when camping permits needed to be picked up in-person from the Jackson Guard office. An annual permit has also been redundant for hikers who spend only a few days traversing the base as part of a longer journey.

To improve the experience for long-distance hikers, we have worked with Jackson Guard to implement a new dedicated thru-hiking permit available free to hikers whose trip originates 50 or more miles outside the Eglin boundary. Thru-hikers follow the same process outlined above, only they select the free Florida Trail Thru-Hiker Permit from the list of available permits listed on the https://eglin.isportsman.net website. During checkout, hikers must provide their anticipated start date for crossing Eglin; this date must be within the next 60 days. The permit lasts for 7 days, and users can order an additional permit if more time is needed during the base traverse. Hikers must be able to produce a physical or digital copy of their permit and a photo ID when request by base law enforcement or Jackson Guard personnel.

Finally, keep in mind that thru-hikers are still required to check the PAM daily; the easiest way to do this as a thru-hiker is to contact Jackson Guard at 850-882-0007. For this reason a cell phone and battery charger is strongly recommended for thru-hikers planning to travel across Eglin. It is also important to consider the implications of an unexpected closure influencing your trip; plan for alternatives or delays, and be aware of the closest trailheads in case a bailout is necessary.

Alaqua Bridge Construction
Finally, we have exciting news to share about the much-anticipated replacement of the old Demon Bridge over Alaqua Creek. After many months of planning and permitting work, the first steps towards construction of the bridge have finally begun. FTA volunteers, Framing Our Communities staff, and personnel from Jackson Guard have been busy working together to clear access roads within the Eglin Reservation and neighboring private property. Materials and tools have been prepared and delivered, and construction on the bridge itself will begin soon.

Hikers in the area are encouraged to be especially cautious when traveling near the construction site, particularly on the west side of the creek. Please pay close attention to posted signs and flagging regarding detours within this area, and be sure to follow directions from any on-site crew members. Everyone’s safety is the highest priority for our construction crews!

Interested in getting involved?
Infrastructure projects of this magnitude do not come along often, and the new suspension bridge will be a long-term asset for this section of the Florida Trail. Don’t miss the chance to be a part of it! Keep an eye on the Choctawhatchee Chapter’s Meetup Page for posted volunteer opportunities over the coming weeks: https://www.meetup.com/Florida-Trail-Chocawhatchee-Chapter/.
To many, the Florida Trail stands as a hiker’s first gateway to the natural wonderland of Florida wilderness. Over 1,300 miles stretching from the Panhandle to the Everglades, each marker, blaze, and sign, has led the steps of thousands of hikers. Ever since my first hike through Hopkins Prairie, the Florida Trail has held a special place in my heart, one that I come back to now and again to relive my fondest memories. The soft murmur of cicada and crunch of dry leaves reminds me of the joy I experience every second outdoors.

I’m a local Boy Scout for Troop 611 in Gainesville, Florida. As a part of the trail to Eagle Scout, the highest rank of the Boy Scouts, each boy is required to complete a community service project – organized, prepared, and lead by the scout. Some may host a trash clean-up day at a park, or renovate a local school’s playground, or hold a neighborhood food drive. I wanted my project to be a means of which I can pass along the same happiness I felt in the backcountry. Not only for avid outdoorsmen, but also for fledgling hikers who can experience Florida’s real beauty, untouched by commercial vacationers or resort folk. I wanted my project to change the life of new hikers all across the state, just as it had for me so many years ago.

While I had plenty of experience hiking the Florida Trail’s eastern corridor through Salt Springs to Clearwater Lake, much of the trail’s western corridor had been a mystery to me and to many others as well I’d assume. Much of the trail had been overgrown and some parts hadn’t seen traffic in quite some time. There were barely any blazes or signs to keep us on the path, and any parts that had been traveled were blanketed with litter (and even a few overturned sofas). It was clear that the western corridor needed some work.

I wanted to focus primarily on resigning; posting new signs with updated plaques and road markers for every intersection from Marshal Swamp to the 88 Store. I would work up from Marshal Swamp to the east-west intersection, first surveying what places needed signs, making those signs, and posting the signs at each marked point on the map. I knew from the beginning it would be a lofty goal, a goal that I was determined to reach nonetheless.

Each post needed an aluminum Florida National Scenic Trail sign, a foot travel welcome sign, and a wooden road sign. The aluminum and foot travel welcome signs were donated by the Florida Trail Association and the wooden road signs were made by a crew of volunteers I organized. We set a day aside to cut, etch, route, sand, and paint each of the 30 signs and prepared them for installation.

A crew of good friends helped make new wooden signs at the FTA headquarters in Gainesville. Here, all the freshly painted signs are set to dry.

For installation, crews were organized to travel into the Ocala National Forest and post each of the signs at the various marked points as we moved north, driving to each site. Each site had two posts, one for each side of the road the trail intersected and 6 total signs between the two posts. We opted to travel by van or SUV, driving as carefully as possible not to get stuck in the thick sand in some parts of the forest. Any trailers brought into the forest would have gotten stuck.
in the narrow winding jeep trails that many of the signs were to be posted at. Sometimes we had to drive into the forest hauling the posts outside the back window of the vehicle.

The project took 70+ hours of individual work over the course of a year. 7 work days and 14 volunteers (and a dog too) made the entire project worthwhile. I couldn't have done it without the help of my closest friends, and the financial support from my closest family. Thank you so much for your contribution to improving the trek for thousands of hikers, old and new, and inspiring a generation of Floridians to enjoy the Florida Trail.

Strawberry (Jeff Glenn’s trusty trail dog) approves of all of the new signs as the crew is finished for the day. She’s a tough boss but was extremely proud of the beautiful work.
When the US Forest Service works with prospective land managers to draft agreements that allow the Florida Trail to cross new properties, one of the concerns repeatedly heard is how hikers and trail maintainers will interact with other user groups like hunters, cyclists, equestrian and even astronomers. We are always impressed with how well our land managers balance the needs of these user groups. As hikers and trail maintainers, we can do our part to prevent conflict by reading and following regulations on each section of trail. This information can be found on brochures, kiosks, and the agency’s website. Being mindful of information like hunting seasons or light restrictions near astronomy viewing areas can help us all enjoy Florida’s public lands in the way we enjoy most.

This year, I attended a Volunteer Work Party (VWP) where hunters and trail maintainers didn’t simply tolerate or avoid each other, but rather formed a strong bond and a mutually beneficial relationship. Every year during the last weekend of October, volunteers in the Indian River chapter maintain trails in Bull Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This VWP is all hands on deck for the chapter— it is the only weekend during trail maintenance season that hunting is not allowed. Typically, our volunteers avoid maintaining trails during hunting dates. Our loud equipment scares away wildlife and ruins the peaceful solitude that hunters and hikers alike enjoy.

Even though hunting was not allowed, it didn’t stop hunters from spending the weekend with us during the 2017 Bull Creek VWP. Local hunters Ed Alley and Chad Stanich were kind enough to lend us their time and their trucks to help us shuttle volunteers and equipment to trailheads. They also let us use their RVs and treated us to dinner, including Ed’s special baked beans.

Enjoy the below conversation with Ed Alley, where he tells us more about his history in central Florida, and how hunters and trail maintainers have formed a positive relationship in Bull Creek.
How did you develop an interest in hunting?
I was born in Lakeland, Florida in 1944 where I lived until 1963 when I joined the Air Force. Several of my childhood friends and I spent most of our earnings from our paper routes (about $15 per week) on camping, fishing and hunting gear. After we collected the weekly fees ($0.25) on Saturday mornings, we loaded our bags with camping gear and rode our bicycles to camp, fish and hunt around central Florida.

How did you discover Bull Creek WMA?
In 1988 my wife told me her 12-year-old nephew wanted me to take him hunting. I had not seriously hunted since 1963. I began to search for places to hunt wild turkeys and one of my clients suggested Three Lakes and Bull Creek Wild Life Managements Areas. I had never heard of either place so I visited both places. The defining characteristics of Bull Creek are the creek, the vegetation surrounding the creek, and the and interconnecting cypress strands. These areas provide refuge, food and safe passage for deer, turkeys and feral hogs. I bought several topographic maps of Bull Creek and began planning our first hunt.

What was it like exploring Bull Creek for the first time?
On the day prior to our hunt we went to the selected area and built a blind from natural vegetation to cover up our movements. The next morning, we sat and listened to the pre-fly down turkey talk, heard them fly from their roots and waited for them to come to my calls. We were sitting side by side on short stools about 2 feet apart and a doe stuck its face between us about shoulder high and curled its top lip to gather our scent. Suddenly she realized we were humans and blew to alert all other deer in the area there were humans present. We were splattered with moisture from the blow. Needless to say, all three of us were surprised. My wife’s nephew jumped from his stool, the doe ran away crashing through the brush making considerable noise and I watched the turkeys run away to a more secure place. Since that time, I have spent hundreds of hours on Bull Creek.

How did you discover Florida Trail?
Every hunter uses the Florida Trails to scout distant areas of the property and reach their hunting areas. Bull Creek is not only a refuge for animals, it is a refuge for people who want to get away from the stress and strain of everyday life and give their minds a chance to relax and put things into perspective. It provides us with diversions from the issues of everyday life and an incubation period in which we put things into perspective.

When did you begin working with our volunteers to support trail maintenance?
Since I use the trail all the time for hunting, I thought it was important to give back. I met section leader Bill Alexander out on the trail, and he encouraged me to join the 2016 Bull Creek Volunteer Work Party. This year I attended again, and recruited another hunter, Chad Stanich to participate too. Chad’s truck with snorkel attachment was incredibly helpful in shuttling trail maintainers across the WMA in wet conditions. Chad and I are excited to participate in future volunteer events. Increased participation of hunters in future volunteer events will bring the two groups closer together. This is something that we can work on together.

How else have hunters been able to partner with Florida Trail volunteers?
In 2016 Bull Creek was threatened--there were proposals made to exchange Bull Creek for a new conservation easement
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Please consider putting your donation to FTA on a recurring basis. You decide the amount, you decide the frequency, you control your account, and it all benefits the FTA.

By clicking on the donate button, you will be directed to our secure donation page from Network for Good. Network for Good is our partner and a leading giving platform for non-profit organizations.

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

elsewhere in Central Florida. I knew the only way to prevent this from happening was to recruit the help of all the users. Every contact responded in a positive manner and became involved in the public advocacy. I believe the unity of Bull Creek user groups came as a surprise to the people who proposed the exchange.

What more can we do to support hunters who use the Florida Trail?
Traditionally, The Friends of Bull Creek has sponsored a cookout and cleanup during the small game season and this is open to all users and their families. They invite decision-makers from the regulatory agencies to the cookout which provides us a chance to meet these people and to communicate issues in a positive non-confrontational environment. Events like these can create contacts and strengthen our relationships for our common goals. This strategy could be adopted in other areas of the trail where hikers and hunters intersect.

Ed Alley using his truck to help Bill Alexander tow the mower to the next trail head.

From left to right: Hunters Ed Alley and Chad Stanich, FTA Central South Regional Representative Kelly Wiener, and Indian River volunteers David Newkirk and Eric Cardze.
January 20, 2018 – FTA Board of Directors Meeting at the FWC Ocala Conservation Center

January 20, 2018 – FTA is hosting the Wild and Scenic Film Festival at Swamp Head Brewery in Gainesville 5-10PM – More info at https://goo.gl/sHJRhw

January 21, 2018 – FTA Chapter Council at the FWC Ocala Conservation Center

April 7 – FTA Annual Meeting Location TBA
Florida Trail Association is a Proud Partner with Warrior Expeditions

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Visit WarriorExpeditions.org for more information
Aristotle once said, “Quality is not an act, it is a habit.” Whether it be trail running, systems engineering, trail maintaining or hiking, whatever task or hobby Marjorie Pugh pursues, she fully dedicates herself to it and develops her strengths over time. Marjorie is an emerging volunteer in the Black Bear Chapter. I first met her at the Trails Skills Training in September and then joined her at the recent North Florida Chainsaw Certification course in Ocala Forest. It was easy for me to detect that she is a high-quality human. She had an air of calm and ease about her and was quick to check in with me about how I was settling into the FTA community. Marjorie’s enthusiasm for the Florida Trail is contagious. Her welcoming spirit and her tenacity for trail work gives me hope for the positive impact our FTA activity leaders and trail stewards can continue to make on the Florida Trail and those who explore it.

In early November, I met with Marjorie near the Pat’s Island trailhead in Juniper Wilderness during a Black Bear Chapter work party. She took a break from clearing the trail and went with me on a brief hike toward Hidden Pond. After learning about the deep connection Marjorie has to the trail and the Ocala National Forest, I couldn’t have imagined a more appropriate and inspired setting to interview her for this spotlight. Here’s a bit about Marjorie’s story and what to look forward to with her growing involvement in the FTA.

Where are you originally from? Tell us about your background.
I was born and raised in Orlando. I grew up there with my parents and brothers. I’ve been in Florida for most of my life except for the time that I spent in the navy.

Growing up, I thought I was going to have a career in skateboarding. I was part of that Lords of Dogtown 70’s era but as an east coaster. We’d tread pools. If there was an empty swimming pool, you could count on it that we would jump the fence and skateboard in it. My childhood self was wild and crazy. I think I exasperated my parents. They thought I was going to stay at home the rest of my life. So my father, in an effort to motivate me, took me to a recruiter’s office and said, “You should pick one and go.” And so I did. That’s how I ended up in the navy. I joined when I was 19.

In the navy, I was based in Hawaii and Key West as well as a couple of ships. After I getting out of the navy and finishing school in Ohio, I was a part of a research ship that floated around the Bering Sea. I spent three years doing that as a civilian as a part of our missile tracking defense for the United States. We would track missile launches and collect data off of them, send them to the powers-that-be to be analyzed, and make sure their countries of origin were not acting outside of all of our nuclear arms treaties.

Where do you currently reside and what are you doing now?
Now, I live in Ormond Beach. I’ve been there since about 1989. I currently work at Space Center as a Systems Engineer for the Air Force Space Command. I’ve worked there for about 29 years. In my off time, I volunteer a lot for the FTA and work in some other civic programs. My happy place is the Ocala National Forest. I spend a lot of time over here, especially now that I’ve become a lot more active in the Black Bear Chapter.
Did you always have an affinity for the outdoors?

Yes. Especially considering that I grew up in a Florida that is a lot different from what it is now. That's one of the reasons why I'm really attracted to the trail. It's a constant reminder of what Florida used to be. Being out in the woods makes you feel young. I love the Florida Trail and all of its nuances. There are a lot of parts that are different, but I love it. I love the challenge.

What adventures have you embarked on in recent years?

Every year, I try to thru-hike the Florida Trail. That's been a dream of mine for a long time, but life always gets in the way and I usually come off the trail early. On average, 10 days has been the longest hike I've done. I've sectioned hike the FT in 10-day segments from Oasis up to KICCO as well as throughout the Ocala National Forest section. The first thing after I retire that I'd like to do is thru-hike the FT. That's one of my aspirations.

With my background in fast packing as an ultrarunner, I like to challenge myself by packing light with minimal stuff. I love just being out in the woods, the quietness and solitude. The woods have a way of clearing the air for you, separating you from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life.

How long have you been with the FTA and how did you first discover the Florida Trail and the FTA?

I first learned about the Florida Trail about 10 years ago when I was trail running.

I was in a running club based out of Deltona called the West Volusia Runners (WVR). One of the trails that we ran was a 20-mile section that started at Clearwater Lake to Alexander Springs and back. I realized the section was a part of the Florida Trail when the group leader mentioned it before our run. Prior to that, I had just known it as an orange blazed trail and not officially as our state's national scenic trail.

The more we ran, the more I felt obligated to care for the trail. It's kind of an unwritten rule amongst ultra runners that if you're running a trail, you ought to be a part of taking care of it. So that's when I joined the FTA. I wasn't active at first but as I've gotten closer to retirement, I've had some life changes and more time has opened up in my schedule.

How did you first become actively involved with the Black Bear Chapter?

My first step in getting involved was when I decided to become an Activity Leader. Partly because they were offering that training then, and also because the Black Bear Chapter Chair at that time was retiring from her position and soliciting members to become more active in officer positions.

As an Activity Leader, I've led short day hikes around Ocala. At the beginning of 2018, I'm planning a series of 8 to 10 mile hikes that traverses the Ocala NF. This will be a way for us to show off what we've done in terms of maintaining these sections and hopefully making it into a recruiting effort to get more active members to join the chapter.

I also volunteer as a Black Bear Chapter representative in the FTA.

I love the trail so much. It's very near and dear to me. It's Florida. It's old Florida. Especially in the Ocala National Forest, where I grew up. It reminds me of my childhood and emotionally connected to it.
Chapter Council. I really enjoy that because I’m able to see things at a higher scale--- a 10,000-foot level of what it takes to bring all of this together. It’s good to see the big picture and the major struggles. Getting involved to improve the trail on a higher level really interests me.

Along with being an Activity Leader and Chapter Council Member for the Black Bear Chapter, what other positions have you held as an FTA volunteer?

I’m also the Vice Chair of the chapter and I just became a Trail Master for the maintenance of a small southern section of the Juniper Wilderness Area. I’m really excited about that.

This is the first year that I’ve become active in my chapter. I look forward to doing great things. Other than getting involved on a more administrative level, I love trail maintenance work--- whacking weeds and lopping, getting sweaty and dirty. There’s a lot to do on the ground and behind the scenes.

What trainings or certifications have you acquired through FTA?

My chapter nominated for me to attend the Technical track of the Trail Skills Training this year because I was becoming more active in the chapter. I’ve also participated in the Activity Leadership Training, the online First Aid/CPR course, and most recently, the North Florida Chainsaw Certification Training.

What do you enjoy the most about trail maintenance?

I can’t really put my finger on any one thing. The camaraderie, the camping, hanging out around the fire, the dirty work. It’s a challenging job. Especially in the Juniper Wilderness where the scrub just grows right back. Taking care of the Ocala NF is a full-time job in and of itself. It keeps me busy and invested.

How do you stay motivated and dedicated to your service as an FTA trail steward?

I have a lot of energy because I just recently retired from running. It wasn’t my choice to retire. My body is getting older and I can’t run hundreds of miles like I used to. I’m throwing that energy at the trail and it’s working out for me. It’s not really a suitable substitute for running, but it’s serving me. The love that I have for the trail and our woods is what keeps me motivated.

What would you like to happen for the future of the Florida Trail?

I’d like to see more Floridians, people who live here and who are stakeholders, get to know the trail and fall in love with it as well. So that they, like me, can throw some energy into it. There are untapped resources out there and it is just a matter of how we can get to them. I’d like to find a way to do that.

What is your most memorable moment on the FT?

I have so many. I couldn’t give you one. Last night, the coyotes were howling all night. Hundreds of them, all night long.

Two of my closest friends, Tim “Salt Shack” Purol from the Suncoast Chapter and Dusty Hardman from the Indian River Chapter, and I did the Everglades a couple of years ago when it was flooded. We are all accomplished ultrarunners who could average 50 miles in 12 hours. We went from Oasis Visitor Center at the Southern terminus up to the south end of Lake Okeechobee. It was one of my most memorable trail memories.

What is your favorite section of the trail?

Farles Prairie area. I like the lakes, the openness, and the old-school Long Leaf Pine and wire grass ecosystem.

What are some of your greatest achievements?

Surviving 70 foot waves in the Bering Sea...

I ran 100 miles once in Saint Sebastian River Preserve. They have a race there every year. It was a wooded, sandy track like here in the Juniper Wilderness. That’s my only 100 mile race that I’ve finished within the time limit, which was about 31 hours.

I once ran across 5 states for a race that spanned from Missouri to Georgia. (MO, KY, TN, AL, GA). You get off a ferry in Missouri and then you start running. You have ten days to get across to Georgia where you end on a mountain summit. You’re on your own. You stop wherever you can find food and water. What you have in your pack is what you have. The more stuff in your pack, the heavier it is. I averaged about 5lbs. of weight in my pack.

What are three things that you value the most in life?


What's your favorite quote or piece of wisdom?

Don’t major in minor things. Life is too short.
### FTA Volunteer Chapters

#### List of Florida Trail Association Chapters

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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](http://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/](http://FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/) then select the chapter*
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