VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: AMANDA “COLDILAWKS” KINCAID

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Closing Gaps
A New Section Opens Along the Suwannee River

Connecting Trails
The Eastern Continental Trail

The Kissimmee River
Then and Now

Florida Trail Association
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Cover photo: Amanda "Coldilawks" Kincaid on her southbound hike of the Florida Trail.

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
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 Fall issue of The Footprint is August 21, 2018.
Happy Summer!

As hiking season winds down for the year, things are still happening behind the scenes at the FTA. I’m still in awe of how many moving parts it takes to keep hikers hiking on the Florida Trail.

We have signed a contract to have the old office demolished and it should happen in the next few weeks. Important documents, books, and memorabilia have been moved to a safe and dry storage unit. As of writing this, no decision has yet been made on a permanent office. We are very fortunate to have Jan Wells spearheading this process, as she has years of building experience during her highly-regarded career in New Jersey. The Board will review all options with as much information as possible before making a final decision.

I went to Tallahassee last week, along with Alex Stigliano (FTA Trail Program Director) and Shawn Thomas (Florida Trail Administrator, USFS) to meet leaders from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Meeting Samantha Brown (Director, OGT), Callie DeHaven (Director, State Lands), and Eric Draper (Director, State Parks) was very productive, as we explained our needs to close the gaps on the trail and increase promotion. Eric reiterated how much he enjoyed his time at the IDIDAHIKE in February, and how he’d like to see more of our events at state parks. The Florida Trail winds through 9 state parks. Two more parks will be added when the Big Bend reroute is completed. It’s a natural partnership. I encourage the chapters to connect with a park in their area and to work together on an event. I was very pleased by the positive response we received from all the agencies. I made it clear that we prefer a natural footpath for our hikes, and that 365,000 other people (that’s how many hikers use the Florida Trail each year!) think so, too. By the end of the meeting, we all agreed we share mutual goals and will continue to work closely together.

Special kudos are due to Jeff Glenn, North Florida Trail Program Manager, as he has pieced together an opportunity for us to close another gap. We have an opportunity to purchase an easement from a land owner in the Suwannee River area which would re-open 5 miles of previously existing trail and eliminate 2 miles of road walk – if we raise the money. We have a year to raise $30,000 for this critical piece and I believe we can do it! A fund-raising campaign will be announced soon. In the meantime, I’d like to thank Jeff for all of his hard work to get us this far. Over several years, he has worked with the landowner and his neighbors to allow us this opportunity for access.

Finally, note that Jeff’s title has changed along with Adam and Kelly’s; from “Regional Representatives” to “Trail Program Managers.” This title change better reflects the type of work Adam Fryska, Kelly Wiener and Jeff Glenn do for the Florida Trail and the FTA volunteers. Not to exclude Alex Stigliano and Van Tran (now Community Outreach Manager), we are very fortunate to have such a professional and creative team.

Put on your bug spray and keep hiking!

Leslie Wheeler
FTA President
FTA Partners with

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Did you know you can now easily spread your donation to FTA across several months or years?

Go to FloridaTrail.org and click

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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 is a leading giving platform for non-profit organizations.
Granite Gear Grounds Keepers are cleaning up the FNST!

Over 50 pounds of trash have been removed by thru-hikers to date!

Learn more at TheGroundsKeepers.org
Thru-hikers want continuous trail without roads, rails, traffic, or very many distractions along the way. Yes, the occasional pit stop along the trail is appreciated (thank you 88 Store and Lake Butler Depot), but for the most part, it is the continuous footpath that has the most allure, especially when the trail features some of nature’s finest along the way. We recognize this and strive to create a trail that encompasses what long-distance hikers want. Recently, a new section of the Florida Trail has opened which offers hikers the best of the best when it comes to hiking. It eliminated paved road walk and added new miles of trail along the Suwannee River.

Northbound thru-hikers used to access the Suwannee River for the first time at Bell Springs, east of the town of White Springs; but now, the Florida Trail begins its riverfront journey at Big Shoals, the only class III rapid in the state of Florida. Overnight users will now be able to pitch camp directly overlooking the shoals and be lulled to sleep by the sounds of rushing water. Gone are more than five miles of exposed and paved road walk, making way for three additional miles of single-track trail.

Adding these new miles makes the Florida Trail a more complete hike in many ways: a new Florida State Park (and its users) added to the list of trail partners, closing gaps in the trail, and increased chapter involvement in the region. More gap closures are coming, so stay tuned!
No, Randy Madison did not pass on…
He’s just enjoying Big Shoals on a hot day

When the Suwannee River reads between 59-61 feet above sea level,
Big Shoals earns a class III rapid classification. Here the river level is
low enough to walk across

All Trained Up
Dennis Helton of Helton Logging Enterprises once again treated the FTA
volunteers to a fantastic chainsaw training that raised certification levels
of many sawyers in the region as well as trained brand new sawyers who
will assist their chapters with trail maintenance. This two-day class on the
Ocala National Forest prepared 11 FTA sawyers for bucking and limbing only
certifications that will last three years. Dennis then traveled the Panhandle
and Southern regions to lead another 2 chainsaw trainings. A total of 34
volunteers received training this Spring!
The Exos/Eja features uncompromised durability in an ultralight package that defies belief. The only way to discover wondrous moments is to get out there and find them. So grab your friends, pack your gear and make it happen.
For over 50 years, the FTA has been working with our partners to link together a continuous footpath across the state of Florida. What might surprise you is that the Florida Trail itself is just one part of a roughly 4,800 mile route that stretches from Key West to Cap Gaspé, Quebec.

Known as the Eastern Continental Trail (ECT), this unofficial route links together the Florida Trail (FT), Appalachian Trail (AT), International Appalachian Trail (IAT), and numerous shorter trails into one continuous hiking path. For those with a serious case of wanderlust, the ECT provides a unique opportunity to hike almost the entire length of the eastern North American continent. Every year, a number of intrepid Florida Trail thru-hikers continue up through Blackwater State Forest to the Alabama border in order to attempt this awe-inspiring journey. On their way, they’ll travel through a wide variety of natural environments, from the subtropical swamps of the Everglades to the boreal forests of Canada’s maritime provinces. By the time hikers reach the northern terminus, they will have traversed 16 states, 2 provinces, and have been walking for anywhere from 7 months to over a year.

The ECT was first hiked in 1997 by Washington native, John Brinda. Then a 22-year-old college student, Brinda was the first to link together a walk along the FT and AT with the newly proposed International Appalachian Trail. The IAT sought to extend the existing Appalachian footpath to other mountainous regions connected by the same geological history; in Canada, this included the Miramichi Highlands of New Brunswick and the Chic-Choc mountains of Quebec. Although Brinda ended his hike at the Gaspé Peninsula, work has continued to build sections of trail in Newfoundland, Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, as these areas are all shared remnants of the same 300 million year old Appalachian mountain range. Nonetheless, Cap Gaspé remains the furthest point that one can reasonably reach by foot, and it was this terminus that was used the following year by Meredith Eberhart (perhaps better known by his trail name, Nimblewill Nomad) when he completed the second known hike of the ECT. Nimblewill Nomad wrote a book about his adventure, came up with the name "Eastern Continental Trail," and with that...
The Blackwater Section features Longleaf Pine and Wiregrass ecosystems, Photo courtesy of Walt Ebbert
By the time hikers reach the northern terminus, they will have traversed 16 states, 2 provinces, and have been walking for anywhere from 7 months to over a year.

The northern link between the Florida Trail and the ECT is tucked away in the northwestern corner of the Florida Panhandle. The Blackwater Section is a blue-blazed side trail that veers off from the orange-blazed FT in the Yellow River Ravines Section. An official connector of the Florida National Scenic Trail, the Blackwater Section was built and continues to be maintained by volunteers of FTA’s Western Gate Chapter. Heading north, the trail meanders through the Blackwater River State Forest, Florida’s largest state forest with over 200,000 acres of gently rolling wiregrass and longleaf pine woodlands. This area contains some of the most interesting topography found in Florida, with numerous ravines and bluffs that offer sweeping views of the surrounding forests. The Blackwater Section reaches its terminus at the Alabama border and the ECT continues north into the Conecuh National Forest.

Blackwater section of the Florida Trail through Okaloosa and Santa Rosa counties

The route was established as the ultimate long-distance eastern hiking route.

Florida serves as the southern terminus of the ECT, and the FTA community has easy access to the various connectors that link our trail system to the greater ECT. Beginning at the famous Southernmost Point Buoy in Key West, hikers can follow the Overseas Heritage Trail along US Route 1 up through the Florida Keys. This section of the route mostly follows paved multi-use paths, and the views of crystal clear turquoise waters and mangrove forests make up for the busy traffic along the Overseas Highway. While certainly walkable, the Overseas Heritage Trail is best enjoyed by bicycle, and is one of Florida’s top destinations for a multi-day cycling trip. Beyond Key Largo, the route follows the South Dade Greenway and several short road walks before it finally merges with the Florida Trail at our southern terminus in Big Cypress.

Blackwater River

A previous Big Cypress FTA maintenance crew poses in front of the FT Southern Terminus in Big Cypress National Preserve
The Alabama section of the ECT begins with a long rural road walk that connects the Florida Trail to the Pinhoti Trail at Flagg Mountain. This section remains the largest gap in the ECT trail system, and members of the Alabama Hiking Trail Society are working hard to build and promote a true trail connector for this section. For now, northbound hikers enjoy easy walking and frequent resupplies for about 175 miles as they follow the yellow-blazed road route to Flagg Mountain, their first peak over 1,000 feet. From Flagg Mountain, the ECT follows the Pinhoti National Recreation Trail, an established 335-mile footpath that links together Alabama and Georgia through the southern foothills of the Appalachian mountain range. The Pinhoti Trail then joins the Benton MacKaye Trail in the Chattahoochee National Forest, about 70 miles west of the Appalachian Trail’s famous southern terminus at Springer Mountain. Hikers then continue north, continuously following the same ancient mountain range until the cliffs of Cap Gaspé fall away to the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Ready to start planning your hike? There’s a wealth of great information about the Eastern Continental Trail available online. The following links are a great place to start learning about the less well-known connectors in this trail system:

- http://jupiterhikes.com/ - Florida native and FTA Loxahatchee Chapter volunteer, James “Jupiter” Hoher, completed a thru-hike of the ECT in 2016. His story was closely followed by the FTA community. His website offers great insights into what it takes to prepare and complete this monumental journey.
- https://nimblewillnomad.com/ - Nimblewill Nomad was the first thru-hiker to popularize the ECT, his website continues to inspire folks to step away and go on a long (long!) walk.
- http://hikealabama.org/joomla/ - The Alabama Hiking Trail Society is doing great work to build and promote hiking trails within the state. They offer a great set of free maps covering the yellow-blazed road walk between the Florida Trail and Pinhoti Trail.
- http://www.pinhotitrailalliance.org/ - An exciting hiking destination of its own, the Pinhoti Trail connects 170 miles of trail in Alabama with another 166 miles of trail in Georgia, making it the longest continuous hiking path in either state.
- http://www.bmta.org/ - The Benton MacKaye Trail is a 300 miles footpath that explores the Appalachian mountains in Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. It shares a southern terminus with the Appalachian Trail at Springer Mountain.

http://www.floridastateparks.org/trail/Florida-Keys - The Overseas Heritage Trail is a fantastic way to explore the Florida Keys. Bring a bike!

Flagg Mountain, the first peak over 1,000 ft for northbound ECT hikers
Western Gate Chapter hikers along the Blackwater River Section of the Florida Trail
WE'RE TAKING CARE
OF THE PLACES YOU LOVE
THE KISSIMMEE RIVER

Then and now

Have you ever hiked the Florida Trail along the Kissimmee River? If not, you may be underestimating this quiet, rural region. The stretch of trail that parallels the Kissimmee River showcases a unique intersection of the natural, cultural and historic values of Central Florida and is well worth the trip.

The nature: The Kissimmee River is a naturally winding river that flows into Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, serving as a vital component of the ecosystem in South Florida as a whole. The river has an extensive floodplain that can reach up to three miles wide in certain areas during the rainy summer months. It meanders through a mosaic of common natural communities in Central Florida, including oak hammocks, cow pastures, prairies and marshes. Within these communities, wetland plants, wading birds, fish and particularly large alligators have thrived in the river’s ecosystem.

The culture: Did you know that Florida was the first state in the country to practice cattle ranching? Florida has a long cultural history of ranching, beginning in the 1500s when Spanish explorers first brought cattle to the “New World.” Today, Florida’s $531 million cattle industry has 1.7 million cattle and calves, and it is the 17th largest in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Along the Kissimmee River, the Florida Trail overlooks ranches that have been handed down through families for as many as six generations.

The Florida Trail also passes through a former town known as KICCO (pronounced “kiss-oh”), which stood for “Kissimmee Island Cattle Company.” The town operated from 1915 to the late 1920’s and grew from the need for a pit stop for the local “traffic”-- horseback or steam-powered paddle boats. At one time, the KICCO settlement had homes, a bunkhouse, mess hall, company store, ice house, power plant, schoolhouse and even its own steamboat landing! Many of
The new Micco Bluff section in Central Florida travels along the Kissimmee River.
The Kissimmee River meanders through a mosaic of common natural communities in Central Florida.

The foundations of these buildings and brick roads can still be seen today, adjacent to the “Town of KICCO” campsite.

The history: In the 1940s, Congress was prompted to channelize the Kissimmee River following widespread flooding and property damage. The goal was to deepen and straighten the river into a man-made canal, preventing another catastrophic flood. Biologists suspected from the start that the project would have devastating ecological consequences. While the project delivered on the promise of flood protection, it also destroyed much of a floodplain-dependent ecosystem that nurtured endangered species, hundreds of native fish and wetland-dependent animals. According to the South Florida Water Management District, more than 90 percent of the waterfowl that once inhabited the area disappeared and the fish population dramatically diminished due to decreased oxygen in the water.

In 1992, both the Federal and State government spent nearly a billion dollars to restore the river in order to protect local ecosystems, clean the water that flows to South Florida, and protect recreation opportunities for Floridians. Estimated to be completed in 2020, the Kissimmee River Restoration Project will be the largest functioning restoration project of its kind in the world.
On March 31st 2018, the FTA celebrated the opening of the new “Micco Bluff” section of the Florida Trail with a ribbon cutting and inaugural hike. This reroute has eliminated 8 miles of road walk on Micco Bluff Road and replaced it with a beautiful winding footpath through some of South Florida Water Management District’s most scenic land along the Kissimmee. At 11.9 miles in length, this new trail section between Micco Landing Trailhead and Oak Creek Trailhead makes for a rewarding and challenging day hike.

The Micco Bluff section was first scouted after the large routing shift of the Florida Trail from the west side of the Kissimmee River to the east in 2015. Since then, the completion of this reroute can be attributed to over 30 volunteers in the Tropical Trekkers chapter, the U.S. Forest Service, the Florida Conservation Corps, and support from South Florida Water Management District and FTA staff. Our records indicate that over 500 volunteer hours have been dedicated to this reroute. A special thank you is owed to Lori Burris and Tom Clements of the Tropical Trekkers chapter for their leadership and hard work!

Hikers took a break by blooming Southern Blue Flag Irises during the Micco Bluff inaugural hike.
The new section of trail offers an incredibly scenic path through iconic natural communities in Central Florida including oak hammocks, cow pastures, prairies and marshes.
In April of 2018, less than a month after opening the Micco Bluff trail section, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Kissimmee River Wild and Scenic River Study Act. Sponsored by Representative Darren Soto, from Florida's 9th congressional district, this bill designates segments of the Kissimmee River and its tributaries in the State of Florida for study for potential addition to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Systems.

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to “preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.” Authorized at the time to compliment then-current policy of hydroelectric dam building, the Act is designed to provide land management agencies the authority to protect and preserve designated rivers from future degradation. More than 200 rivers are designated as Wild and Scenic across the United States. In Florida, just two other rivers are enrolled, the Wekiva River in Central Florida and the Loxahatchee River along the Treasure Coast.

"The historic Kissimmee River is not only the heart of Central Florida's water drainage route, it also serves as the headwaters for our iconic Everglades, and it is home to many of Florida's endangered species. An environment jewel of our district, it is imperative that this natural treasure is preserved for future generations to come. Over the past year, we worked tirelessly to advance this legislation to safeguard our ecosystem, and we’re proud it passed with unanimous consent. Designation as a “Wild and Scenic” river will grant the River and trail corridor with critical ecological protections from the harms caused by development. I am committed to continue fighting to protect our environment and Floridians way of life!"

- Congressman Darren Soto, Representing the 9th District of Florida.
We all hike the Florida Trail for different reasons. Whether it's for exercise, reflection, clarity or fresh air, the trail is there as our respite. What's stunning to me are those who are also hiking our national scenic trails for a greater cause. Amanda Kincaid—including by her trail name as Coldilawks—is one of them.

Amanda was chosen as this year's Florida Trail Granite Gear® Grounds Keeper. I reached out to her while she was hiking southbound on the FT and met up with her in late March. I had the chance to hike with her for a few miles through beautiful pine scrub and oak hammocks in Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area. Over the years, Amanda has transformed from being a hesitant, first-time hiker to a dedicated, long-distance backpacker. Here's the story of how she has combined her growth as a hiker with her passion for being an environmental steward:

What was your first exposure to hiking?

Spending time with my dad means a lot to me. In my sophomore year of college, he took me hiking in Glacier National Park for four days. I didn't enjoy the hiking at the time but I enjoyed spending time with him. So when I graduated from undergrad, I asked my dad if he wanted to go hiking somewhere together. He has always wanted to hike the Pacific Crest Trail since he had done small sections of it when he served in the Air Force. My mom wanted him to take someone with him to hike the PCT and I offered to go with him. Not because I wanted to hike or because I wanted to spend 6 months outside - that sounded like no fun to me at the time - but because I wanted to spend time with him.

So I took a year off after undergrad. I had already applied to law school, and planned to start the following year. We got out to the PCT and started hiking it in April. At mile 7, my dad rolled his ankle. We woke up the next day and it was super swollen, black and blue. I
took all his food weight and hiked twelve miles into Morena. He hobbled in after me. We hung out in Morena for a few days but the swelling in his ankle didn’t go down. So he went home and I decided to stay. We figured that I would continue hiking and he would come back after a few weeks of recovery and continue hiking on the trail with me. I was hiking the foothills in southern California on my way into Laguna the next day when I get a call from him that his ankle was going to take nine weeks to heal and they thought it was best that he not hike the PCT that year. I didn't outright say this to him but I was upset and thought, “I don’t want to do this trail. I’m out here to do this with my dad. I can’t do this next year. I have law school.” I felt dirty and miserable. But I kept hiking into Laguna and I met this guy named Michael who is now one of my good friends. I was thinking of getting off the trail but all of a sudden, I had a hiking partner. We hiked together for 400 miles.

My favorite story to share about the PCT is the moment that my brain made a 180 degree turn and I fell in love with hiking. Michael had hiked ahead of me because he wanted to get into town. He was going to wait at the road for me and we were going to hitch in together. That was how we hiked because he hiked a lot faster. I was really pushing to try to get to this road so that I could get into town that night. I was super miserable and had a meltdown earlier. I was in a lot of pain and was frustrated with how hot and dirty I was. I remember throwing my trekking poles and pack down on the trail and thinking, “I’m having a snack and taking a break because this is stupid.” So I sat down and looked out. A feeling came over me like when your vision goes into focus. All of a sudden, my brain registered that this was where I was supposed to be, this is what I was supposed to be doing. From that moment on, I was absolutely in love with hiking.

I ended up getting off the PCT because I had bad tendonitis, but I didn’t discover that diagnosis until a year later. My whole right leg and foot had gone numb while I was hiking and some people thought it was hairline fracture. That was the injury that got me off the PCT.

What was your next major hike after the PCT?

When I started law school at the University of Florida the following year, hiking went on hiatus. I graduated in May of 2017. Within a week of finishing the Florida Bar exam, I was on the AT. I hiked 400 miles southbound on the AT until I got sick and had to get off the trail.

I was underweight on the AT because I had been stressed out studying for the bar. I started the AT in August, which is super late for Southbounders. I got all the way through Maine and got to the summit of Mt. Madison in The White Mountains in New Hampshire. Then my body shut down… I had a headache, nausea, no energy and could barely move. Of course my thru-hiking brain thought, “No no. We just got through the White Mountains, the hardest part of the AT. Push through.” But I realized I could barely walk the five miles down the mountain.

I saw a doctor to make sure I didn’t have Lyme disease. I had five out of ten of the proteins, which was not enough to determine whether or not I had Lyme. I was put on a super strong antibiotic, doxycycline, as a “just-in-case.” I did another twenty or so miles on doxy before I spent a whole day in a shelter. I ended up leaving the shelter, hiking out and driving all the way back down to Gainesville. The doxy had given me even worse symptoms and side effects and I was not in good enough health to continue hiking.

How did you discover the Florida Trail?

When I got back from the PCT in 2014, I was desperate for hiking. Then I found out that the Florida Trail was five miles from my parents’ house where I grew up and I was like, “Done!” The first section I hiked was Econina. It was a great time even though I hiked it in July and it hailed on me that day. I started doing an eighteen-mile section of the FT near my parents’ place whenever I could.

How did you first get involved with the FTA?

I’ve been involved with the FTA through UF law school and the legal side of working with the organization. I have yet to go out and do trail maintenance with the FTA although I’d like to. When I started my third year of law school, I started getting into linear corridors and trails systems and everything that was associated with that. Then, one of my UF law professors mentioned that they would like to have the FTA as one of the clients for their clinic, so he sent me and my friend down to the FTA 50th Anniversary Conference in October of 2016. I got to meet the team and members of the FTA community and had a lot of fun. Through the law school, I worked on investigating and identifying all private and public land leases the FT has to secure protection and development of the trail.
What do you have to look forward to after this hike?
Right now, I’m kind of in a waiting period. I’ve applied to the UF Interdisciplinary Ecology PhD program in which I’d like to focus on on rewilding urban areas, making cities greener and more based on environmentally friendly and natural, biodiverse Florida landscapes. I’d like to pursue this either through academia or a legal career. I’ve also applied for a job at a law firm in Gainesville that is involved with land trusts. I’ll know in April what I’m doing after the hike. I hope I’ll get this job at the law firm, depending on if I pass the bar. I’ll also find out if I got into the PhD programs I applied for at UF in April as well. Until then, I’m just in the woods.

Tell us about your current FT thru-hike.
My dad was talking about the Florida Trail a lot so I was set on taking another year off after law school to thru-hike it with him. He was originally going to do this hike with me but he had an injury with his foot and couldn’t. When I missed the January starting window, I started to reconsider if I wanted to do the Florida Trail or different national trail. But then I came to the conclusion that I absolutely did want to hike the Florida Trail. It’s my state. This is my home trail. It’s like someone from Pennsylvania saying that they want to hike the PCT when they have never hiked the AT in Pennsylvania.
At the beginning of February, I discovered Big Cypress was closed for prescribed burns. The trail was still closed for burns in Big Cypress by the beginning of March so I decided to change my plans. I decided to flip flop because of the burn and how late in the season I was starting my hike. To flip flop is to attempt a thru-hike by starting off at a relative midpoint of the full length of a trail and then going back and doing the other half from that midpoint. I decided to start from a halfway point close to Gainesville off 301 in Starke and hike south on the trail. Since I started late in the FT thru-hiking season, I think that flip flopping and reaching the Southern Terminus sooner will be the best way for me to avoid the early summer heat down there. My halfway point of my thru-hike will be reaching the Southern Terminus in Big Cypress in April. Then I’ll go back up to Gainesville and hike north and end at Fort Pickens, the Northern Terminus in the Panhandle. It worked out really well with the flip with all the different things happening in April for me, it was a good goal to finish half of the trail and to see where I’m at in April.

What are some essential resources outside of what you’re carrying in your pack that has really benefited your hike?
So outside of what’s in my pack, it’s the people. For me, it’s more convenient because I do have a lot of friends along the trail to support me since this my home state. I’ve never had that kind of support before on my hikes. Like with that big awful storm that swept through earlier in March between Ocala National Forest and Altamonte; I was hiking that section at the time and had a friend in Altamonte who came and picked me up right as the storm was hitting. The safety network of the FT community has been such a resource for me. You know, I’m from Florida. I get it. There are some sketchy folks and people can have a weird impression. You hear all the horror stories about events that have happened in the woods.... But every hunter who stops and sees me offers me water or a protein bar. People who pass me ask me if I need anything. The trail angels are an incredible community. The private FT Hiker 2018 group on Facebook has also been great. The group is closely monitored for people who are not a part of the trail angels or hiker community so I feel comfortable posting where I am and asking for help. From there, you get a lot of cache information, who to call in what towns, and information about trail conditions and shuttles.

The Florida community around this trail has just floored me. It’s way more than what I thought it was. I have a lot more support than I had on the PCT or AT. On the AT, it’s mostly businesses and local commerce that are the resource. But here on the FT, it’s mostly just local people who want to help hikers simply out of kindness.
The FTA and all the staff and volunteers involved in maintaining and building the trail are also a major resource. I don’t think people understand that in sections of the FT like this area... in one day, you can have the entire trail destroyed from a natural event like a flood or hurricane. This whole section was previously underwater and then became quickly eroded and overgrown. Within a few months, the whole path has been redone by volunteers. You see blazes burnt off by trees and it’s re-painted immediately. The quality of trail maintenance has been way more than I was told to expect. It’s just been incredible. All the boardwalks, little ladders and infrastructure. A lot of care goes into this trail by the people who take care of it.
Can you tell us about the Granite Gear Grounds Keepers program and your process of applying to become a Grounds Keeper on the FT?

Everything started with the Packing it Out program. It started with two guys who were sponsored by Granite Gear about four years ago on the AT who packed out a thousand pounds of trash. The year after, the same hikers did the PCT and that’s when I learned about Packing it Out. I was really drawn to how devoted they were to packing out trash on the scenic trails. Last year, Granite Gear started the Grounds Keepers Program. I heard about the application early this year through Packing it Out and applied with a video and written application. They accepted me and I was very excited to be the second Grounds Keeper for the Florida Trail. “Dirty Bowl” (Gretchen Matt) was the first FT Grounds Keeper last year.

The Grounds Keepers Program supports hikers who want to “Leave it Better” and pack out trash as they hike along trails around the country. As a Grounds Keeper (GK), we practice Leave No Trace principles and pick up the trash that we find on the trail. Right now, my official GK number is 44 pounds of trash removed from the FT. I won’t weigh the trash that I produce because it is not trash I’m finding on trail. The goal is to pick up anything you see left behind. What I find a lot of times is microtrash. Something I didn’t think I’d find on this trail-- which I’ve been really sad about-- is finding a lot of toilet paper, which I pack out. I suppose that could be considered a form of trail maintenance. I don’t like picking up other people’s trash. I didn’t become a Grounds Keeper because I find great joy in picking up people’s used toilet paper. I don’t go out on a Friday night with my friends to pick up used toilet paper. But I do find great joy in cleaning up our scenic areas. And it’s always kind of nice when I meet people who feel the same way or who are inspired by what I’m doing. I’m not going to pass through a place and just complain about the litter I see. I’m going to take action and do something about it. Even if I can’t clean up all the trash, at least I’m making an effort to minimize it.

The trails aren’t as bad as the roads. You don’t need to pick up all of it. You just need to do better and leave it better. If my aim was to clear all the trash in some sections, I wouldn’t be hiking.
What gear have sponsors provided you with for your hike?
For packing out trash, Granite Gear® gives the Grounds Keepers a stuff sack, a dump truck pouch which attaches to my hip belt, gloves and a scale for weighing out the trash we collect. They also gave me the backpack I’m using, an ultralight Crown VC 60 pack as well as a dry stuff sack. I also have Groundskeeper patch and a sticker from them. The sticker is on my ukulele and the patch is on my pack.

This Crown VC 60 is my favorite pack I’ve ever had. It fits really well. The only issue I’ve had is an issue I had with carrying my BearVault canister. I hiked with my bear canister up until a few days ago. I dropped it off because of the way that it was working with my pack. My pack was molding to my canister and it caused these ridges that rubbed up on my back and causing my vertebrae to swell. I don’t hike with a lot so there is not much to buffer my canister and the back of my pack. I’ve switched to just using a bag to store and hang my food now. That issue I had was a combination of my BearVault and the way that I slouch when I hike. But since I’ve removed the canister and have been working on my posture, I haven’t had any back issues and the swelling in my vertebrae has gone down. I’m also making sure to stretch my back out and take more breaks as I hike. I’m feeling a lot better now.

Altra® also gave us two pairs of shoes. They specifically recommended the ones I’m wearing for trekking through mud and wading through water. These are the ones I started with and I have my second pair to swap out into when I start the Northbound half of my hike.

What is some encouraging advice you’d share to someone who has never thru-hiked before?
I met a family from Minnesota when I was passing through Forever Florida, a couple and their two daughters. When they found out that I was thru-hiking the FT alone, their immediate response was, “We could never do that.” My response to them was, “But you could.” I’ve had hypothermia, dehydration, altitude sickness, foot injuries, knee injuries, all sort of issues in the woods. I’m not exactly an adept hiker. I’m pretty accident prone. There was a joke on the AT that I didn’t know how to set up my tent because I always slept in shelters. I would show up to camp and look for a boy and go, “Can you help me? Can you help me set up my tent?” But I also ran out of food in the Hundred-Mile wilderness on the AT and my friend had to feed me. So it’s not unfounded.

But look at where I am now. Everyone starts from somewhere. You could go five seconds onto the AT or FT and everyone would be trying to help you. You’d have your pack shaken down and they’d give you tips and pointers and would find a way to help you make your hike fun. Everything I’ve learned about backpacking I’ve learned from the people I’ve hiked with.

I don’t think you learn to love hiking on your good hikes. You learn on your miserable ones. Those are the moments when you feel defeated but then you stop and think, “Actually, I’m not. I can keep going.” You can realize you feel miserable and be miserable. Or you can realize the fun in what you’re doing. The day I hiked out of Clearwater, I had talked with my dad on the phone earlier that afternoon. It had rained on me that morning but my dad assured me it wouldn’t rain the rest of the day. That ended up not being true. There was a torrential downpour that afternoon. I didn’t feel like wearing rain gear because I had been hot hiking with it on earlier in the day and ended up soaking wet and freezing. It ended up being in the 50s later that day. There was lightning hitting so close I could feel the heat. It was scary, I was freezing and it was wet all around me. I was in burn areas with sporadic pine trees and little cover. I was panicking but then stopped and realized
I could either feel miserable as I hike or start doing something fun in my misery. So everytime it thundered, I would howl. That got my blood pumping and I was like “Yeah we’re making noise together, Nature!” And then I got to camp and all the freezing sensations hit me again all at once. I was cold once I stopped but I had made the rest of my enjoyable that day.

How did you get your trail name?
My trail name is Coldilawks. My original trail name was Goldie Locks. It was given to me on the PCT by my hiking partner, Michael... Because I complained a lot. I’m a complainer. We were hiking through the desert and I kept complaining about how cold I was. Then we stopped to make dinner and I complained that the food was too hot. He then responded, “Nothing is ever just right, is it?” And that’s when he gave me the name, Goldie Locks. But then he realized I mostly just complained about how cold I was so he changed it to Coldie Locks. When I found out that I got into UF Law School while I was on the PCT, I changed the spelling to Coldilawks (L-A-W).

What are some pieces of gear you’ve realized you could really use on trail and gear that you’ve realized you could do without?
While my canister will not be pictured here, I prefer to hike with a canister or Ursack Bear Bag because bear bag hanging isn’t always available, if you’re in a scrub area for example. My dad was really sweet and ordered me an Ursack which is really cool. I’m super lazy which is why I carried my bear canister. I don’t like to cook, I don’t like to hang my food.... In places that still require a bear canister, you can’t use an Ursack. But it’s basically a kevlar bear-proof bear bag. Bears can’t open or get into it, it can’t be torn open. It’s is durable and has been tested with big cats, bears, raccoons, all sorts of wildlife. It’s a nice, lightweight sack.

This time around, I haven’t sent any piece of gear home. I did buy a new pair of socks at REI Winter Park because I got holes in my previous pair. I’m really happy by how I minimized my gear amount on this trip. On the AT, I brought way more than I needed. I’ve brought the bare minimum this time. I’m also more comfortable in Florida since I’m close to home and could easily have something sent to me if I need it. My favorite piece of gear that I have isn’t even gear. I hike in short shorts if I’m not hiking in a section with a lot of ticks. They’re so comfortable and easy to move in. I also have a clean pair of underwear I sleep in every night, which is the most luxurious thing on a long hike.

Other things I’m carrying on me are: a tent, ground tarp, sleeping pad, paracord, an emergency fire starter, a spread of everything Amanda hiked with on her FT thru-hike

A spread of everything Amanda hiked with on her FT thru-hike

What’s your favorite trail food?
Honey Stingers! I have an unhealthy obsession with Honey Stinger® snacks. It’s a brand that carries different types of trail foods. They make gummies with electrolytes in them that come in different fruity flavors. The snacks are made with healthy, organic ingredients. You can find Honey Stingers usually at health food stores like Lucky’s Market. I hiked an extra 10 miles on the AT one day just to access a resupply package I had sent myself for more Honey Stingers. I needed to have them. I also love having seaweed snacks on the trail. But I’ll go through my supply of them in one day.
IWIf you choose to see it that way. Which makes it so immensely meaningful to accomplish.” So when I have my days on the trail when I’m like “I’m just out here... Wandering through the woods...” I come back to what my friend said and the thought that this whole thing I’m doing may be pointless—unless it means something to me. It means something to me if I’m choosing to do it. If it matters to you, then it has meaning.

**What is your favorite nature-inspired quote?**

This isn’t exactly a nature quote but my friend Ian told me something while I was on the AT that really helped me on my hike. So I was having a really rough time one day on the AT and was feeling anxious and unsure with what I was doing with my life. I wasn’t sure if hiking at the moment was important or meaningful enough. But then he told me through a text, “It is the very fact that this trip could be considered arbitrary if you choose to see it that way. Which makes it so immensely meaningful to accomplish.” So when I have my days on the trail when I’m like “I’m just out here... Wandering through the woods...” I come back to what my friend said and the thought that this whole thing I’m doing may be pointless—unless it means something to me. It means something to me if I’m choosing to do it. If it matters to you, then it has meaning.

_Amanda was nice enough to share her delicious Honey Stinger® snacks with me_

_Holding up an example of common microtrash to be mindful of packing out_

_Continuing south on the FT after our hike together in Three Lakes_

_Enjoying day of trail work with Panhandle Chapter volunteers_
Amanda has packed out a total of 88.13 lbs of trash off the FT, including this abandoned “trash cooler.”

***Since my hike with Amanda in March, I had the chance to catch up with her over the phone. Here’s a recent update from her:

When Amanda was hiking the Okeechobee section at the beginning of April, she ended up getting heat exhaustion due to the exposed, dry and hot conditions she had been hiking in around Lake Okeechobee. She had gotten so ill that she couldn’t keep down any water or food and became very depleted. Just 100 miles short from the Southern Terminus, Amanda decided to leave the trail and went home for a week to recover.

She decided she would try to section hike the Apalachicola National Forest section of the FT close to her parents’ house. Beforehand, she had an opportunity to volunteer with the Panhandle Chapter and do trail work on part of the FT section she was planning to hike. The morning that she got back on trail, Amanda found out that she had passed the Florida bar. She continued to hike for two days from the start of Apalachicola NF and almost to Eglin when she came down with the same heat exhaustion symptoms she had in Okeechobee. She had to get off the FT again to fully recover.

Since the beginning of May, Amanda has started a job at a law firm in Gainesville. She and her dad plan on doing the remaining 100 miles of her hike to the Southern Terminus together in December. She plans to complete the second half of the FT in sections over the next few years on weekends and anytime that she has off.

As of today, Amanda has packed out an incredible total of 88.13 pounds of trash off the FT and continues to pack out more with each section hike. Thank you for continued stewardship and stoke for the Florida Trail, Amanda!
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
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