Hand Tools of the Trail
A Guide to Common Trail Maintenance Tools

Volunteering
What You Need to Know

2018 L2O 100K
Ultra Running in Florida

Skills Training
A Photo Essay
Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), along with a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida. Together with our partners, the Association provides opportunities for the public to contribute to meaningful volunteer work, engage in outdoor recreation, and participate in environmental education.
The Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building, has been the primary mission of our organization since 1966.

Our goal is 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 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 Winter issue of The Footprint is December 31.
Happy Fall, Y’All!
I hope by the time you read this letter, hurricane season is over and my stocks of batteries and Vienna sausages are still at par levels. Unfortunately, our friends in the Panhandle were not so lucky. Although some sections of the FT are open, the devastation was incredible in other sections. There will be plenty of trail work to do and I’m convinced the FTA volunteers and trail staff will rise to the challenge. Make sure you check the FTA website for trail updates and heed the trail closure notices.

I can’t tell you how proud I was of the National Trails Festival in DeLand. We had great weather, enthusiastic speakers, fun demonstrations, delicious food trucks, music, and lots of people! Many thanks to Carlos, Janet, Van, Diane, and the rest of the FTA staff who worked so hard to make it such a fun event. I also want to thank those FTA members who attended the FT Coalition meeting that Saturday. I appreciated your presence and our partners were able to sense your dedication for themselves. Watching the participants that weekend, I was reminded of the important role our volunteers play in keeping hiking trails open and accessible for everyone all over the country. By protecting the Florida Trail, you encourage folks to protect other National Scenic Trails. Don’t ever think that our work just stays in Florida. It was a great day for the FTA and the FT!

At the Festival, I was able to personally express our support of the Big Bend reroute to Jaime Schmidt, the USFS National Trail Information Coordinator. As of this writing, we have not yet received approval, but I am hopeful. And so are the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC), the Suwannee Water Management District, Lafayette Blue Springs State Park, and the community of Steinhatchee who will all be our partners for this new section. Part of our responsibility as a National Scenic Trail is to take advantage of existing conservation lands, not private properties. In addition, Taylor County was recently awarded a grant to develop a master plan of multi-use paved trails in Steinhatchee. The county specifically mentions the potential to connect to the Florida Trail, as our new route would be in the same area. This is actually a win-win for Steinhatchee and the FT, as the county is trying to develop jobs based on ecotourism. There is no plan to have any portion of the FT on a paved multi-use trail, although there will be short distances of roadwalk. The new route wanders through multiple ecosystems, all of which have their own charm. I still remember how proud I was to work on the new Eglin section when I was a member of the Western Gate chapter. There is a real sense of ownership when you help build a footpath for others to enjoy. I am looking forward to getting out and helping in the Big Bend, making the Florida Trail more accessible to more hikers. I have been trying to come up with a clever name for a hiking-scallop festival – if you have any ideas, let me know.

Highlights of recent Board meetings: 1) the old office on Hwy 441 has been demolished and the Board voted to sell the property. There were too many obstacles to rebuild on the old lot. For now, we will continue to lease office space and look for new options in the months to come. 2) Pete Durnell and Megan Eidel have put all pertinent FTA documents on the website and archived old content.
3) Megan Eidel is coordinating our upcoming electronic elections (Spring 2019). We are lucky to have an engaged Board of Directors, but we do have open positions. If you are interested in becoming active on the state level, please review the Board Responsibilities (BOD tab) on the website, and contact Megan. Please see Megan's open call for BOD applications on page 13.

4) The Board voted to support the purchase of the Stafford easement and Jeff Glenn is coordinating the details. This easement will result in the reduction of 2 miles of road walk and will reopen about 5 miles of the FT in Suwannee River State Park. I'd like to congratulate Jeff on his efforts. It was nice to have money in the Land Acquisition Fund to support this effort.

6) The Board revised the FTA Mission statement to better reflect our primary goal of protecting the Florida Trail. The emphasis of our work is and will be the Florida Trail, but we acknowledge the value of promoting local and regional trails to introduce people to hiking. The new statement is: The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), along with a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida. Together with our partners, the Association provides opportunities for the public to contribute to meaningful volunteer work, engage in outdoor recreation, and participate in environmental education. Please make sure your own chapter website is updated with this revision.

7) The Chapter Council has been working on standardizing best practices amongst all the chapters. This is not easy work but I hope it will lead to a document that will strengthen our chapters and ultimately, our organization.

Finally, later in this edition of The Footprint, you will read an article by a former FTA president, Mary Anne Freyer. Mary Anne offered to write this article about a critical topic of concern to all of us: estate planning. I know. I hear you: “Bah, hum-bug,” and “yawn” you say. Her article is a good reminder to remember FTA in your will. No amount is too small, and you know it will be put to good use. And just to drive home the point, since the end of 2017 we’ve had 3 major donations from members’ estates. A recent substantial gift amounts to at least $40,000 in cash, and 3 properties, which we will sell. These members thought enough of our organization to leave their hard-earned dollars with FTA to help ensure there will be a Florida Trail for generations to come. It’s a trust the Board does not take lightly. If you have any questions, please contact our treasurer, Pam Hale.

Are you reading your EBlaze? Do you get the EBlaze? If not, please take the time to contact the office and make sure we have your correct email address: 352-378-8823 or communications@floridatrail.org. The EBlaze is an important tool by which we communicate with you, so please make sure this month’s edition isn’t in your spam box.

Again, thanks for all you each do for FTA and the Florida Trail. It’s an honor to serve as your President.

Leslie Wheeler
Not everybody has a passport full of exotic stamps from around the world – different colors and images that remind one of various places around the globe. To many, these collections of passport stamps are a cherished portal to memories of an adventure. This is true for at least one member of our Florida Trail community.

The passport pages Randy Akerson filled during his hike of the Camino de Santiago in France and Spain are beautifully framed, alongside the pilgrim’s shell that he brought from Florida and wore around his neck for the entire length of his hike. The delicate stamps depict cathedrals and other images that evoke the places where they were first created – an aged, wooden-handled rubber stamp is first pressed into a green, blue, red or even orange inkpad and then carefully pressed onto a piece of folded cardstock. The stamps are hosted by churches, businesses and civic buildings in the towns through which the Camino de Santiago passes.

When creating the new Florida Trail Passport, the FTA’s Gateway Communities program – coordinated by recent FSU graduate, Halle Goldstein – took a couple of cues from the Camino de Santiago. The layout of the passport is a simple accordion fold that will allow for easy display of the stamps. The design of each stamp depicts an image or slogan that somehow represents the business, town, or section of trail where the stamp is available. The designs were chosen or created by the business owners and leaders in the communities hosting the stamps. Florida Trail hikers need only to present their FT Passport to the host to have their passport stamped.

We’re excited that the Florida Trail now has a passport with over 20 different stamps (many more to come) from around the state for hikers to collect.

Please check out our Florida Trail Passport webpage at floridatrail.org to see how you can get your own passport and to explore the Gateway Communities where stamps are available.
As a casual hiker, it’s easy to underestimate how much work goes into creating and maintaining trails. It’s also easy to underestimate how valuable volunteering can be, not only for yourself but for the larger community. It’s not just about hard work - it’s about seeing the best natural areas Florida has to offer, meeting new people, and creating opportunities for others to experience the same. Every year, hundreds of people from Florida and across the nation contribute thousands of hours to building and maintaining the Florida Trail.

How do I find my first volunteer opportunity?

Visit www.floridatrail.org and submit a volunteer profile. This provides us with important information like your contact information, certifications, emergency contacts, and more. Your profile is also used to track hours for volunteer recognition like shirts, patches and awards!

Explore the “Volunteer Opportunities” page on our website. On this page you can connect with your local chapter and check out their meetup page. You will also find a list of Volunteer Work Parties (VWPs) across the state. These overnight events with camping and meals included are a great way to dive head first into trail maintenance!

Finally, register for a project. Check out the project description to determine who to contact and whether a registration form must be submitted.

What should I wear?

Think of the following as your “uniform”—everything you will need, from head to toe, to be as comfortable and safe as possible on the trail. Items with an asterisk (*) are provided at the event.

- Hard hat*
- Eye protection*
- Ear protection*- if using mechanized equipment
- Lightweight shirt - Long sleeves are highly recommended. Wear bright colors when maintaining in an area where hunting is permitted.
- Gloves*
- Long pants - For protection against thorns, branches and insects.
- Chaps* - If using a chainsaw, brushcutter or hedgetrimmer.
- Socks - synthetic or wool
- Closed toe shoes- Tennis shoes or mesh shoes are recommended for wet trails. Leather boots are required for chainsaw use.

What basics should I bring?

- A day pack- hip belt recommended!
- At least 2 liters of water- bottles or hydration bladder
- Lunch and snacks
- Bug spray
- Sunscreen
- Toilet paper and zip-lock to pack out used toilet paper
- Safety whistle
- Personal first aid kit recommended

What is a typical day of trail maintenance like?

Before the event, make sure you know the exact location of where to meet and how to get there. Most trailheads are not searchable on Google Maps. If you are new, try to arrive early so the project leader can help you get acquainted.

The half hour between arriving at an event and beginning trail work, called the “tailgate safety session”, is extremely important. During this time, you will meet other volunteers, sign paperwork and decide the plan for the day. You’ll also learn emergency protocol, go over abatements to hazards on the trail, get your protective equipment, and learn basic corridor clearing techniques.
The basics of trail maintenance in Florida
Building trails in wet, tropical environments like Florida requires different tools and techniques than many maintainers on mountain and desert trails employ in other parts of the United States. Due to the incredibly fast rate of vegetation growth, the bulk of trail maintenance in Florida consists of corridor clearing—opening a 5’ by 8’ path to allow for easy passage. This needs to be done on a yearly basis on every foot of the 1,300 mile trail!

Clearing the corridor in Juniper Prairie Wilderness.

Kelly leading a tailgate safety session

After the tailgate safety session, the group will divide into crews, grabs their tools and head out on the trail! Usually crews will rotate tools so everyone has a chance to try different jobs. Be sure to drink plenty of water and take breaks as needed. Lunch is usually eaten at a shady spot on the trail. Crews generally wrap up work in the midafternoon.
Lopping and Hand Sawing
If it’s your first time volunteering on the trail, the job you are likely to start with is lopping and hand sawing. These are our most commonly used hand tools. Any plant or limb that obstructs the 5x8’ corridor or the view of blazes should be removed. Be sure to cut small trees and plants flush to the ground and cut limbs flush to the trunk to prevent tripping hazards and injuries.

Clearing cut debris from the trail, also known as “swamping,” is a very important part of corridor clearing. Drag debris off the trail leaving the cut end pointed away from the trail. As trail maintainers, our goal is to make the trail as aesthetically pleasing as possible. Scattered debris, cut ends sticking out, and knobs left on trees can greatly detract from the beauty of the trail.

Blazing
On the Florida Trail, blazes are dollar bill sized swatches of orange paint that are typically placed on trees or wood posts in order to help reassure hikers that they are on the right path. Blazes should be painted about 6’ above ground level, at a frequency such that when standing at one blaze, you can still see the previous blaze and the next blaze ahead.

Mechanized Tools
After gaining experience using hand tools, you’ll have the opportunity to try out some of the mechanized equipment used to clear the trail. Field and brush mowers, brushcutters, hedge trimmers and chainsaws are our most commonly used mechanized tools. In order to use a chainsaw, volunteers must be certified by the Forest Service. If this interests you, let your chapter Trail Coordinator know! FTA staff looks to chapter leadership for chainsaw training nominations. Volunteers in your chapter can train you in all other mechanized tools.

Other ways to get involved!
Trail maintenance isn’t for everyone and that’s okay! Whether due to physical limitations, or if your personal or professional strengths lie elsewhere, there are plenty of ways to support the trail without being a maintainer.
- **Trail inspection and evaluation** - Turn your recreational hike into a volunteer opportunity by providing your chapter with up to date conditions and maintenance needs.
- **Shuttling trail workers** - When working on a linear trail, having shuttle drivers can greatly improve a crew’s productivity.
- **Mechanized tool maintenance** - Keep equipment in working order and troubleshoot repairs.
- **Trail Infrastructure** - Have construction or engineering experience? Help us build and maintain picnic tables, kiosks and more.
- **Removal of litter** - Can be done on your own or as a large organized event.
- **Hours entry** - After every event, hours must be submitted in our online database. If you are organized and have great attention to detail, this job is for you!
- **Camp chef or food provider** - Providing lunch or snacks on a day hike, or cooking meals at overnight events is a fun and rewarding way to support the crews.
- **Lead activity hikes** - This helps grow your chapter and its volunteer base.
- **Administrative work** - Our Gainesville office can always use a helping hand.
- **Chapter leadership** - Each chapter has officer positions that could utilize your skill set, including chapter chair, treasurer, trail coordinator, section leader, activity chair, public relations, and newsletter editor.

When you volunteer for the Florida Trail Association, you’re not just building trails, you’re building community. By maintaining our 1,300-mile corridor across Florida, you are promoting natural resource awareness for generations to come!

If you have any questions about how to get involved, reach out to your local chapter or our Community Outreach Manager Van Tran at vant@floridatrail.org. You can also visit our Volunteer Opportunities page: https://www.floridatrail.org/volunteer/volunteeropportunities/.
**Florida Trail Maintenance 101**

by Adam Fryska, Panhandle Trail Program Manager

**HAND TOOLS OF THE TRAIL**

While mowers, brush cutters, and chainsaws are an essential part of maintaining the Florida Trail in the face of a seemingly never-ending growing season, hand tools will always have an essential niche in trail construction and upkeep. In designated wilderness areas, or in areas too remote or wet to access with power tools, trail maintainers use hand tools to build, shape, and clear the trail corridor. In this article we’ll take a quick look at a few of the basic cutting, digging, and grubbing tools, their design and function, and provide some advice on how to choose the right tools for the job.

Also, a word of advice: invest in quality tools. Many of the basic tools found in hardware and big-box stores won’t hold up to the repeated heavy use you’ll encounter in trail maintenance. Nothing is more frustrating than dealing with bargain equipment that fails when you’re deep in the woods. Your Regional Trail Managers can assist you in obtaining the right gear, as well as provide tips on maintenance and storage to keep everything in top shape.

**Loppers**

The most ubiquitous tool out on the Florida Trail is the tried-and-true set of loppers. But not all loppers are the same. The main distinction among loppers is between bypass and anvil types. Bypass loppers operate like scissors, except that they generally only have one blade that moves past a jaw or hook that is not typically sharpened. The jaws of bypass loppers may be straight, curved, or one curved with one straight. In contrast, Anvil loppers have a single sharpened blade, with a straight or sometimes curved edge, that closes against a similarly contoured flat anvil-like surface on the other side of the jaws, usually made of a softer metal than the blade.

Bypass loppers are best for green wood - good for green wood

Anvil loppers are best for dead wood as the anvil can crush the stems

Loppers also come in many sizes and weights. While sturdy models are most suitable for the repeated heavy work of clearing thick brush and limbs, small lightweight models are a great backup tool that can easily be carried on social hikes to clear the odd branch that’s swinging at eye level. Outfitting a crew of new volunteers with light loppers and leading a “hike and clip” event can serve as an easy and accessible introduction to trail maintenance.

**Pruning Saws**

When the “rule of thumb” comes into effect, meaning that the limb to be cut is larger than a good size thumb, it’s time to put down the loppers and pick up a saw to do the job. Like with loppers, there is more than one choice when it comes to choosing the correct style. A key factor is the size and teeth per inch (TPI) of the saw blade.

Saw teeth can be categorized into four types: fine, medium, large, and extra-large. Small, fine teeth saws have a TPI of up to 11 and are ideal for making smooth cuts on hardwoods. The medium teeth saws with 8.5 TPI provide clean cuts for softer woods, while the large 6 TPI saws are great for general pruning as they cut faster and more aggressively. The fastest and most aggressive saws are the extra-large teeth models with a TPI of 5.5; this is what you’ll find on the large slightly curved pruning blades. However, these lower TPI saws can have trouble or even levers them apart; anvil loppers will simply smash their way through.

Loppers also come in many sizes and weights. While sturdy models are most suitable for the repeated heavy work of clearing thick brush and limbs, small lightweight models are a great backup tool that can easily be carried on social hikes to clear the odd branch that’s swinging at eye level. Outfitting a crew of new volunteers with light loppers and leading a “hike and clip” event can serve as an easy and accessible introduction to trail maintenance.
starting a cut or getting through harder materials.

Pruning saws will generally cut on the pulling stroke only, unlike larger bow saws or crosscut saws. Their blades are usually designed to be replaced, rather than sharpened. For best results, use light pressure, starting slowly and letting the saw teeth do the work. Be careful to keep the blade straight and perpendicular to what you’re cutting, and use long strokes.

The Ax
Entire books have been written about the history, care, and proper use of axes. One of the oldest and most basic of cutting tools, in the hands of a skilled user, it remains an effective tool for chopping through logs and harvesting timber. For our purposes it remains particularly important as a tool to clear blowdowns in designated wilderness areas, where power tool use is prohibited. Even outside of wilderness areas, the ax has one key advantage over the usual chainsaw: an ax is exceptionally simple and light weight. The weight of a chainsaw, chaps, fuel and spare parts can quickly become overwhelming, especially when accessing remote sections of trail and faced with a long hike to reach the work site. The light weight of an ax also allows for a trail maintainer to easily bring it along on any hike or scouting trip, and still be fully prepared to clear any blowdowns encountered along the trail.

There is an incredible variety of ax patterns, weights, and sizes. Chopping wood is often done with a 3 – 3 ½ pound head, while correct handle length depends on the height and reach of the user. A quality ax is becoming one of the more difficult tools to acquire. The best axe heads were always made of two different kinds of steel; the body was comprised of a softer, more mild steel, while the edge was formed of a harder carbon steel forged to the body. This was the key to the ability of the ax to hold a sharp edge. Most axes found in stores today are drop-forged with soft steel, and require considerable work to keep sharp. Older, high quality axes can often still be found in antique stores; look for a seam between the edge and body of the head as a clue to their two-part construction.

Always be aware of your surroundings when using an ax, making sure that the work area is free of obstacles and that other trail workers are at a safe distance. Swinging the ax should always be controlled (don’t let it swing back over your shoulder), and be extremely careful to avoid over-or-under swinging past the log you’re chopping; you don’t want to stick the ax in your shin. There is an art to successfully chopping large logs; chopping through a log requires a cut twice the width of the log’s diameter. It takes a lot of practice to consistently chop in the correct spot to widen your cut; placement is more important than force.

Shovel and Tamping Bar
Moving on to digging tools, we have the humble shovel. Perhaps the most familiar trail tool, it’s essential for moving soil, shaping the trail tread, and constructing drainage ditches and water bars. Common varieties have blades that are either tapered, square, or pointed, depending on their intended use. Long handles are generally preferred for trail work.

When using a shovel, remember to bend your knees and use your legs, not your back. Avoid using the shovel as a prying tool; a tamping bar is more effective at loosening soil. Tamping or digging bars allow you to loosen compacted soil and rocks, as well as help with compacting soil around posts.

Grub Hoes, Adze Hoes, and Pick Mattocks
Grubbing is the act of cutting plants and their roots out of a trail corridor. An essential part of constructing new trail, particularly along hillsides, this is done primarily using hoes of various styles to break up sod and level a new trail surface. Adze hoes are the heaviest; they have solid blades that are 3-4 inches wide and sturdy handles. The grub hoe is a lighter variation that has a sharper and wider blade, and is very effective so long as the soil isn’t particularly rocky. These tools are most effectively used by bending at the waist and using short, shallow chops to break up the soil.

When it comes to prying something out of the ground, nothing beats a pick mattock. The pick mattock, a variation of an adze hoe, combines a sharpened pick end with a corresponding adze blade. A powerful combination, the heavy adze makes short work of matted roots, while the pick provides excellent leverage for prying out root bundles or rocks. The pick is also useful for breaking up extremely compacted soil in combination with other digging tools. Another alternative, the cutter mattock, has a cutting blade instead of a pick; this is useful for larger roots, as the cutter can be used to sever the roots while the grubbing end pries them out.

Learning to Use Them!
Ultimately the safe and efficient use of hand tools takes skill and experience. A great way to learn more about these tools and how to use them is by attending Florida Trail Association Volunteer Work Parties (VWPs) and Training Events. Staff-supported VWPs are held throughout the state and are an ideal introduction to trail maintenance and tool use. Each event is led by experienced staff and volunteers who will provide all necessary equipment and ensure you have a safe and enjoyable time while learning to maintain the trail. The FTA also offers an annual Trail Skills Training that provides up-and-coming volunteers with a comprehensive overview of the technical and leadership skills necessary to organize their own Florida Trail maintenance events. Contact your local Chapter leadership or Regional Trail Manager for more information on signing up for this event.
The call for nominations is now open for Florida Trail Association’s (FTA) 2019 Board of Directors, and we are seeking candidates for at-large Board Member positions.

FTA has a 15-member Board. Nominations may be submitted for President, Vice-President (VP) Development and Outreach, VP Membership, VP Governance, VP Trails, Secretary, and three at-large board members. Terms for officers is two years, and at-large positions is three years, beginning after the annual meeting on April 6, 2019.

The Nominating Committee will select the ballot based on nominations received. A ballot of officers and at-large Board members for 2019 will be voted upon via electronic voting beginning sometime early 2019. In addition to this, we will include a mail-in voting option in the Winter Footprint. The elections will be announced at the April 2019 Annual Meeting.

Serving on FTA’s Board of Directors is a rare chance to help the organization face challenges, provide creative solutions, contribute to a fast-growing trail program, and affect long-term positive change. Board service also offers you the opportunity to grow personally and professionally, to develop valuable skills in non-profit governance, gain unique experience and make lasting connections with a team of other passionate and motivated professionals.

Please consider serving on the Board and submitting a nomination for the 2019 Florida Trail Association Board of Directors.

For more information on our current Board of Directors, and Board Member Responsibilities, click here: https://www.floridatrail.org/about-us/ourboard/.

Please send your nominations to Megan Eidel at meganedonoghue@gmail.com.

Nominations should include the following information:
- Name of Nominee, address and contact information (including email address);
- Brief statement or cover letter outlining why the nominee would like to be a board member;
- Resume or Short background on the candidate in question (work history, non-profit experience, involvement with the FTA, interests etc.); and
- Reference (optional).

Thank You,
Megan Eidel
FTA Nominating Committee Chair

NOMINATIONS CLOSE
Monday December 1st, 2018
What Does the Florida Trail Mean to You?

If you are like me, the benefits of being a Florida Trail member for over more than half of my life have been numerous. Some of these have been the adventure of experiencing the real Florida; the satisfaction of helping to build a Florida and national treasure; the wholesome activities of being outdoors and breathing fresh air; the opportunities to join experienced leaders on hiking, canoeing, and camping trips; and so much more.

What have you done for the Florida Trail?

As an active FTA member, you have likely contributed time, labor, talent, and treasure to promote the development of a statewide trail. This requires lots of physical labor and planning- mapping a proposed route, organizing work parties, clawing and cleaning a path through new territory, making the path safe for residents and visitors to enjoy, and leading others to enjoy hiking and camping on this dream as it materializes.

But, you know all of this!

I’m here to discuss what you may not have thought about- the future of what we have spent many hours to produce. Will the FT live on after our time? Will it be there for your children and grandchildren? Will its’ condition remain as you left it- in prime hiking condition?

That is up to you (and all of us) and how much you continue to give after your time. For the Florida Trail to endure, it must have people and resources. If the resources are there, people will come.

My purpose today is to ask you to remember the Florida Trail in your estate plans, as I have done. This action will help ensure that the FT will remain, that all your effort and devotion will live on through this Trail and the Florida Trail Association for others to enjoy well into the future. You will feel better for this remembrance and the FT will stand forever as a legacy to you and like-minded thoughtful and generous souls.

Thank you.

Mary Anne Freyer
FTA, Past President
In the early 1970s, FTA Trail Master Ray Maxwell was looking for a multi-purpose trail tool for work on the Florida Trail, something that was easy to transport and could be used by any worker. Also a trained machinist, with a shop in Branford, FL, Ray devised a tool that he originally dubbed, “the war club.” This hand tool was excellent at removing vines, weeds, overgrowth, and small branches from the trail. It was not until Ray Maxwell’s death that the chapter renamed the tool a gentler name, the Suwannee Sling.

Weighing in at 5 pounds, with a fiberglass handle, the sling has a hardened steel ax head for cutting heavier foliage, branches and roots, and a double sided bottom blade that cuts with a “golf” type swinging action. The head of the sling is securely fastened to the handle to prevent separation of the two parts.

With the introduction of more gas powered tools into our caches, the Suwannee Sling is dedicated to wilderness work exclusively. In the North region, the Juniper Wilderness is the only place this tool is used, and it is used all day, every day, when we are working the almost 15 miles of the Florida Trail and the Yearling Trail. The Suwannee Sling has always been custom made in a small machine shop. Once fabricated by Ray Maxwell, the tool is now made by his grandson, also a machinist, at Yancey’s Machine Shop. While manufactured in Florida, the Suwannee Sling can also be found on other trails. The National Park Service mentions it in its trail management section on hand tools.

If you are interested in purchasing a Suwannee Sling for yourself, check them out at the Yancey’s Machine Shop website: www.yanceysmachineshop.com

The Suwannee Sling
A History

Western Corridor Facelift

The Western Corridor of the Ocala National Forest is getting a major renovation in the form of a large scale puncheon replacement project. This project is being funded through a grant received by FTA from the National Forest Foundation with funds originating from the REI Co-Op MasterCard, which donates $0.10 per purchase transaction made to the National Forest Foundation, up to $1 million.

This large-scale project aims to remove the old and decrepit puncheons and replace them with more than 9,000 board feet of new puncheon that will help elevate the trail out of marshy ground. After Hurricane Irma and through the extremely wet spring and summer, the trail was entirely under water in many places. There are 17 puncheons located in an 11-mile stretch between State Route 40 and County Road 314 in Marion County.

The work carried out so far involved two concurrent week-long projects in October 2018 that were led by FTA staff and volunteers. These were big events with large volunteer capacity. Over the course of 16 days of consecutive work, over 40 individual volunteers worked tirelessly to remove and replace hundreds of tons of puncheon material. This work is as hard as it gets on the FT and the magnitude of this task was monumental. To put this into perspective, these puncheons were installed over the course of 5 years by youth crews almost 20 years ago. FTA volunteers not only removed the completely rotten structures, but installed new ones in their place. This is more than phenomenal, and a mere thank you to all of the incredible volunteers that accomplished the job under the leadership of our hardworking FTA Technical Advisor, Abe Christian is not enough. The work is not yet complete, with many days still scheduled for December. If this sounds like something that would be of interest to you please email Jeff Glenn at jeffg@floridatrail.org. Be prepared to work hard, learn new skills, have a fantastic time, and make a huge difference.
On October 5-7, the FTA hosted National Trails Festival at the Wayne G. Sanborn Center in DeLand, FL. This event was a tremendous success. Alongside our FTA staff and volunteers, a crowd of around 400 attendees, presenters, tabling organizations and workshop instructors gathered to celebrate the 50th Anniversaries of the National Trails System and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The weekend was packed with inspiring and informative talks, a diverse array of interactive workshops, shared insight among outdoor enthusiasts and environmental advocates, delicious food, lovely music and smiles all around. Thank you to all who contributed to this commemorative event!
The Front Porch Backsteppers performed.
Groundswell

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FOR MORE INFO: FLORIDATRAIL.ORG
There are some people you meet in life and on the trail who seem to show an obvious determination and persistence in their step. They move past you, completely in their element, and you get an immediate sense that it will take a lot more than just a few obstacles to cut their journey short. To me, Joe Howard represents one of those people.

I first met Joe at our 5th annual FTA Trail Skills Training. I learned that he had recently retired from the Florida Park Service and had become active over the last few years as a new Activity Leader, Trail Maintainer and Section Leader for the Suncoast Chapter. Noticing Joe’s quiet contentment and good-humored energy throughout the weekend helped me feel at ease and recognize that the volunteers were enjoying their experience at the training.

Six months later, the opportunity emerged for us to host our first collaborative trail maintenance event on Earth Day with a new and important partnership group, Outdoor Afro. Outdoor Afro (OA) is a national non-profit organization that celebrates and inspires African American connections and leadership in nature by establishing leadership networks around the country. As I was coordinating plans with Hillary Van Dyke, the regional Outdoor Afro Tampa Coordinator, she was mindful to emphasize how important it was that we (FTA) create an environment that felt safe and inclusive for their group members at this first work party we were hosting. To ensure this, I realized it was important to find a representative FTA member who the OA members could identify with and more readily feel secure around. So I decided to reach out to Joe to see if he would like to co-lead the workday with Jeff Glenn and I, doing maintenance near Joe’s section of trail.
in Withlacoochee State Forest. Before I called up Joe, I hesitated as a wave of concerns popped into my head: Would I somehow be offending him with this proposal?... Am I making the obvious even more painfully obvious by reaching out to one of our few African American volunteers?... Will Joe feel tokenized?... How do I make this first leap to bridge gaps in the demographic makeup of our volunteer community?... As it turned out, I only had to say a few straightforward sentences in explaining the work party and what Outdoor Afro is all about for Joe to excitedly respond, “I get it, Van. I totally get it. I’m all in.”

During the work party, Joe would identify and point out different bird songs to the group as well as native and exotic invasive plants growing in the forest. By the end of the workday, he and I discovered that we were both signed up to attend the same Florida Master Naturalist Program (FMNP) class later that month. It was his final course module to complete in order to become an official Florida Master Naturalist and it was the first course I was taking in the program. I was impressed that Joe, a retired Park Manager who already showed a wealth of knowledge on Florida ecology, was continuing to further his knowledge through the FMNP program. But that just tells you something about Joe. When he is out in nature, he is in his element. His pace is steady and persistent. And what I hope you will gather from his incredible interview is that a few obstacles have certainly not cut his journey short.

Where are you originally from? How did you come to Florida?
I was born and raised in a small town in Georgia. I had spent six years in the U.S. Air Force, from 1978-1984 and came to Florida shortly after. When my enlistment was over, I was looking for something to do and moved to Ft. Lauderdale in 1985.

How did you first become involved with the Florida Trail Association?
When I was a Park Manager in Naples (Collier-Seminole State Park), I first met the Alligator Amblers, the FTA Chapter that managed the trails there. When they would come out to work on the trail, I would find an excuse to be out in the field with them. I was happy to do whatever got me out in the woods and in the swamp. What really impressed me was that the FTA consisted of “doers,” not just “talkers.”

When I took over the management position at Little Manatee River State Park, I first met the Suncoast Chapter Vice-Chair, Lenny Chew. Lenny contacted me to see if the chapter could have the primitive site for their annual Thanksgiving celebration and trail maintenance party. When I started working with the Suncoast Chapter while still the Park Manager at Little Manatee, I decided I wanted to be an FTA member. I worked with Mike Williams, Ralph Hancock, Dale Meyers and all the section leaders. We’d discuss how the park could assist them in providing equipment for their maintenance parties and whatever else they needed that I knew was within our power to offer at the park. As soon as the word was out that I was going to be retiring, I was contacted by Lenny and he mentioned a couple of places that might be looking for a Trail Master. The Croom was my first intended section. I was all in. Then I learned that Citrus Trail might also need help as well. I was recommended to be the Trail Master of the Citrus Tract and shortly after, the Section Leader for the Citrus Trail. Since Citrus is closer to where I live in Inverness than Croom, it was a better fit.
Did you always know you wanted to work in the Park Service?

No, coming to work for the Park Service was a blessing in disguise. After my enlistment with the U.S. Air Force ended, I considered moving to Florida. At the time, I thought I wanted to become a business owner. So I spoke with my uncle who lived in Ft. Lauderdale and asked him about his lawn service business. He told me all about the pros and cons of being in that business and at the end of the conversation, he asked me if I wanted to come down and buy him out. I was thrilled. That was better than what I could have hoped for. I was living in Atlanta prior to that. I moved to Florida with the intention to buy my uncle’s business. Needless to say, I did not do that.

Instead, I met a park ranger through a job service program. In those days there was a counselor who was designated to work with veterans at various job service locations. I met with this counselor several times. He had given me several leads on jobs in construction and law enforcement positions, but I did not want to be in either of those industries in South Florida. So eventually, out of all of the people I could have met... After my fourth or fifth visit, the receptionist told me as I was leaving, “There’s a park ranger here who you may want to talk to.” Initially, I told the receptionist that I didn’t’ have time. I had been disappointed by the other mismatches in construction and law enforcement. In my perspective at the time, it was just another person who might waste my time. So I left... This memory always gives me chills because it’s rare for these kind of things to happen... I went outside and I got into my car. And as I began to turn the key... A voice said, “Why can’t you wait? You have nowhere to go.” The voice was so clear that I looked behind my seat and then I got out and looked around my car. The voice was so clear but no one was there. It wasn’t a thought... It was a voice. When I couldn’t find anybody who might be playing a trick on me, I went back inside.

So I went back inside and decided to wait for a little while for the park ranger to finish with a meeting. Within five minutes, I was able to meet with him. His name was Willie Hill and he was the first African American park ranger I had ever met. I’ll never forget him. At the time, the Department of Environmental Protection had recognized that minorities were underrepresented in the Park Service. So Willie was a part of a pilot program in which minorities were sent out to recruit other minorities. When Willie came out of the room with these other folks after their meeting had ended, he walked up to the reception desk and then the receptionist motioned to me. He turned to me and then looked at his watch. He just shook his head and said he didn’t have time, he had somewhere he needed to be... But then he changed his mind and motioned for me to meet with him in the room. We ended up chatting in that room for at least an hour. Willie had also served in the Air Force so we instantly shared that as a connection. He told me about what it was like to be a park ranger including all the ups and downs. By the end of the conversation, I knew that was exactly what I wanted to do. But that wasn’t a sure thing.

At the time, Willie was recruiting people who would be interviewed for a park ranger position. The test was administered on a Saturday and took about three and half hours to complete. There were two times you could choose to take the test. You could select to take the exam at 8 in the morning or at noon. I knew that I was a morning person so I chose to take it at 8am. Myself and one other person were the only two people out of twelve to show up for the morning exam.

I felt okay about how I did on the exam. It was very difficult. There was math, mechanics, carpentry, reading and comprehension, and uses of tools. I was a master of none of those but I had grown up on a farm. My dad worked for a big landowner in Southeast Georgia. This landowner had different crops: corn, tobacco, everything that was profitable at the time. My dad worked for him for wages. There were a lot of cattle as well. As a result of growing up on the farm using tools and using my hands, those skills had become my forte.

Several days after taking the exam, I went back to Georgia to visit my mom. While in Georgia I received a call from John U. Lloyd State Recreation Area in Dania Beach where I had taken the exam. The assistant park manager asked me if I was still interested in being a state park ranger and I told him yes. He then told me that I was the only one who had passed the test and then asked me when I would like to start. I started the following week. I was 27 years old at the time. This was in 1985.
practical factors. These practical factors covered a variety of topics related to Florida Ecology like plant identification, fish ID, etc. The Florida Park Service has since done away with that, but those criteria were how I became acquainted with being a park ranger in the Florida Park Service.

John U. Lloyd State Recreation Area had three shifts for park rangers. The shifts rotated. I would work seven days from 8am-4pm. Then another seven from 4pm-12am. And then another seven days from 12-8am. It was a difficult adjustment to shift between these schedules but we were able to do it somehow.

When I worked the office night shift from 12-8am, I’d read all the books from the shelves and would study about Florida and the environment. I’d learn everything. Florida plants, birds, butterflies, Florida everything. I had a solid foundation to work from once I started at John U. Lloyd. Those late night shifts were really great opportunities for me to get acclimated and learn about the Park Service. It gave me time to study and read all the Unit Management Plan and what that was all about.

A Unit Management Plan is written for every Park Unit. Back then, it was revised every five years. It’s the working document for every park. It tells you what to do in formal recreation, what the practices should be for resource management, etc. If there is any doubt as a park ranger that you’re doing the right thing – like if you’re removing the correct invasive species from the park or what programs should be presented to the park visitor – you refer to the Unit Management Plan. When I knew that there was a chance I could be promoted for another position, I’d study the Management Plan for that unit.

John U. Lloyd is a beach park with many day visitors. There was limited time for resource management. The focus as a ranger at that park was outreach and recreation, accommodating day users and ensuring that they had a good time recreating at the park. The next park I was interested in applying to work at was a place where I could learn more about ecological resource management like prescribed burning and invasive plant management. That park was Wekiwa Springs State Park.

I remember one of the questions the park manager at Wekiwa Springs asked me during my interview was, “Where would you like to be in 5 years?” And I said, “I would like to be in your chair.” Turns out, I got the job.

After two years at Wekiwa Springs, I was recruited to be the Assistant Park Manager at Flagler Beach State Recreation Area. I was the Assistant Park Manager at Flagler Beach for seven years. I would try and try and try to climb up the promotional ladder but I felt there was an invisible ceiling that I wasn’t able to figure out how to break through.

How did the rest of your career in the Park Service play out?

I spent one year as a park ranger at John U. Lloyd, two years as a park officer at Wekiwa Springs, and then seven years as an assistant park manager at Flagler Beach. Those seven years as an assistant manager almost derailed me. At the time, there was only one African American park manager in the Florida Park Service and one assistant park manager. Me. After a while, it came to feel that it wasn’t a lack of ability that I was working against. I left Flagler Beach and my beloved Florida Park Service because I didn’t know what else I could do to be promoted. I began to question my abilities. So I switched to another job with a different agency.

Within the Department of Environmental Protection was a Division of Marine Resources. There was a job posting for Operation and Management Consultant II for the Division of Marine Resources Office of Fisheries Management and Assistant Services in Tallahassee. I applied and was hired for the position. That was a three-step promotion. I missed the Park Service when I was working in Marine Resources. I had a mentor from when I worked at my first park (John U. Lloyd) named Tom Linley. Tom had originally encouraged me to apply for the park officer position at Wekiwa Springs. He then reached out to me and advised me to seek an assistant park manager position at a park with a good park manager. So I applied for an assistant park manager position at Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park where Valinda Subic was the park manager. I learned everything I needed to know about being a park manager from Valinda. Within two years, I applied for a park manager position and I finally got it. This was in 1999.

I served as Park Manager I at Torreya State Park and was later promoted to Park Manager II at Collier-Seminole State Park. In 2004, four hurricanes hit Florida. At that point I had been working twenty years in the Florida Park Service. I left the state for five years and lived in Asheville, North Carolina.

After five years, I came back to the Florida Park Service and I started as the Trail Manager at the Withlacoochee State Trail under the Office of Greenways and Trails. Within a year and a half, the Office of Greenways and Trails was merged with the Florida Park Service. So I was back in the Florida Park Service without even trying. My title then changed to Park Service Specialist. I later applied for an assistant park manager position at Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park in Tallahassee. I worked there for two years and then guess who came back into my work life: Valinda Subic. She had moved up to District Manager and I was promoted to park manager at Little Manatee. I stayed at Little Manatee for two years and then decided to retire in 2016.

You seem like you’ve had a lifelong curiosity for nature and ecology. What do you gain from being able to retain and share that information with others?

I think every day is an opportunity to learn something. And whenever I can take advantage of that opportunity, I feel obligated to do something about it. And there is so much I don’t know. It’s a steady, growing process and that is exactly what I intend to do. To keep growing.
Examining marine life with UF/IFAS Extension Agent & FMNP instructor, Savanna Barry

Sifting for marine specimens during a FMNP Coastal Systems field trip at Cedar Key, May 2018
What was the most rewarding aspect of being in the Florida Park Service? The most rewarding aspect of being in the Florida Park Service was being able to have a hand in resource management. Being able to have a hand in keeping a resource healthy.

When you were in park management, how were you received by visitors? It was a mixed bag. There were some who were very welcoming and encouraging. I can remember some of the campers who, for years, stayed in touch. They would come to the park and ask for me. It was one of those really nice bonds.

At Stephen Foster, there was one family who was having a family reunion in the area. When they met me, they immediately said, “We want you to give us a tour.” It was a family of about twenty people. And so I gave them a tour and by the end of the day, they said, “We want you to become a part of our family.” After that, they invited me to all of their family events.

What was a challenge for you during your time in the Park Service? I’m speaking just from experience of what I’ve sensed and what I’ve seen.... Although the Park Service envisioned a level playing field for all Park Service staff, there were many obstacles that happened on a daily basis that only a minority Park Service employee had to deal with. Within and outside of the park grounds, in our day-to-day lives.

It isn’t so much the overt things, but subtle instances. It’s the little things. Every day. It’s a certain look... It’s someone crossing the street away from you just to keep walking in the same direction as you’re headed... It’s waiting in line and the cashier asks the person behind you for their order first. It’s that sort of thing. For me, it hasn’t been just one event that was big and powerful. It’s that day-to-day grind.

What would you say to inspire a young African American who is interested in joining the Park Service or a position of leadership within the outdoor industry? To a young African American who is interested in joining the Park Service— I’m actually thinking of a few young African Americans I know who are currently within the Park Service—I would say: Don’t easily become discouraged. Have someone who you could look up to. I’m willing to be that person for someone and have served as a mentor for that purpose before. A person in which they can think, “They did it. And I look like them. So I could do that too.”

I wanted to represent someone from my community in the Park Service. Growing up, I never saw a black park ranger. And then when I saw Willie Hill—the first black ranger I’d ever met—at John U. Lloyd State Park, I realized that it was possible for me to become one. Key people like Willie changed the trajectory of my life.

If there is a way that I could mentor, encourage and prepare somebody to become a park ranger, I’d be more than happy to do that. Because I think that is key. I want to follow through with the FTA’s and Florida Park Service’s missions to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in the outdoors and see it come to fruition.

Have you been involved with any programs focused on enhancing diversity, equity and inclusion in communities? When I was living in Asheville, North Carolina, I became a facilitator in a program called Building Bridges. This group came about to counter discrimination. Building Bridges in Asheville takes a look at what everyone can do today to dismantle and tear down existing walls of racism and build new bridges within communities. The program allowed the opportunity to see what others are going through. I became a facilitator because I believed in the process so much. I also believe that, until you can walk in another person’s shoes... And I’m saying this not as a victim or anything but as a victor.... Until I can walk in someone else’s shoes, I cannot fully understand what they deal with on a day-to-day basis.

With Building Bridges, we would provide educational programming and hold a safe space to learn, reflect and discuss issues surrounding discrimination and racism. On average, about 50 to up to 80 people would attend sessions we hosted at least twice a year. Groups of about 10-12 people would then be divided up with 2 facilitators. It was important to form groups with a good ethnic cross-section. As facilitators, we would follow a course through a book from week-to-week. We would do things like read a book in the day and in the evening, we’d discuss a chapter together. We discussed whatever anybody wanted to talk about. There were a lot of rules about confrontation and it was always well-mediated. I was involved with that for five years, the entire length of time I was living in Asheville.

Were there any personal experiences you’d often reflect on while you were a facilitator for Building Bridges? Yes, through Building Bridges, we’d address people who were often displaced. I’d often reflect on when they desegregated schools in the South. During desegregation, there seemed to be this undertone of “Let’s get rid of everything that black people could be proud of.” In other words, when they desegregated the schools, the historically black schools became abandoned. You didn’t go to school in your community anymore. You went to school in someone else’s community. Most of the black teachers had to find new jobs while white teachers were able to keep their positions. That’s not something that plays out in my mind every day, but it’s still a part of the whole equation.

I was in 6th grade when Georgia participated in desegregation. In my small community, we were told that the school we were attending was going to close. So on the first day of desegregation, I was on a bus with my classmates.
thinking we were about to be sent to the “white school” in my hometown. But the intention was to send the 6th grade black students to a school that was 45 minutes away. Then it was decided that just two black students would stay and be integrated into the school in my town. I was one of the chosen two.

I was told it was based on my academics and my “potential.” So they kept me and a young lady named Linda as the test pilot students. Originally, Linda and I were on the bus heading out of town and then someone came on and told us to get off the bus. But soon after I had gotten off the bus, they came back and said, “Joe. You need to get on the bus.” As it turned out, there was a boy named Willy who was on the bus and was crying uncontrollably. I guess he was distraught thinking that he was about to be shipped off somewhere. So they replaced me with him. Every day after that in the 6th grade, we lost an hour and a half of classwork because we were traveling on the bus to the school outside of town.

In the 7th grade, they kept us in town. They had figured out a different system. They divided the African American 7th graders into different divisions: A-Class, B-Class, C, D, and E.... I had no idea at the time what this was all about, but Linda and I were assigned to the A-Class. My cousin and two other girls I knew were in the B-Class. A lot of my friends were in the C-Class. And overwhelmingly, the D-Class was where a lot of the black students were assigned. This seemed to be determined by “academic potential.” It felt like an unfair assignment because the D-Class students were then not treated or taught in the same equitable manner, with any expectation or hope that they had potential. For desegregation, I believe it should have been an even half and half mix of African American and Caucasian students split off into schools.

For Earth Day this year, we had a chance to do trail work with you and Outdoor Afro on the Richloam Tract. How was that experience for you?

It was a great feeling to see that there is interest within minority and African American communities to maintain trails and experience being outdoors. I look at my relatives and the majority of them don’t want anything to do with being in the woods. They would tell you point blank that they don’t want to be in the woods. And that’s okay with me. But if I could find someone who is interested in being outside in nature, I’m going to tell them everything that I know. And share everything that I know.

To see people who already had an interest and who were ready to chip in, that was great. I even joined Outdoor Afro afterwards. I enjoy being a part of groups that are active. My hope is to be able to lead some trips through Outdoor Afro in the near future.

What do you hope for the future of representing and supporting underrepresented communities in the outdoor industry - within the Florida Trail Association, the Florida Park Service and elsewhere?

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Out walking the trail, being involved in trail maintenance, just representing the trail in some way. I know I’m not the only one who can get so much more out of these experiences than I could ever give. So I’m hoping that in some way, on a regular basis, I could somehow make contact with folks who may have an interest in what we do but who have never known the questions to ask or the right people to reach out to. I hope to continue outreach on the trail and representing the black community on the trail.

What is your favorite piece of wisdom?
The first one I can think of is: “Always stay green and growing. Because when you become ripe, you start to rot.”

Another favorite quote of mine, which I’m paraphrasing and I believe Socrates once said is: “For anything to ever come clean, you have to have an agitator in it.” If we want things to change, someone has to shake it up.

Afterword
by Van Tran
At the National Trails Conference held in Vancouver, Washington this October, the FTA trails team and I had the pleasure of attending multiple workshops and hearing a number of powerful speakers from different backgrounds and facets of outdoor leadership and environmental advocacy. One of the keynote speakers was renowned author, activist and educator, Carolyn Finney. I’d like to leave you with this passage from her book, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*:

“There is something about our collective experiences– the “collective” sometimes defined by cultural/ethnic/racial differences– and the relationship between those differences that offers a chance to recognize and embrace our common humanity; a chance to imagine other possibilities by seeing another’s position of privilege and the challenges one has experienced. We come to understand how people create, retain hope, and move forward. Our mutual responsibility is to see those differences and recognize the possibilities and be fearless enough to bring those possibilities into our realities.”
South Florida has some fascinating weather, unique seasons and really interesting topography. This is not the flat, boring place one assumes by looking at it on a topographical map but a conglomerate of swamps, marshes, sloughs, farms and large population centers all vying for the same space.

“The Everglades” as people know them, are not a singular entity, but as Marjory Stoneman Douglas called them, “a river of grass.” And they do not start down in Everglades National Park but way up north in the Kissimmee River Basin. At the center of this ecosystem is Lake Okeechobee, from which the estuaries of the Caloosahatchee River running east to west and Saint Lucie River running west to east, the cities of West Palm and Miami and everything in-between, the thousands of acres of sugar cane fields, and the fragile southern Everglades all get their water.

In the winter we usually have a mild drought and the single track trails of the 1,300 miles of Florida Trail are beautiful and runnable in lots of areas. This is particularly true in Palm Beach and Martin counties where the Ocean to Lake (OTL) spur trail of the Florida Trail is impeccably maintained by our local hiking group, the Loxahatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association. If you’re a local runner who has ever wondered how our trails are always so runnable, it is because of these guys and gals. In early May of this year, the OTL trail was in remarkable condition even by normal standards.

On Saturday June 2nd, at the eastern edge of Lake Okeechobee in south Florida, 26 ultra runners and their crews gathered at the water’s edge to run the L2O 100k. Nervous chatter was punctuated by the slapping of skin and the death of another mosquito. Eventually, inaugural race director Dusty Hardman (having taken over for Jeff Stephens, the creator of this madness) got everyone to pipe down long enough to remind them of really the only thing to remember when running the Lake 2 Ocean 100k. “Follow the orange blazes! Not white, not blue, ORANGE!” With that, a countdown began and crews wished their runners luck, and runners started thinking about the long 15 miles through the Dupuis management area before they would see their crew again.

“GO!” 6:00am had struck and we were off. The L2O starts off innocently enough for the race virgin who doesn’t know what’s coming. A few miles of farm roads lead you into the Dupuis management area. From here you hop over a couple yellow water management gates and prance along merrily thinking, “This isn’t so bad, I wonder what all that prerace chatter was about.” Myself? I was not a first timer, I know what’s coming, as do many others around me. The early
conversations overheard revolve around, “My only goal is to not get lost”, “I want to make the Riverbend cutoff this year”, “I’m only hoping I don’t crap my pants.” True story.

Oh but then there’s the water. Were any of us really prepared for the water? And how much would there be? Conditions in Florida can change, not just day to day, but by the minute. What was once dry single track can become 6 inches of standing water after one brief rainstorm.

A much more challenging aspect of Dupuis is that it’s an area not used a whole lot. Dupuis lulls becomes very remote, very quickly. Especially when the trail tread below you is water, and the area has recently had a controlled burn that dulled some of the blazes. The fastest runners made their way through Dupuis and into the first crew stop under 3 hours. I believe that the first 15 miles of L2O might be the longest 15 miles in trail running. It seems so simple on paper and then you start wondering if maybe you’ve missed a turn somewhere. Surely around this next bend, behind this next palm tree, are those power lines? Then all of a sudden I popped out of the woods and into the arms of my cheering crew. Like a pit stop crew at NASCAR the crews right to work. You’re not allowed to run this race without them. Fortunately, all of the south Florida running community wants to be part of this special day and generally the hardest part is deciding who to ask. Then, before you know it, they have filled you up, given you a pep talk and have pushed you down the road toward the back gate of Corbett. “This is a very runnable section!” I heard folks exclaim as I made my way back onto what appeared to be dry trail for the moment. Lies, all of it.

From the power line, it is 7 miles to the next stop at Grade Road. I’ve heard that there were some panicky moments for the crews waiting for the first runners to arrive at Grade Road. Usually it’s a race between crew and runner to see who can get to the Grade Road stop first. Sometimes it has actually been the runner, as it’s about a 35-40 mile trip for the crews. What the crews didn’t realize was that this year, Corbett was underwater - knee deep or deeper water. These seven miles felt like 20. When I say it felt like it was uphill the whole way, that is not an exaggeration.

The Cypress forest would have been easily navigable by kayak, and I think I speak for all of us when I tell you how incredibly frustrating it was to be moving so slowly and how impossible it was to move any faster. Of the 7 miles, 6.5 of it was slogging through 2+ feet of dark water. And yes, this is Florida, so we have gators, water moccasins and even floating fire ant hills (yes, really). Basically, everything down here is trying to harm you. But what a sight it is. Here we are in 2018, the world is angry at each other for everything, and sometimes the most amazing place to be is pushing through the swamp in south Florida. The bromeliads were everywhere. Orange and yellow milkweed was cheering us on in the waves we were creating. Cypress trees gave us something solid to lean on when we needed a few seconds to catch our breath. And finally, we reach Grade Road. We made it, somehow, someway. Our crews have worried about us and wondered what was taking us so long, but they push all that aside as the effort now is to put us back together for 9 more miles through Corbett and into Hungryland. During this 9 mile Corbett stretch, more than a few of us who were still in this thing started to do the math. There was a hard cutoff at mile 48 in Riverbend at 7:30pm. For all of us left, any pace charts had gone out the window hours ago, and we are in survival mode.

Actual running comes in fleeting moments as we cross hammocks that dot the wet landscape. The earliest settlers of these wetlands used these hammocks for hunting camps. Twenty feet of dry land here, a big one of 100 feet further down the trail there. We were making progress, but it was far too slow. Good runners were running 17-18 minute miles. The bad ones, over 20. Riverbend was the focus of conversation. “Do you know what time it is?” “About how many miles to Hungryland do you think?” “When we get to the pond it’s roughly a mile from there.” “If my hamstrings will hold up, I’m running down the road.” “I wonder how wet Hungryland is.”
will be tough, if we get there.”

“The Pond”, as it’s known, was practically swimmable. Though not a known spot for congregating gators, it is the one place I found myself actively looking for reptile eyes. Finally, we reach the road to the cabin at Hungryland, and who was there to great us? None other than Jeff Stephens (previous race director) and Dusty Hardman. Dusty, bless her heart, has instituted a secondary hard cutoff at the Beeline for 6:00pm. She thinks she is being cruel to those of us who have continued where others have not. But 6pm means that we can’t possibly make it to Riverbend and we get to end this madness at 37 miles. Others have chosen to end their day before now and as far as I know there were 9 of us who continued on to Beeline and 5, yes 5 out of 26 who left Beeline with a glimmer of hope in making it to Riverbend on time.

Hungryland was much like everything else, a deluge of hot, dark, deep water and for your author here, a loop of shame, as I definitely waited for 6pm before putting any more effort in. Frankly, I didn’t want to get there in time just to know I had an impossible 90 minutes to get 11 miles through the Loxahatchee Slough and Riverbend. My day was over and I was ok with that.

But wait! What about our 5 runners who left Beeline? Eddy Souza, Robert Plante, Daniel Berry, Ron Hines and Andrew Barrett all left Beeline with a chance. That there was only 5 of them speaks volumes to the difficult conditions this year. But in the end, just 4 out of 26 runners make the whole 63 mile trip from Lake Okeechobee to the Atlantic Ocean:

- Eddy Souza 15:49
- Robert Plante 16:12
- Ron Hines and Dan Berry 17:30

For most of us, the trail won this year. But man was it fun just trying. Everyone who dared to start, knowing what conditions lay ahead, well we’re all a special kind of stupid.

A big thank you to the Loxahatchee Chapter. I think we might be one of the only running communities in the world so fully and happily embraced by the local hiking community. Without you and your tireless maintenance and defense of the local trails, we wouldn’t have so much to enjoy.
At the end of September, we hosted our 6th Annual Trail Skills Training at Camp La-No-Che in Paisley, Florida. We had our largest turnout of volunteers yet with a total of 61 new and veteran volunteers; 31 attended the Technical Skills Track and 30 attended the Wilderness First Aid course.

Wilderness First Aid was taught this year by instructors, Rachel Austin and Catherine Jean of Florida Outdoor Academy (FOA) using SOLO Wilderness Medicine certification and curriculum. We received great feedback that the course was engaging and informative. Although the instructors had a short amount of time to teach a lot of information, the students noted that they relayed the information in a fluid way that made the curriculum easy to absorb and retain.

We also enjoyed another fun and successful weekend hosting the Technical Skills Track, designed to inspire and prepare new Florida Trail maintenance Crew Leaders. The FTA team led workshops that included Project Planning & Reporting, Invasive & Poisonous Plants in Florida, Tools of the Trail, Emergency Response, Feeding the Crew, Leave No Trace, GPS & Mapping, and an afternoon Mobile Workshop on the Florida Trail. This year, we split the Mobile Workshop into two groups. One group of new volunteers learned the basics of trail maintenance and clearing a corridor while another group of more experienced volunteers shared their crew leadership techniques with each other, reviewing fundamental communication and problem-solving skills for leading a trail crew.

Overall, it was a wonderful Trail Skills Training. It's inspiring to launch each year's maintenance season with our community of motivated and passionate trail stewards. If you would like to attend next year's training, please talk with your local chapter's Trail Coordinator.

A big thank you to all the volunteers who traveled from throughout the state to attend the training. Enjoy some photos from the weekend!
Panhandle Chapter volunteer, Joe Ingram, hones the blade of an ax.
North FL Trail Program Manager, Jeff Glenn, teaches participants how to safely sharpen trail tools. Bottom: volunteers work to sharpen various tools.
A pair of loppers are sharpened

A young trail volunteer prepares pancakes for the participants of the “Feeding the Crew” workshop

Future Trail Crew Leaders learning the Tailgate Safety Session
Dirty dishwashing water is filtered before pouring into a small “sump hole” as part of a Leave No Trace workshop.
Volunteers learn life-saving Wilderness First Aid curriculum from Florida Outdoor Academy instructors.
Hikers take a moment to introduce themselves on the morning of the first day of the 2018 Trail Skills Training.
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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*Includes spouse and children under 18.

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or call the Florida Trail office at 1-877-HIKE-FLA.
Big Cypress chapter member Vickie Siegel flashes a smile during the Mobile Trail Crew Workshop at this year’s Trail Skills Training.

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