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Cover photo: Suwannee River by Michael Strivelli

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.
President’s Message

Cooler weather has arrived, and with it, trail maintenance and hiking season swings into full gear. I wish to express my appreciation to all the FTA volunteers and members in the hard-hit Panhandle area who are still recovering from Hurricane Michael and working tirelessly to re-open the trail that has been closed since October 2018.

Speaking of opening trail, we have recently had several ribbon cuttings to open or re-open trail segments and move the trail off roads and back into the woods. The first was the Alaqua Bridge opening in Eglin which replaced the old “Demon” Bridge and is a section of trail you need to check out if you haven’t seen it already. Second, the FTA worked with a local landowner to purchase an easement that allowed us to re-open the Big Oak section along the Suwannee River. The easement purchase was a long process, but one we are proud of and look forward to doing more of in the future to help close the remaining gaps. The latest trail section to open was celebrated with a recent ribbon cutting in the Seminole State Forest. That project was a great show of teamwork by multiple partners and volunteers.

Speaking of changes, we have had recent changes to our Trail Staff. Kelly Wiener, former Central/South Trail Program Manager, has stepped into the Trail Program Director role, replacing Alex Stigliano. Alex was a great asset to our organization and helped shepherd the trail program along during his 5 years as the Trail Program Director. We saw the revitalization of the Gateway Community Program as well as the addition of the Panhandle Trail Program Manager position. The board, the US Forest Service and I have the utmost respect and confidence in Kelly’s abilities to continue to move the trail program to even greater heights in the years to come.

We have recently hired a new staff member, Jenna Taylor, to fill the Central/South Trail Program Manager position left vacant by Kelly. Jenna will begin with the FTA in January. We are in a great position to continue implementing the 5-year strategic plan for the Florida Trail which includes aims to: Promote Connections, Complete the Trail, Sustainable Management and Strategic Partnerships.

President
Florida Trail Association
THE SUNCOAST CHAPTER PRESENTS:

THE FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION’S 12TH ANNUAL

IDIDAHIKE 2020

MARCH 6-7, 2020
Inverness, FL

JOIN US FOR A WEEKEND OF HIKING & CAMPING
ON MARCH 2, 2019, A BUNCH OF CURIOSITY SEEKERS FROM SUNCOAST VENTURED UP TO LIVE OAK TO CHECK OUT IDIDAHIKE 2019. WE HAD NEVER BEEN TO ONE AS A CHAPTER.

This event was started by the North Florida Trailblazers chapter of the FTA. The Trailblazers are now passing the baton to the Suncoast chapter after sponsoring the event for 11 years! There will be a $20.00 fee to participate, one or both days...payable day of event. This is a fundraiser to benefit the Florida Trail Association, and its mission to maintain, and complete the Florida National Scenic Trail.

This event will be modeled after our successful FTA 50th anniversary hiking fest in 2016 where we had around 90 participants. The idea will be to offer a "buffet" of hikes that you can participate in over 2 days. Longest hike will be 8 miles. All will be a short shuttle, from or originate from Tillis Hill.

Get this - The World Wildlife Fund refers to Citrus Tract of the Withlacoochee State Forest as "One of the 10 Coolest Places You've Never Been in North America."

HERE IS A SAMPLING. THE PLAN IS TO OFFER SAME HIKES BOTH FRIDAY AND SATURDAY.

- **Lizzie Hart Sink and Gorge** - 8 mile - 3.5 hours (carpool 10 minutes)
  Description: Most popular hike at Citrus. Once you know it you will want to share with friends. Enough hills to make it fun. Different habitats. Haven't been here before? This is the hike to sign up for. Possible 3.5 or 4.0 mile Lizzie Hart Option

- **Dames Cave/Peace Cave** - 7 miles - 3.5 - 4 hours (leave from campground)
  Get your flashlight out and prepare to get your knees dirty. Dames Cave - climb down into it and crawl into a side chamber. Explore the surrounding small adjoining sinks. PEACE CAVE ('IF' FORESTRY HAS IT OPEN.) You have to be agile enough to climb/drop into it. It's not for everyone. There have been safety issues at Peace Cave in the past. Limited to 5 - 10 minutes.

- **Radar Hill (bushwhacking)** - approx. 6 miles - 3.5 hours (carpool 10 minutes)
  Description: Every day, every week, every month. Same ol' same ol'. Now, throw convention out the window - this is the 'Salvador Dali' hike of the Withlacoochee. No set trail, bushwhacking, knee to chest high grasses, footing can be rough, unseen divots. Hiking along side of hills. Hiking stick highly recommended.

- **Exceptional Taste of Citrus hiking** - 2 miles - 1 hour (carpool 15 minutes/hard packed dirt)
  Description: Haven't hiked in a while? This hike will reawaken that fantastic feeling of being in the forest. You will know you are not in a city park. The route is on the orange blazed Florida National Scenic Trail. Camping available Thurs, Fri, and Saturday while it lasts. Something for everyone. An event you will remember. Come Join the Fun. March's weather in Citrus County is the best - and you'll be in the forest - YES! The entire campground has been reserved for FTA. There is a 2 night minimum.

- **FOOD.** Meals Friday night, Saturday mid day and Sunday breakfast! Menu TBD

For more info and to register, visit: [https://www.meetup.com/Suncoast-Florida-Trail-Hiking/events/]
It’s no secret that our effort to close the gaps and secure a permanent protected corridor for the Florida Trail is a race against time. Residential and commercial development are relentless, and Florida continues to grow at an astounding rate. We see it all around us. Each year sees new subdivisions, new highways, and ever greater fragmentation of our remaining open spaces.

With the threat of stronger and more frequent hurricanes on the horizon, even the future climate can seem to be working against us. We saw this recently with the damage caused by Hurricane Michael; the storm devastated an area that contains one of the largest remaining gaps in the Florida Trail, some 35 miles of road-walks stretching from Econfina Creek to the Apalachicola National Forest. Large tracts of timber land were levelled, erasing their value and sending landowners scrambling for alternative crops or development plans to salvage their investments. The long-term impacts are still to be seen, but it seems likely there will be even more development of the Panhandle’s remaining forested rural landscapes.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs that Florida’s rural communities are interested in preserving their working lands and open spaces. Recognizing their unique value to Florida, state and federal agencies are eager to help; two federal programs in particular are poised to expand conservation efforts in the Panhandle region. As property owners look to the future, programs like these can help incentivize conservation and preservation of our unique environment, to the benefit of our communities and the Florida Trail.
Florida Panhandle Maritime National Heritage Area Designation

The Florida Panhandle is a geographically, culturally, and historically unique region of the United States. It is a maritime landscape, heavily shaped and influenced by its rivers, coasts, and bays. In recognition of this heritage, a team from the University of West Florida (UWF) has been leading a feasibility study to designate the region as the Florida Panhandle Maritime National Heritage Area (FPMNHA).

Similar to National Scenic Trails, National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are congressionally designated places where natural, cultural, and historic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape. There are 55 NHAs scattered across the United States. Examples include the Sangre de Cristo NHA in Colorado, the Niagara Falls NHA in New York, and the Appalachian Forest NHA in West Virginia and Maryland. Florida is already home to one of these areas, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. This multi-state NHA recognizes the unique culture and history of the people who have traditionally resided along the coast and islands stretching from Florida to the Carolinas.

NHAs are administered by the National Park Service (NPS). The NPS emphasizes that these are lived-in landscapes; the designation essentially “brands” the region, helping to promote it on a national scale for tourism and sustainable development. It’s important to note that a National Heritage Area designation does not create any obligations or place any restrictions on property owners within the region. No new regulations are created. However, with a designation in place, local communities and property owners have access to additional resources that can be used to highlight and conserve what makes these places special. Federal funding and technical assistance are provided by the NPS, including access to preservation grants. While playing an important role in conservation, NHAs have also been shown to generate jobs and stimulate economic development, particularly by supporting tourism.

If any of this sounds familiar, it’s because the Florida Trail also seeks many of the same goals. As a federally designated National Scenic Trail, our footpath strives to highlight areas of particular scenic value and cultural or historical significance.
in Florida. We work to protect natural places, while also promoting the trail and partnering with local communities to attract new trail users and advocates for outdoor recreation. The trail is more than just a footpath in the woods; it’s part of a greater landscape and an important recreational asset for residents of Florida. A National Heritage Area designation for the Panhandle would complement the Florida Trail, providing the opportunity to collaborate with new partners on identifying and protecting these special resources. We’re excited about this development, and the FTA has submitted a letter of support to the UWF team working on the initiative.

**Sentinel Landscapes Program**

Another federal designation set to have an impact on the Panhandle region is the Sentinel Landscapes Program. This is a federal grant program administered by the Department of Defense that provides funding to help conserve lands proximate to military facilities. The program incentivizes landscape conservation and supports agriculture and forestry in order to ensure that military installations can continue to achieve their mission. Certain patterns of development can be incompatible with military training and preparedness, particularly for activities like low fly-overs or munitions testing. These types of activities require a buffer between dense residential and commercial development and the military bases where they take place.

Eglin Air Force Base has recently proposed the creation of a Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape to support its military mission. Recognizing Eglin’s central role in the economic health of Panhandle communities, as well as having a shared interest in rural landscape conservation, a coalition of partners led by Defenders of Wildlife is now working in support of this proposal. This landscape designation would provide incentives for property owners in the Panhandle to maintain and expand the existing rural environment. The scope would include most of the current Florida Trail corridor in the western Panhandle, as well as several areas with gaps still to be closed. The extra protection would not only help to preserve our current viewsheds and hiking experience, but may also provide future opportunities to move the trail off of roads and onto newly conserved lands.

**F-35A Lightning II aircraft from Eglin Air Force Base in flight over the Florida Panhandle.**

It may not seem so at first glance, but what makes a landscape suitable for testing fighter jets can also be desirable for a hiking trail; open spaces, wild habitats, and a buffer from development. The Florida Trail already benefits from this type of relationship within Eglin Air Force Base. Eglin defines the landscape of the western Panhandle. Once a National Forest, this sprawling military testing range stretches from Blackwater Bay almost to the mouth of the Choctawhatchee River. It is part of the largest contiguous long-leaf pine forest in the world, with gorgeous wetlands, uplands, and an incredible array of wildlife, including numerous endangered species. These features make for a tremendous recreational resource, and the base has supported many types of outdoor recreation including hiking, camping, birding, and hunting. For many years now the Florida Trail has been routed along the outskirts of Eglin Air Force Base, and the protected landscape provides one of the longest and loveliest stretches of continuous footpath in Florida. Hikers and trail maintainers have pursued their activities without impacting the military mission, even as we’ve tackled major infrastructure projects like building the Alaqua Bridge. Many of our local volunteers have ties to the military base, and we appreciate what a fixture it is in our communities.

The FTA has had a long and productive relationship with Eglin, and we welcome a potential Sentinel Landscape designation for the Western Panhandle. We also look forward to possibilities for collaboration with property owners and other stakeholders as they work to expand wildlife habitat and support agriculture and forestry in the region, all goals that we share in our efforts to secure a scenic protected corridor for the Florida Trail.

**JR Walton Pond in Eglin Air Force Base**

Photo Courtesy of US Air Force

Photo Courtesy of Robert Coveney

Photo Courtesy of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission

Photo Courtesy of Florida Trail Association

Photo Courtesy of Florida Trail Association

Photo Courtesy of Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission

Photo Courtesy of Florida Trail Association

Photo Courtesy of Florida Trail Association
Each year, the FTA produces and distributes "Project Cards" which promote information about volunteer opportunities on the Florida Trail as well as the schedule of our Staff-Supported Volunteer Work Parties. For this year’s 2019-2020 Maintenance Season Project Cards, we selected three talented artists who have strong ties to living in Florida and share a similar passion for Florida nature as our FT community. Their project card illustrations are featured below. We at the FTA are very grateful for the value Alma Elaine Shoaf, Christina Bartonicek, and Emma Roulette have contributed to our project cards this year. Please take a moment to learn more about these artists and the other incredible artwork they produce.
Alma Elaine Shoaf

Alma Elaine Shoaf (www.almaelaine
shoaf.com) is an artist and illustrator based in Gainesville, FL. She has completed illustrations and commissions for national and international clients, and has exhibited throughout the country, with her most recent personal body of work, “Ghost Lines” having debuted at 621 Gallery in Tallahassee, FL. Her illustrations can be seen in the chapbook What You Call by author Germ Lynn, published by Radix Media and available in August, 2019.

Much of Shoaf’s work is drawn from the formation of personal mythology and ruminations on grief, as well as the natural surroundings of her native Florida, with an emphasis on the darker lens through which wetlanders often view the world. Much of her most recent personal work expands on her desire to incorporate a lifelong love of science fiction into her already existing visual lexicon.

Shoaf has a BFA from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and is open for commissions.
Christina Bartonicek is the sole woman working behind the scenes of Open Door Prints. Born in Austria, but with strong ties to the Czech Republic, Christina is currently a printmaker based out of Gainesville, Florida.

In 2013, she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Printmaking at SUNY New Paltz, and has been growing her art career since. Her creative process is inspired by a combination of the traditional imagery of Czech culture and folklore, art nouveau and most recently, the wild flora of Florida. It's the process of printmaking, especially linocuts, that she feels most connected to while creating and her discovery of the Florida flora that has created a new wave of fascination.

Having lived in many various places in her life so far, it's important for Christina to identify what makes her feel truly at home. There is a consistency in the great outdoors that creates a balance and sense of comfort for her that she can't find anywhere else. Not only that, but there is an endless stream of inspiration in the natural world. Home is so important to everyone in the world, and to connect to others on this topic fuels her. Creating positive spaces for those who are open to it, while honoring the respect Mother Nature deserves, is Christina’s primary goal as an artist.

You can find Christina working at her home studio, or at the Sweetwater Print Cooperative in downtown Gainesville. Find her work at www.opendoorprints.com.
Emma Roulette

Emma Roulette (www.emmaroulette.tumblr.com) is an artist and illustrator from Hobe Sound, Florida. She studied Spanish and entomology at the University of Florida, and has a background in scientific illustration. She’s worked on various illustration projects at the Florida Museum of Natural History and the Hudson River Park Trust. Emma now lives in Barcelona and divides her time between editorial illustration and completing her first graphic novel entitled Cordyceps. Having spent most her life in Florida, though, it’s the subtropical ecosystems that act as a recurring source of inspiration for Emma’s works. Growing up in Florida and taking some plant identification courses in college allowed her to view nature from a categorical and critical perspective, as opposed to some indistinct green mass that is separate from our lives. This is evident in her attention to detail and scientific accuracy within her drawings.

2018-2019 FTA Project Card Illustrations of Florida Trail Iconic Landscapes by Emma Roulette

Village

Fish of the Moselle River

The Daydream

The Moselle River, Schweich, Germany
The Good Days Are Made.

Bridge crossings, sunsets with colors so rich it drips from the sky, dinner with chipmunks. The little things. 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.
THE FLORIDA TRAIL
Connecting Florida’s Public Lands

I recently attended the Department of Environmental Protection’s Public Land Acquisition, Management and Partnership Conference in St. Augustine, and it gave me an opportunity to reflect on some of the successes and challenges we face on the Florida National Scenic Trail and our collective role in preserving this national treasure right here in our front yards.

The conference explored some of the great public land acquisition accomplishments Floridians have achieved through Florida Forever funds, local tax and bond initiatives and partner-led efforts to conserve some of Florida’s land now and for future generations to enjoy and benefit.

I can’t think of a better example of a single resource that embodies the spirit of Florida’s public lands than the Florida National Scenic Trail (FT). The FT provides a glimpse into Florida’s past, our rich cultural heritage, an opportunity to experience natural communities found nowhere else in the world, and critical connectivity for so many plants and animals. To protect and complete the FT is to connect Florida’s public lands in a way that emulates our connected waterways.

To experience the Florida Trail, you will immerse yourself into freshwater swamps, sandhills, pine flatwoods, oak hammocks, tidal swamps, blackwater rivers, and so much more. Your journey will take you through 11 State Parks, 9 State Forests, 9 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), all water management districts, many county environmental lands, 2 National Park units, a National wildlife refuge, military installations, 3 national forests, and many local protected areas as well as Gateway Communities where you can restock, reflect and refresh.

If we invest in protecting the FT corridor and surrounding public lands, we are investing in the future of Florida. We are not only preserving the connectivity of the trail tread but we protect the resources that encompass the larger trail corridor, of which, we strive for ½ mile from the centerline. If we are successful in protecting an FT corridor, this is a mile-wide swath threading the public lands we cherish. I can imagine the benefits of a permanently protected Florida Trail: watershed protection, wildlife and flora transport, and an unsurpassed recreational experience.

As we developed our five-year strategic plan in collaboration with the Florida Trail Association and Florida Trail Coalition partners, the U.S. Forest Service has identified several immediate needs towards protecting and completing the FT and these are the focus of my daily efforts:

- Citizen support
- Easement and land acquisition opportunities through Florida Forever, Land and Water Conservation Funding (LWCF) and local government support
- Critical infrastructure such as bridges and boardwalks
- Major routing initiatives such as Twin Rivers State Forest to Aucilla WMA (Big Bend)
- O2O (Osceola to Ocala) conservation corridor project spearheaded by North Florida Land Trust
- Sentinel landscape potential in the Florida panhandle spearheaded by Defenders of Wildlife and Eglin Air Force Base

We cannot permanently protect the FT without some level of interest in the underlying land of the trail—be it ownership, easement or lasting agreement with landowners. I believe that through increased awareness of the Florida Trail, continuing our steady commitment to volunteer stewardship and partnership with the FTA and expanding the diversity of visitors and maintainers, we can exponentially increase the amount of protected land along the Florida Trail. If Floridians want the trail protected and available as a connected hiking trail...
throughout Florida, it shall be. This is where your assistance is so critical to the future of the trail; you can become involved in the many volunteer opportunities available through our partner organizations, the Florida Trail Association or Framing Our Community (FOC), state and federal agencies as well as helping to inform your local community about this incredible resource. To the many FTA volunteers who contributed more than 20,000 volunteer hours this past maintenance season, equivalent to over $500,000, thank you for all you do. Your tireless efforts go beyond maintenance and clearing trail so an unknown traveler can pass by in wonder of the surrounding beauty, never even noticing that leveled palmetto or fresh blaze. These hours leverage an awareness and appreciation for the FT that is hard to quantify.

Just this year visitors have full use of the Suwannee River State Park FT experience thanks to an easement purchased by FTA, together we have completed the multi-year Alaqua Bridge project at Eglin AFB, we have signed several new access agreements, resulting in 40 miles of gained trail and 25 miles of roadwalk removed over the 2018-19 calendar years. This is a momentum I would love to see continue and with your continued support, I believe it will. There are plenty of unsigned agreements to administer, routing studies to be done, willing landowners to be contacted, and committed state partners collaborate with in order to exceed our 5 year goal of 50 new quality miles of trail added by 2023. The future of the Florida Trail lies in the willingness and dedication of Floridians to continue the citizen stewardship effort of volunteerism, advocacy and passing those skills on to the next generation.

I am delighted and humbled to have just celebrated my fifth year as the Florida National Scenic Trail Administrator and I can only hope to revisit this note five years from now with new public lands acquired, an expanded network of partners and volunteers and more trail gained. I have met so many wonderful volunteers during the past several years and I hope to see you on the FT, an FTA meeting or the like in the near future!

Best regards,

Shawn Thomas
Florida National Scenic Trail Administrator
U.S. Forest Service

The call for nominations is now open for FTA’s 2020 Board of Directors, and we are seeking candidates for at-large board member positions and three officers.

FTA has a 15-member Board. Nominations may be submitted for Vice-President Membership, Vice-President Trails, Treasurer and four at-large board members. Officers serve 2 year terms, and at-large positions serve three years, beginning after the annual meeting on April 4, 2020.

The nominating committee will select the slate based on nominations received. A slate of officers and at-large board members will be voted upon via electronic voting beginning sometime in early 2020. You may also request a paper ballot from the office in Gainesville (352-378-8823) if you’d prefer to vote by mail. The election results will be announced at the annual meeting in April. Serving on FTA’s Board of Directors is an opportunity 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 and submit a nomination for the 2020 Florida Trail Association Board of Directors.

For more information on our current Board of Directors, and board member responsibilities and to review the FTA Bylaws as well as the duties & powers of the Board Officers, visit floridatral.org.

Please send your nominations to Darryl Updegrove at: dupdegrove@gmail.com.

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

Thank You,
Darryl Updegrove
FTA Nominating Committee Chair

◆ NOMINATIONS CLOSE WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15TH, 2020 ◆
Starting in October each year, the trail program across the state ramps up as the weather becomes more tolerable for outdoor work. The FTA hosts trainings and multiple volunteer work parties throughout the fall and winter and it is our most productive time for project work on trail. So far, we have been extremely busy with many successful events and below is a snapshot into happenings from the North region.

National Public Lands Day
This past National Public Lands Day the FTA partnered with REI on a Volunteer Work Party on the Western Corridor of the Florida Trail in Ocala National Forest. Established in 1994 and held annually on the fourth Saturday in September, National Public Lands Day is the nation’s largest single-day volunteer effort. It celebrates the connection between people and green space in their community, inspires environmental stewardship, and encourages the use of open space for education, recreation, and health benefits. Nineteen volunteers and 2 FTA staff members maintained the FT through Silver Springs State Park and the southwest corner of the Ocala National Forest which was the location of last year’s major puncheon project, also funded in coordination with REI. Crew members braved the unseasonably warm fall temperatures but were rewarded with afternoon paddle boarding and swimming in Fore Lake after work. As always, the food was abundant and outstanding, the camaraderie was excellent, and the trail work was challenging but fun. This was the first volunteer event of the season and it was a great way to kick it off.
Chainsaw Training in Highlands Hammock State Park

Twenty-two participants from all over the state came together this fall to take part in a USFS chainsaw training at Highlands Hammock State Park in Sebring. Instructed by Dennis Helton, Greg Helton, Kyle Titus, and Ian Barlow, our FTA volunteers learned the skills needed to help the FTA trail program maintain the trail to standard. This certification is required to be able to operate a chainsaw on the Florida Trail. The saw program is an integral part of what the FTA needs to run a successful trail program and trainings like these are what help us get there. First time sawyers receive an A level certification and those coming to recertify an existing A can move up to the more advanced B level.

Indian River Chapter volunteer, Stephanie Jackson, getting checked off by instructor, Dennis Helton, on chainsaw bucking.

Margaret Nonnemacher a.k.a. "The Hammer" is a skilled brushcutter operator. Margaret is an all-star volunteer who works weekly, year-round to help FT be the best it can be.
Dennis Helton teaches proper tree boring technique
Big Oak Celebration Hike
The FTA recently hosted a hike on the Big Oak section of the Florida Trail in Suwannee River State Park, celebrating the recent re-opening of a once beloved portion of the trail along the Suwannee and Withlacoochee Rivers in Suwannee River State Park. For the past 6 years, a portion of private land blocked access in this area, causing the entire 5 mile section to be closed to thru-traffic and forcing a 2.5 mile roadwalk. Approximately 25 hikers, including three families with young children, attended the event and were treated to guest speakers from the US Forest Service, Suwannee River State Park, and the local FTA Suwannee Chapter.

The FTA, with support from the Suwannee Bicycle Association and a private donor, purchased a trail easement through private property which re-opened the trail and will now be accessible to the public for the first time since 2013. The easement, which will be maintained by the Suwannee Chapter of the FTA, was donated to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection for management.

Osceola Maintenance Marathon
The 7th annual maintenance marathon on the Osceola National Forest was an example of what flawless trail work should look like. Never before has a crew completed all 21 miles of mainte-
Help spread the word about these free bear canister rentals. Always practice Leave No Trace!

The FTA and the USFS sponsor free bear canister rental on the Ocala National Forest

Florida Trail users can now borrow bear canisters for overnight trips along the trail. There are currently twenty bear canisters at the Buck N’ Bass Sports Center in Salt Springs that are ready for use. The Buck N’ Bass is a very friendly place that welcomes hikers and is proud to participate in this program. This program is a direct response to negative encounters between FT users and black bears in the Juniper Prairie Wilderness. With proper Leave No Trace camping techniques, including the safe storage of food, these instances can be stopped. The safety of trail users and wildlife is a top priority.

Canisters are available on a first-come, first-served basis by calling (352) 685-0200. A fully refundable cash or check deposit is required at the time of rental.

In the next few months, additional canisters will be available at the Juniper Springs Recreation Area.

Ocala National Forest Trail Maintenance

Bill Taylor, Trail Coordinator of the Black Bear Chapter and trail maintainer on the Ocala National Forest for over 30 years, recently exclaimed that the eastern portion of the trail from Pat’s Island to Rodman Dam, roughly 32 miles, has never been maintained as quickly as it was in 2019. The Black Bear chapter runs like a well-oiled machine and this October, they blew through the forest, leaving behind a Florida Trail in as pristine shape as can be seen anywhere in the state. And for good reason too! The Ocala NF is the number one destination for overnight FT users statewide, and it is maintained to a very high standard in the hopes that hikers can be lured onto the trail in other parts of the state as well. Despite record late October heat, the crews managed long days in tough scrub oak habitat, and long miles in open longleaf pine and wiregrass forest. For a chapter that manages 88 miles of trail, efficient work is important and the chapter prides itself on having well-trained and extremely qualified crew members and leaders. If you want to see this chapter in action, sign up for one of their three large maintenance events that happen each fall and winter!
If you have been around the Florida Trail (FT) for at least a few seasons, you begin to understand it as a living entity. Over time—as violent storms roll across Florida, as water levels rise and fall, and trail crews traverse through forests clearing a path and leaving orange blazes behind—the Florida Trail is left a little different than it was just a short time ago. The trail’s essence is always the same, but it grows as staffers and volunteers pour time, money and labor into the trail. Regardless of how many giant trees fall across it or how many times a section disappears temporarily under a swath of blackwater, the trail adapts to the ever-changing landscape around it.

The winds of change are blowing across the Florida Trail yet again, this time bringing in big dollars, setting the stage for major developments along the Northern Florida Gulf Coast, and breathing life into a section of trail that was closed due to hurricane damage many years ago. The USDA Forest Service, Florida National Scenic Trail program is proud to announce that after having applied to the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in partnership with St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, 1.2 million dollars is funding has been approved to make recreational infrastructure improvements on the FT in St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge (SMNWR).

In combination with $16,000 raised by the Florida Trail Association (FTA), this funding provides the opportunity to re-open the Spring Creek section in St. Marks and will hopefully give hikers and members of the Florida Trail Association’s Apalachee Chapter reason to rejoice. The money will be used to build a bridge across Spring Creek and construct any boardwalks or puncheons that are necessary for hikers to enjoy this section of the Florida Trail, yet still return home with both shoes. The project includes a second proposed phase which will reestablish routing through historic Port Leon in the St. Marks Wilderness Area. In addition, this project will offer excellent opportunities for ecological and historical interpretive materials along the trail. The Spring Creek section is a fan-favorite and has been sorely missed since it was officially closed in 2012. This section of trail initially sustained severe damage in 2005. Storm surge from Hurricane Dennis lifted, twisted, and washed out sections of boardwalk that had made traversing Spring Creek possible. FTA members fought hard for this trail and did whatever they could to keep it maintained and in use. Hikers determined to brave the muddy terrain without the necessary structures were routinely finding themselves...
stuck in sinking mud and often missing footwear for their efforts. Ultimately, in 2012, SMNWR staff members in consultation with the FT Administrator removed the remaining wooden structures and declared the trail closed due to safety concerns. A roadwalk was then officially introduced to circumvent the now impassable Spring Creek.

Still, this charming section of trail was never forgotten and never given up on by those who loved it most. One of those people that never gave up on the Spring Creek trail is longtime FTA volunteer and Apalachee Chapter member, Linda Patton. Linda, now 81 years old, has been an FTA volunteer for over 30 years. In 2015, three years after the section was officially closed, Linda was still determined to find a way to re-open the trail. Buddied up with former Apalachee Chapter Chair, Dawn Brown, these two set out to find a way across Spring Creek that avoids the worst of the mud. While walking through the mud and probing ahead of her path, Linda took one misstep and immediately sank waist deep in mud. Getting out was no easy task. As she recalls, “It took about half an hour to move two or three feet to where I could rest my weight on a tree root near a dry island and leverage myself into a position where Dawn could help pull me out.” Now after years of dedicated effort from the U.S Forest Service team, the FTA and St. Marks staff, the Deepwater Horizon NRDA funding and the money raised by the FTA should afford those determined to bring this trail back a sigh of relief knowing the outcome is certain. When asked what makes this section of the Florida Trail so special, Linda says, “The ecosystem and the scenery. It just looks different. It’s not like a salt marsh or an impoundment or any other areas in the refuge or along the Florida Trail. It’s unique and very beautiful.” She added, “It also provided direct access to the Marsh Point campsite which is a beautiful place to stay.” Linda is not overstating the beauty and uniqueness of the Spring Creek area.

Travis Pollard is the Fire Engineering Equipment Operator for St. Marks NWRand the refuge's Florida Trail Coordinator. When talking about the project and local habitat with Travis, he shared, “The Spring Creek area is unique, you could almost say it is a tale of two marshes. Not counting the three major feeder creeks, Spring Creek is about two and a half miles long from where it comes out of the ground to Stuart Cove, where it empties out into the Gulf of Mexico. Unlike all the other tidal creeks in that area, Spring Creek is spring fed and one of the major outflows of the Florida Aquifer.” He added, “The lower half of Spring
Creek as you get closer to the Gulf exhibits more saltwater marsh characteristics. It contains lots of needlerush and is more open and grassier. But the further north you go and the closer to the source, you see more of a freshwater marsh. Historically, it’s more of a sawgrass ecosystem and the higher elevations around the area are characterized by high concentrations of cabbage palms and cedar trees.” Being tied closely to the Florida Aquifer with so much freshwater output, Spring Creek is truly different from the surrounding tidal creeks in the area. Hikers on the Florida Trail will notice the area’s special qualities when taking in the beautiful views and scenery. Travis also shared that, “This is one of only maybe a handful of similar areas in the Big Bend.”

There is still a long road ahead and lots of work to do. Now that the funding is fully approved and received, the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will begin the logistical planning which includes designing the bridge and obtaining all necessary permits, before materials can be brought in and the real work can begin. While we are still at the very beginning of this process, we hope you share our excitement for what is to come. The Florida National Scenic Trail team and our partners look forward to providing this remarkable experience to hikers on the Florida Trail.

For questions or comments on this project please reach out to the Florida National Scenic Trail Administrator at shawn.c.thomas@usda.gov
Granite Gear
Grounds Keepers are cleaning up the FSNT! They have packed out over 500 pounds from the trail and over 5,000 pounds nationally in 2019.
In 1970, Florida's nickname as the Sunshine State was officially adopted by the Florida state legislature. Florida was bestowed this nickname because of its humid subtropical climate and annual average of 230 days with sunshine. For those acquainted with Chris “Water Bear” and Chelsey “Honey Bee” Stevens a.k.a. The Sunshine State Seekers, it’s fair to presume that these avid adventurers are outside at least 230 days a year exploring our vibrant state’s natural environments. And like the orange blazes painted along the Florida Trail, these two have become recent fixtures at FTA special events and volunteer work parties throughout the state. Since 2018, they have been sharing their adventures on social media and through their blog (www.sunshinestateseekers.com). Their mission is to honor and highlight the natural, cultural and historic elements that encompass what the Florida State Park Service has coined as the real Florida. Given their proven dedication to promoting and stewarding Florida’s natural lands, it’s an honor to capture their story and to feature their outstanding efforts.

“There’s so much that, without doing research, the average person would not know was available within our state. Our goal is to share as much information as we can gather from the natural side of

Camping at Gold Head Branch State Park, July 2019
Florida, from exploring State Parks and Forests to visiting local museums. We also want to focus on conservation of our natural resources, lands, and rural areas.”

Chris was born in Clearwater and has resided in Florida for most of his life. Chelsey was born in Washington State but moved to Florida as a child. Through their families, they were each exposed to the outdoors at an early age and individually gravitated to the wonders of hiking, camping and geocaching as adults. Although Chris spent a brief part of his childhood in New England while Chelsey ventured back to Oregon for a few years in her early twenties, both of their connections to the consistent sunlight and diverse landscape of Florida have led them to deepen their roots here. Their mutual interests in exploring the outdoors allowed their paths to cross in 2017. They’ve been trekking the same trails and seeking the sunshine together ever since.

Chris earned his trail name from their first hike together in June of 2017. He had proposed they search for a geocache in Seminole State Forest using a geocache finding app that was on his phone. They set off on their search just prior to sunset but were unable to find the hidden geocache before daylight faded to dusk in the forest. In the dim light, they lost their way back to the trail. They both regard that moment as a lesson in planning ahead and being equipped with adequate gear as their only navigation source was an unreliable geocache app which, rather than providing a GPS map, only indicated their route with an imprecise directional arrow. In order to find their way back to the trail and to the car, Chris had to follow the directional route to the geocache location in reverse. Along the way, they encountered a bear that had suddenly climbed down a tree in front of them. Fortunately, the bear quickly ran in the opposite direction from them and they were eventually able to make their way safely back to the car. From that incident and their shared love for kayaking, Chelsey endearingly started calling Chris, Water Bear. Chris gave Chelsey the trail name, Honey Bee, because of her affinity for insects, particularly pollinators. Their trail names were also pulled from a song called Honey Bear by Father John Misty, a musician they both enjoy. Today, Chelsey and Chris reside in Chuluota near Little Big Econ State Forest and the Econlockhatchee River where they have close access to hiking and paddling options and can continue to explore Florida nature together as Honey Bee and Water Bear.

Sunshine State Seekers started as a means for Chelsey and Chris to document and share their adventures as a couple and as a family of four with Chelsey’s two daughters, who are known by their trail names as Lyonia and Flutterbye.

“We are a blended family which allows us to experience both. While the girls are visiting their father, they get to see an entirely different side of Florida involving mouse ears. This is very fun for them, and the two households give them a well-rounded experience.”

While their blog and social media initially began as a way to share their memories with friends and family members, their influence quickly spread to a wider audience including parents with young children who were inspired.
by their family outings in nature. After receiving skeptical responses from other parents, Chelsey and Chris felt a calling to prove the feasibility and amazing benefits of going on outdoor adventures with your kids.

“We just wanted to show people that you can do these things with kids, you just have to educate yourself and be prepared in advance. Being prepared cannot be emphasized enough. You can never have too much water. Reading up on the place that you’re going to can make a world of difference and set you up with what to expect.”

Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, stated in his book: “Time in nature is not leisure time; it’s an essential in our investment in our children’s health (and also, by the way, in our own).” Today, supporting our children’s relationships to the natural world as a means of investing in their health is more pressing than ever. The average American child spends just four to seven minutes in unstructured outdoor play each day, and more than seven hours each day in front of an electronic screen. Chris and Chelsey are committed to rectifying this emerging disconnect between today’s youth with nature by providing as many opportunities as possible for their kids to have interactive outdoor experiences. They engage the girls on their hikes by playing games, having the girls document their journeys, and identifying flora and fauna while utilizing available resources such as plant id guides and apps as well as interpretive materials offered by park and forestry services.

“You take baby steps. Little hikes at a time. A lot of people say, ‘Well when they whine, just give them a phone to distract them.’ When that’s like the worst thing you can do. We try to engage them by playing different games and activities.
Enjoying the new Seminole State Forest section during the FTA’s inaugural hike and ribbon cutting in November

Flutterbye picking up trash using grabbers
Granite Gear provides to Grounds Keepers
Every now and then, you’ll have a grumpy mood and it helps to play a game to reset everyone’s attitudes a little bit.”

Chelsey and Chris plan to start doing overnight and multi-day treks soon with Lyonia and Flutterbye. By maintaining a flexible and patient mindset, they have steadily introduced hiking over time to the girls, who can now hike up to 3 to 6 miles in a day.

“It’s a balance of encouraging kids but not pushing them too hard that it becomes a part of their memory as a difficult experience they would not be interested in trying again. If you have a bad experience, don’t let it keep you from trying again. Especially with little kids, the first few hikes we went on, it was a little rough. But every single one gets easier and easier. Even when it’s not the best experience, they always end up asking when the next time will be that we go hiking again.”

As the connection that Lyonia and Flutterbye feel to the natural world deepens, so does their sense of responsibility to conserve it. Chris and Chelsey are leading by example in showing their kids what it means to protect the resources they love. Along with Josh Johnson, Chris and Chelsey were selected as 2019 Granite Gear Grounds Keepers. Since they often go paddling in addition to hiking, they were placed in a category of packing out trash from both Florida Natural Lands and Waterways. They’ve joined others in removing litter from rivers by participating in geocaching and paddling events called Cache In, Trash Out (CITOs). Lyonia and Flutterbye are also enthusiastic to join them in collecting trash and will even fight over who gets to the trash first. Since the start of this year, the Sunshine State Seekers have removed a total of 554 lbs of trash from Florida Natural Lands. A majority of that has been trash they’ve collected and carried off the Florida Trail in Ocala National Forest.

“It definitely has changed our attitudes about wanting to pick up whenever we see trash. In the past, if I spotted a cup off the trail, I probably wouldn’t have bushwhacked to it. But...
Operating hedge trimmers during the Trail Crew Mobile Workshop at Trail Skills Training
Volunteering at the Prairie Lakes WMA
Work Party in early November

now, I definitely will. Cleaning it up makes it nicer for everyone.”

“One of the most common questions we get is ‘Do you get really mad and jaded from all of the trash you find?’ The answer is no. I get really proud that I seem to be raising two children who care. They really love taking care of our planet. Also, I see we ARE making a difference. Trash begets trash. Often times, once we remove trash from an area, people aren’t as inclined to add to the pile (because the pile isn’t there). I also have people tell us all the time that we have inspired them to pick up trash along their hikes. I’m sure we also inspire people to think twice before littering.”

Chris first discovered the Florida Trail in 2010 through geocaching in Little Big Econ and Seminole State Forest. Once he discovered the FT, he started doing day hikes and became interested in investing in backpacking equipment to start doing overnights. Chelsey started hiking on the FT after they met. They’re both grateful to live within close proximity to the trail and take full advantage of it.

“We each hadn’t started backpacking until we met each other. We just completely bonded over nature and loving Florida. We plan to section hike the Florida Trail as often as we can.”

So far, Honey Bee and Water Bear have hiked 182 miles of the Florida Trail, including the entire eastern corridor of the Ocala National Forest, metro Orlando through Seminole State Forest, 30 miles of the Suwannee River section, and a portion of the Prairie Lakes Wildlife Management Area. They’ve completed these miles in every kind of weather and temperature extreme that North Central Florida has to offer. They maintain a positive and resilient attitude through any hiking condition and truly seem to stay on the sunny side of life.

As passionately as the Sunshine State Seekers have pursued hiking on the FT, they have shared equal enthusiasm and ambition into becoming rock star FTA volunteers. Since 2018, they have participated in six volunteer work parties throughout the state and have also completed the Technical Skills course at this year’s Trail Skills Training. Their contribution as trail maintainers has ranged from helping to install a new section in Seminole State Forest to assisting with hurricane recovery in Apalachicola National Forest. The thoughtful and captivating posts they share about their experiences serving as trail maintainers has drawn tremendous public awareness to our mission and efforts at the Florida Trail Association.

“As Apalachicola was truly stunning especially for someone who loves swampy sections and unique plant life. It was also more satisfying to clean a section of trail that really needed some love and seeing the before and after product.”

For the Sunshine State Seekers, there is no land too vast, no wilderness too wild and no dream too daunting to explore. Through their commitment to each other, their family, and the environment, Chelsey and Chris Stevens are shedding light on what it means to live a truly radiant and adventurous life in Florida.
Volunteer Spotlight: Josh “Pace Car” Johnson
by Van Tran, Community Outreach Manager

HIKE WITH HEART
Hiking can serve as a source of many things for people—whether it be for exercise, exposure to nature, peace, solitude, inspiration or a synthesis of these experiences. If you’ve ever been solo hiking for multiple days, weeks or even months, you can probably relate to that sinking feeling many hikers often inevitably experience in which your perceptions of the hike have shifted from connecting to isolating—introspection has turned into repetitive internal dialogue—and the discipline of forging ahead and fulfilling your own needs one step at a time starts to feel disconcertingly selfish. With hiking or any other pursuit, dedication to the activity requires some degree of self-focus in order to stay motivated and present. Josh “Pace Car” Johnson has found a way to make his trekking adventures something that goes beyond his own experience and personal benefit.

Born in Wyoming and raised in Alabama, Josh discovered the wonders of Florida when he moved to St. Augustine in 2002 to complete a degree in graphic design at Flagler College. His career in graphic design and love for Florida has continued ever since. Now a committed husband and father of three still based in St. Augustine, Josh balances a busy schedule of work, family life, charitable service and hiking. In the past few years, he has also developed an expansive presence on social media and throughout the trails community as a hiking enthusiast, trail steward and philanthropist.

Josh had been exposed to camping and day hiking throughout his life but hadn’t pursued it as a regular hobby until 2015 when he simultaneously discovered the Florida Trail and backpacking when he and his wife, Tabatha, celebrated their wedding anniversary by embarking on an overnight hike to Hidden Pond in Ocala National Forest. After doing some internet research for camping recommendations in Florida, Josh decided that hiking the FT to Hidden Pond would be a romantic destination, seeing as how it was in a large wilderness setting with minimal light pollution where they could enjoy a meteor shower that happened to fall on their anniversary. A fateful factor with this trip, however, was that...
their anniversary is in August-- the hottest month of the year and exponentially so in our neck of the woods. But Josh and Tabatha were up for the challenge. Considering the heat and their limited experience at the time with backpacking, the trip turned out to be a grueling journey with many valuable lessons learned including the importance of planning ahead and having adequate gear, water and food supplies. The irony culminated when they only had enough energy that night to stargaze for a few minutes before passing out in exhaustion. Although it was a challenging experience, Josh and Tabatha perceived the trip as an adventure and were also thrilled by their first encounters with trail magic including a family that offered them extra food and campers who offered to filter their water for them the next morning. To this day, Josh lovingly refers to that trip as a “marriage building experience.”

After that first overnight hike, Josh searched the internet to learn more about the Florida Trail and soon discovered other national scenic trails and the world of thru-hiking.

“When I realized there were 1,300 miles of contiguous trail right there in my state, I couldn’t believe that people hiked it end to end and the same with the Appalachian Trail. That is what inspired my first section hike on the AT.”

Josh prepared for his first section hike on the AT by doing 20 to 30 mile sections on the Florida Trail in Ocala National Forest and along the Suwannee River. He also went on a hiking trip with a friend in the Sipsey Wilderness in North Alabama where he was challenged by more elevation changes. After building up his endurance and personal gear collection, Josh set off in 2017 to hike 85 miles of the AT from the Southern Terminus at Springer Mountain in Georgia to Deep Gap in North Carolina. He has also since completed a second AT section hike in 2018.

“After that hike, I made a commitment that I would come home and hike as much of the Florida Trail as possible.”

So far, Josh has hiked almost 200 miles of the Florida Trail in the Ocala National Forest and Suwannee River sections as well as a thru-hike of the Ocean to Lake Trail this past February. Juggling the recent excitement of a newborn and other life obligations, he hopes to complete the Florida Trail in sections and plans to thru-hike the Ocean to Lake Trail for a second time at the end of this year with his father. He also has his sights set on thru-hiking the John Muir Trail or the Long Trail in Vermont in 2021. And he is determined to make every step count along the way.

Josh has taken his passion for hiking a further distance, turning a hobby into a cause. In 2017, before embarking on his first AT section hike, Josh founded Hike With Heart (www.hikewithheart.com), an effort to raise money for charity for every mile that he hikes.

“I thought about how marathons are organized and realized that if people can regularly fundraise to run 26.2 miles, I could also raise money for a good cause while I hike 85.1 miles on the AT. And that’s how Hike With Heart began. I like the idea of hiking for something more than just my personal enjoyment. That’s basically what Hike With Heart means to me.”

Currently, Josh is raising funds for Ability Tree First Coast, an organization in Northeastern Florida dedicated to supporting families within the special needs community by offering recreation, education, support and training. Ability Tree provides respite services like Parents Night Out and Parents Day Out, as well as a summer day camp called Camp Ability Special Day Camp. Their programs not only serve people with special needs but the families and caretakers of those with disabilities. They also promote inclusion in communities by providing strategies for churches, businesses, and organizations to assimilate these families into their visions. Aiming to
Josh has a fundraising goal of raising $3 per mile ($900) by the end of 2019 and has already successfully raised $500 so far for Ability Tree.

“In everyday life, my wife and I usually run on a tight budget so I don’t often have a lot of extra money that I can put towards donating to charity. But then I realized the potential for me to raise money through hiking. Once you save up and acquire your gear, hiking is not an expensive hobby to keep up with. I’m spending a few bucks on food for the day but aside from that, I have everything I need. Now, beyond doing it for personal enjoyment, hiking is a way for me to be benevolent. Hiking for charity gives me extra motivation to finish a long day on the trail. Because those lame days will happen. Whether it’s been raining all day, you’re metabolically tanked or whatever… It’s helpful to have a perspective that at least I’m out here doing something for more than just me.”

Another platform Josh uses to support charities is an app called Charity Miles. Through Charity Miles, you can use the app to track your movement by mileage—whether it be by walking, running, biking or even dancing—and raise money for organizations based on your mileage. For every mile you move, a percentage is donated by corporate sponsors to a charity of your choice. Josh uses the app to support the National Park Foundation.

Beyond Hike With Heart, Josh has also pursued other outlets for giving back to public lands. Last fall, he applied and was accepted to be a 2019 Granite Gear Grounds Keeper. Granite Gear Grounds Keepers is a program in which Granite Gear sponsors and supports hikers who want to “Leave it Better” and pack out trash as they hike along trails around the country. Josh originally found out about the program through social media and jumped on the opportunity to serve another important cause as cleaning up Florida’s wild spaces. Through this year, he has packed out over 50 lbs of trash from the Florida Trail.

“It interested me that people would go on hikes and pack out everybody’s trash, not just theirs.”

A major advocate of Leave No Trace principles, Josh is committed to sharing a sense of connection and responsibility to the outdoors with the public and with his family. He has gradually been introducing his nine year old son and seven year old daughter to backpacking. This past year, they did a small 2-mile backpacking trip in Ocala National Forest in which he not only got them excited about hiking to camp in the woods, but also to pick up trash and to leave the trail in a better condition than how they found it.

In rhythm with stewarding public lands, Josh has also recently become an FTA member and volunteer. He joined a maintenance party hosted last May by FTA staff and the North Florida Trailblazers chapter in which the crew finished the installation of three stunning miles of trail along the Suwannee River between Cansa Road and Bell Springs. This reroute closed a 5-mile gap on the Florida Trail, getting hikers off of paved roads and instead, into a forested corridor in Big Shoals State Park. Josh was thrilled to be one of the volunteers to paint fresh orange blazes and mark this new section of trail:

“In an outdoor program I was involved with as a child, one of their age group sections was called ‘The Trailblazers’. At the time, I thought that name was hokie because I thought the idea of blazing a new trail had become outdated since trails
Among an array of equipment he received for being a Grounds Keeper, Granite Gear provided Josh with a sturdy Crown 2 38 hiking pack.
Within a mile from the Clearwater Lake Trailhead, Josh collected and packed out over 4 lbs of trash along the FT
had already been cleared by the original pioneers. But then fast forward and there I was as an adult, blazing a new section of the Florida Trail. It was amazing to realize that people are still establishing routes as trailblazers. That experience meant a lot to me.”

Along a similar vein of how Josh found the concept of being a trailblazer to hold greater meaning, I also see significance in his trail name and how it was given to him. Josh received the trail name, Pace Car, during his first AT section hike. After venturing alone for the first thirty miles, Josh started hiking for a short while with two hikers he had met at a backpacker hostel. Both of the hikers had been experiencing physical issues on the trail at that point. One was suffering from bad blisters on her feet while the other one was struggling to pace herself when she hiked and therefore, was needing to take longer breaks to recover. Considering these issues, they both asked Josh to hike in front of them and to set the pace. He continuously checked in with them and put their needs first to make sure they were moving at a comfortable pace. A few days later, one of the hikers was catching up on the phone with her boyfriend when he asked if she still had her “Pace Car.” And that was how Josh received his trail name.

Trail names give hikers a sense of identity on the trail and are often an echo of other hikers’ experience of that individual. The way Josh got his trail name is fitting for the role he is actively performing in the outdoor community. While Josh could have continued hiking on his own, he found it more important to share his journey with others and to act out of compassion and empathy. Through the Grounds Keepers program and Hike With Heart, Josh is setting the pace and tone for how outdoor recreationists can give back to their communities and to the places they cherish.

Josh is setting the pace and tone for how outdoor recreationists can give back to their communities and to the places they cherish. You can find out more about his efforts at hikewithheart.com
This September, the Florida Trail Association hosted their seventh annual Trail Skills Training weekend at Camp La-No-Che, a Boy Scout camp in Paisley, FL. This three day event was split into two course options, Wilderness First Aid, and Technical Trail Skills. My wife Chelsea and I were nominated by the Central Florida Chapter to take part in the Technical Trail Skills course at year’s Trail Skills Training. Over the weekend, we learned valuable skills, including project planning, tool repair and maintenance, the Leave No Trace principles and wayfinding. We also took part in a mobile trail crew workshop.

Signing up
We first learned of the Technical Skills Training while attending a Central Florida Chapter meeting last May. Speaking with our local section leader, we expressed interest in attending the event. In August, we were excited to find an invitation to register online in our inbox! We jumped on the opportunity to learn how to strengthen our skills as FTA volunteers.

TRAIL SKILLS TRAINING 2019

Technical Skills Course

After a Thursday evening Central Florida chapter meeting, we cruised to the southern edge of the Ocala National Forest and set up at Camp La-No-Che. The forecast was for a clear evening, so our tent went up without the rain fly, and we quickly fell asleep under the stars.
TRAIL SKILLS TRAINING – DAY ONE
On Friday morning, we woke up early and took a short stroll over to the cafeteria. Reminiscent of middle school, we stood in line for a breakfast plate. Grateful for the complimentary meal, we grabbed our coffee and joined other FTA volunteers at a table. After breakfast we headed over to the registration table to get ready for a short group hike on the Florida Trail. We introduced ourselves, shared a morning stretch, and played an ice breaker game called “Ninja”. At the end of the round, we found an unexpected member of the group had the quickest reflexes.

Walking down the entrance road to the camp, we collected any trash we saw alongside the road. Several others joined in, producing bags to stash the trash. At the intersection of the Florida Trail, we took a couple of minutes to cover ourselves in bug spray, then headed west into an open field. We followed orange blazes through the tall grass and up the hill to a large oak. At the top of the hill, we convened in a circle and got to know each other a bit more. After the hike ended, we headed over to the pavilion for the first class of the day.

Project Planning & Reporting
Our first class in the Technical Skills Training course was Project Planning & Reporting, instructed by FTA’s Trail Program Director, Kelly Wiener. This mostly consisted of the paperwork needed to run a successful trail maintenance event. Although some folks may find this tedious, it’s an extremely important step towards holding a safe and successful volunteer work party. Having all the participants’ information before a project begins allows everything to flow smoothly once everyone is on the trail. If proper procedures are followed, then when the unexpected happens, preparations are in place.

Project planning ensures the who, what, where, when, and why of a work party.

◆ Who is attending?
FTA staff shared that they can help crew leaders gather information about each participant using online registration forms. Important information such as arrival times, contact information, dietary restrictions, relevant medical conditions and emergency contacts can be collected, organized into a spreadsheet and shared with crew leaders.
◆ What are you doing?
We learned that when advertising a work party, to make sure that everyone attending is aware of what is expected of them. They need to know how to prepare and if the project is within their capabilities. How many miles will be covered? What will the weather be like? Will we need people with additional training like US Forest Service chainsaw certification? All of this information can be shared in advance on the FTA website.

◆ Where are you working?
We also discussed factors to consider when choosing the location for a trail maintenance event. Crew leaders should ask themselves: Have you checked the hunting schedule or checked to see if any prescribed burns are scheduled? Where will everyone be parking?

◆ When is the event?
Important considerations include: What date are you starting? What time of day are you starting and finishing? Will you need to reserve a campsite if it is a multi-day event? What time of year are you working and what will the weather be like?

◆ Why are you there?
The “Tailgate Safety Session” is an important presentation by the crew leader at the start of every work day that explains the plan for the day ahead, how to maintain the trail, and how to stay safe. This sets up expectations and allows everyone to choose tasks that best match their abilities and skills. If the area is
overgrown at the start of the season, volunteers will mostly be mowing and clipping. Maintaining a trail after a large storm can require more skilled help. Seek out volunteers who are trained to cut back fallen trees and remove other large debris.

**Florida Upland Systems**
FTA's Community Outreach Manager, Van Tran, led us through a presentation about Upland Systems in Florida. This class covered one of our favorite features of not only the Florida Trail, but all of Florida's natural lands and ecological diversity. A small section of the Florida Trail can traverse a multitude of different ecosystems.

The Florida Trail meanders along coastlines, pine flatwoods, hardwood forests, wet and dry prairies, scrub, swamps, marshes, rivers and urban infrastructure.

As their name suggests, upland systems are situated upon higher ground. In Florida, this includes areas where ancient sand dunes have collected in the middle of the state and created unique habitats. A locally famous section that could be considered a Florida Upland System is the Ocala National Forest. Also known as Big Scrub, the land here is mostly xeric. Rainfall is consistent, but the porous sand drains quickly, and the wildlife has adapted keenly. Fast-growing sand pines and short scrub oaks dominate large areas that experience infrequent fires, whereas stretches of longleaf pine and other flora rely on frequent fire to flourish. Scrub jays, black bears, and gopher tortoises also thrive in this environment.

We were familiar with the overall concepts of this course, though we learned quite a bit. A fun Cranium style quiz was thrown in at the end, where we were given a chance to prove we were paying attention.

**Tools of the Trail - Hand Tools**
About a year ago, we attended the National Scenic Trails Festival, a conference hosted by the FTA in honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Scenic Trails System with Lyonia and Flutterbye. During the event, we participated in an abridged version of this course. In that setting, the kids received a brief demonstration on how to sharpen tools. As all of the participants in the Technical Skills Training training were adults, we were able to participate in a much more in-depth and hands on way.

The class started off explaining what tools volunteers use and for what reason. The most popular hand tool when doing trail maintenance is probably the bypass lopper. Jeff Glenn, FTA's North Florida Trail Program Manager, taught us how to take them apart, sharpen, and oil them and then put them back together. We all took turns disassembling and sharpening a number of tools. My favorite tool is one endemic to Florida; the Suwanee Sling.

**Emergency Response Protocols and Procedures**
After sharpening our tool skills, we took a short break to have lunch away from the cloud of love bugs. We met up once more at the pavilion to go over emergency response protocols and procedures. Adam Fryska, FTA's Panhandle Trail Program Manager lead this course.

Adam gave an overview of standard procedures before he split us off into groups along with some of the completed paperwork we learned about in our Project Planning class. He presented each group with a scenario within an allotted amount of time to come up with a safe solution. The situation varied from broken legs to losing cell signal. Each resolution was discussed amongst the group, with the overall theme of calling local authorities if things really hit the fan.

The main take away we gathered from this training was that a group of people will not always agree on how to move forward. This is especially important when dealing with an emergency situation.

**Dinner and Trivia**
When classes wrapped up for the day, we headed back to our tent for a minute before heading over to the mess hall. After filling our bellies with cafeteria food, we broke into teams for
trivia. Trivia was quite fun and allowed us to get to know our fellow classmates a bit more. We competed closely for several rounds, and in the end, our team was victorious, winning by one point.

Outside the venue, we discovered a large bonfire. Gathering around the flames, folks cooked smores that were provided by one of the major FTA sponsors, REI. It was then that we discovered peanut butter cups are far superior to chocolate when used in this fashion.

TRAIL SKILLS TRAINING - DAY TWO
We emerged from our tent on the second morning, and moseyed over to the cafeteria for breakfast. We were accompanied by several troops of boy scouts, and the place was quite crowded. Coffee was easily accessible, and we waited in a short line for waffles and sausages. With full stomachs, we headed over to the sandwich station to fix our lunch. We glanced at the schedule to reveal an action packed day beginning with engine repair, an informative Leave No Trace class, and hands-on trail crew field training.

Tools of the Trail - Mechanical Tools
Another class taught by Jeff Glen, this was a very informative and enjoyable hands-on class focusing on small engine repair. We enjoyed this class thoroughly. Although many things can go wrong, knowing all of the possible scenarios and how to fix them requires a lifetime of training. This class provides enough to give a general understanding of the most common issues. Perhaps some of this information is common knowledge, but we honestly learned a lot in this class.

* Fuel
When filling a car, it typically uses fuel containing ethanol; this is not what is put in a small engine. Gasoline containing ethanol separates the two stroke oil to remain bonded to the gasoline but not to ethanol. Over time, ethanol absorbs water and the water part of the mixture ceases to retain oil. This leaves the engine with poor lubrication.

Another thing to keep in mind when storing fuel is that gasoline begins to deteriorate after 30 days. This is especially important to know, living in Florida where people will buy gasoline to store for use after a hurricane. If your equipment has fuel in it but you have finished using it for the time being, add stabilizer to extend the shelf life by 30-90 days. The best suggestion is to simply check the manufacturer’s recommendation.

* Combustion
A carburetor is a device that mixes air and fuel for internal combustion engines. The carburetor regulates how air and fuel move through the engine in order for combustion to occur. A dirty carburetor can cause poor engine performance as well as starting problems.

The first step taken if the carburetor is not working properly is to clean the filter. If that doesn’t work, clean nearby components with a carburetor cleaner and check all of the connections.
Ignition
To ignite the air/fuel mixture, electrical energy transmits through a spark plug. The spark plug has a small gap in between two metal prongs and the electricity jumps the gap in the plug’s firing end. The electrical spark created ignites the gasoline/air mixture in the combustion chamber.

When no spark is visible, the easiest thing to do is to remove the plug and make sure it’s clean. If it is clean, make sure the gap in-between the two metal parts is still there. In a continued malfunction, they are affordable enough to replace.

Deconstruction
After Jeff’s instructions, we split off into groups to gain hands on experience. With a few pieces of equipment arranged upon the picnic tables with pink tags on them explaining their symptoms, we set forth diagnosing our equipment. Examples included: billowing smoke, heavy vibration, not igniting; etc. We each took turns diagnosing the equipment and putting things back together so they would work properly. This was one of our favorite learning opportunities.

Leave No Trace
After a short break, we convened under the pavilion for an overview of the seven principles of Leave No Trace. The Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics provides education for methods to enjoy the outdoors with minimal impact. In this course, we learned new techniques for hiking and camping, along with a description of the seven main principles. The class featured hands-on demonstrations, including how to build a no-impact fire on a pan, and proper campsite dishwashing. Keeping the wilderness clean is huge to us. As Granite Gear Groundkeepers, we regularly go a step further and collect trash left by others. We encourage folks to bring along their “11th essential” (a trash bag) when hiking. If we all contribute and leave our paths better than we found it, everyone will benefit. (Source: https://www.earthriversup.com/leave-no-trace-seven-principles/)

Mobile Crew Workshop
While taking a quick lunch break, everyone got psyched up for the next task at hand, the mobile trail crew workshop! With the truck and trailer loaded with equipment, a caravan headed south to the Seminole State Forest Lake Tracy Unit. This section of the Florida Trail, also known as the Royal Trails section, got its name from the nearby subdivision. A new section of trail was recently opened that eliminated 3.2 miles of roadwalk and added a 5.3 mile reroute through this part of the Forest.

As the vehicles pulled off to the side of Coconut Avenue, we got out...
and donned our respective hard hats, protective eyewear, and gloves. Before heading out, we went through the standard procedure of making sure we had all of the proper documents on hand including the Trailhead Communications Plan. Everyone looked over the Job Hazard Analysis documents and we added our signatures to the Assessment of Risk waiver.

Our team split off into two groups, with one half heading south while we headed north. Honeybee put on some chaps, then took to the trail with a large hedge trimmer. This piece of machinery worked great and made quick work of the vegetation that slowly encroached from the edges of the path.

We took turns using the various tools, including loppers, hand saws, mowers and rakes. We discovered that rakes assist in the very important job of sweeping. This job is one of the most demanding and involves flicking the debris off the trail into the surrounding woods. A little over an hour later, we came across a huge tree blocking the trail. We didn’t have a chainsaw on hand, so we decided to head back to give us enough time to prepare for dinner.

**Dinner and a Movie!**

Dinner consisted of spaghetti and some sort of cafeteria food that was delicious considering the cost (free!). Afterward, we headed over to the pavilion for a movie. We were treated to a showing of 180 Degrees South, a documentary about an expedition to Patagonia. It followed the journey of a surfer/mountain climber as he traveled on the Pacific Ocean from California to the southern tip of Chile.

**TECHNICAL SKILLS TRAINING - DAY THREE**

On Sunday morning we awoke to chirping birds and headed over for breakfast. It was a good meal and we convened at the pavilion one last time. Philip Marley, the US Forest Service Florida Trail Deputy Administrator, guided us through a really neat project in the works, a cloud-based app for collecting and reporting trail conditions coinciding with the Florida Trail ArcGIS map. After a short introduction to an app called Collector for ArcGIS, we were split into two groups.

Using our phones, we walked through a course that had been set up beforehand. We used the app to tag hypothetical changes to the trail along with descriptions, and learned how to upload this information to the server. Walking a loop around the camp, we visited each station, taking digital pictures and notes. When implemented, this app will be an invaluable tool for the trail.

**Packing up**

When this final class wrapped up, the group collectively helped pack up the outdoor classroom and shot the breeze for a bit before heading back to the tents. The campground was disassembled quickly, and everyone parted ways.

**Leave No Trace, fluff the grass!**

The Trail Skills Training was an awesome way to sharpen our trail abilities, and meet like-minded people. If the opportunity presents itself, we would recommend this training to anyone interested in leading or participating in trail work parties. We are very grateful to the Florida Trail Association for putting this event together and hope to attend the Wilderness First Aid track next year.
Trail Skills Training 2019 Photo Essay
by Van Tran, Community Outreach Manager

Alligator Amblers member, Janet Hildebrand, poses with a freshly lopped saw palmetto
Technical Skills participants inspect a malfunctioning mower.
Sanjay Adhikari from the Big Cypress chapter, disassembling and polishing a pair of loppers during the Tools of the Trail workshop.

Jeff Glenn instructed the Mechanical Tools workshop and taught participants how to assess and repair motorized equipment.
An example of the lovebug frenzy that was experienced throughout the weekend at this year’s Trail Skills Training.

Central Florida chapter member, Sage Hansen, learns the gratifying effectiveness of a hedgetrimmer during the mobile workshop.
The mobile trail crew sets off to clear the corridor.
Joe Ingram from the Panhandle Chapter smiles with a makeshift sling during the Wilderness First Aid course taught by Florida Outdoor Academy.
Happy Hoofers chapter member, Kay Ferrara, creates a sling for REI Jacksonville staff member, Craig Saathoff.

Chelsea Vensel & Preston James, REI Winter Park staff and new FTA volunteers.
FTA volunteers work through a first response and evacuation scenario.

REI Jacksonville Outreach Manager, Anastasia Dieter, starts a no-impact fire during the Leave No Trace class.
The Technical Skills group poses during their morning hike on the FT outside of Camp La-No-Che
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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Group Morning Hike on the FT at Trail Skills Training 2019