

Local naturalist showcases Volusia's varied terrain

By Eyal Goldshmid

Bonnie Cary, Naturalist and Outreach Education Person for Volusia County Land Acquisition and Management, gives guided tours of the area's nature preserves.

But rather than lecture her guests outright on the characteristics of the environments she visits, she prefers to let the land do the talking for her.

"My primary job is public outreach and education programs," said Cary. "I go out on the land a lot."

Cary has been doing just that since 2000, when she left her teaching position with the Volusia County school system. Since October 2005 alone, she's led nature tours for more than 2000 people, including students, area residents and tourists.

There is no cost for her services. Simply give her a call and she'll set up a time to meet you and take you around. Her tours are informal and informative, and those who participate will discover that Cary probably learns just as much from her guests as they do from her.

"You always learn something from the tours," said Cary. "I'm amazed sometimes that people drive to a site just to explore nature. You don't have to drive to a place to experience nature. It's all around you, even in your own backyard."

On March 11, 2006, she invited me for a day's excursion, starting at the Lyonia Preserve in Deltona and moving onto two other natural highlights in the area: Hickory Bluff Preserve and Wiregrass Prairie Preserve, both in nearby Osteen.

For our first stop, she took me behind Lyonia and through an area filled with Progress Energy power lines. "This is the back way," said Cary, "the service road entry."

Within minutes, we found ourselves immersed in Florida scrub, the state's equivalent of desert, complete with cactus and sand dunes.

"The site is highly used for educational purposes, with everything from scrub jay education to evening hikes to cactus classes," said Cary.

"I probably do a class here once a week. High schools, Debary outing clubs, Audubon clubs, public hikes."

Lyonia Preserve is 380 acres in size and split into two parts by Eustice Avenue in Deltona. In addition to the scrub found here, the land also contains several water-based ecosystems, like wetlands and a cypress dome. It also provides a home to dozens of animal species, all of which thrive in the harsh environs.

The best known of these is the Florida scrub jay, which is similar in appearance to the blue jay.

"They only live in Florida scrub," said Cary.

Unfortunately, the day's warm weather and steady winds limited us to only one viewing of a jay, and the bird in that case flew in and out of sight before we could really focus on it.

"They don't like it when it's windy," said Cary. "When everything's moving, there's too much to concentrate on. The best time to see them is in the winter, when it's cool."

Still, the setback did little to diminish Cary's enthusiasm for the bird and the territory in which it lives.

"The coolest thing I've ever seen here was a scrub jay, sitting on a tree around eye level, and all of a sudden he flew down, grabbed a green lizard, brought him down with one hand, and peeled him, like celery, into strings and ate every single bite of that lizard," said Cary.

“They eat not only acorns but also lizards, scorpions.”

During our tour, Cary also took an opportunity to educate me on the importance of wildfires to the Preserve. In addition to adding nutrients to the soil, fires also ensure certain species of plants do not dominate the area.

According to Cary, Land Acquisition and Management often sets fires to parts of the Preserve to ensure the eco-system remains intact.

“This is a difficult place for prescribed burns, so we have to do it mechanically,” she said. “Without the fires, the habitat is not acceptable for scrub jays.”

Following Lyonia, Cary and I took off for Hickory Bluff Preserve, about fifteen minutes away. The idyllic 150-acre area, located at the end of Guise Road in Osteen, sits alongside the calm waters of the St. John’s River.

At it, visitors will find several ecological habitats and outdoor options, including its namesake bank overlooking the river, a lower beachfront area, hiking trails and picnic facilities.

The Preserve also hosts a number of events during the year, such as an insect education class on April 8.

“The land itself was purchased by Volusia Forever from the Catholic Diocese,” Cary informed me.

“I guess they really had to consider whether to buy it or not, because it doesn’t connect with the corridor, but gosh it’s so beautiful, it’s really a jewel.”

At one point during our tour of Hickory Bluff, Cary pointed towards the direction of the site’s cypress dome and claimed this was her favorite place to visit in the entire county.

When asked why, she replied: “Why don’t I just show you?”

Without delay, she led me through a field of the saw palmettos and into a sleepy, shade-covered filled with budding trees and cypress knees. A stump stood in the center of the area, surrounded by a group of trees Cary called the Druids (because of their age and stateliness).

“There’s always something different here,” she said. “This is the real Florida. This is what it looked like years ago, before anyone got here.”

Our final stop was Wiregrass Prairie Preserve, located off Lopez Road and Pell Road in Osteen. This area boasts three trails (each marked by Volusia’s Eagle Scouts) and, in the coming year, will see the construction of a trail head building and gazebo.

Like Hickory Bluff, Wiregrass hosts a variety of events during the year, many of them built around the site’s flat stretches of land and clear views of the sky.

On March 17, for example, it will hold a nighttime Celestial Tour, a stargazing event held by Dr. Hugh Ward, Astronomy teacher at Seabreeze High School.

“There’s lot of open pasture here,” said Cary. “It’s great for stargazing. There’s very little light pollution.”

The site’s one drawback, noted Cary, is its remote location.

“The road conditions here are poor the majority of the year,” added Cary. She suggested for anyone heading to the site, particularly at night, to take extra care while driving.

A short while later, she dropped me off back at Lyonia and we said our goodbyes.

Before leaving, she encouraged me to spend some more time in the areas we’d visited.

“It’s much better walking the sites,” she said, smiling.

Lyonia Preserve, Hickory Bluff Preserve and Wiregrass Prairie Preserve are open seven days a week, from sunrise to sunset. Admission is free.

For more information or to see a list of classes and tours held on the sites, please visit <http://volusia.org/growth/outreach.htm> or call Bonnie Cary directly at (386) 736-5276.