

Plenty to Explore: Snell Creek Area in East Polk County Is a Rich Natural Habitat

By [Tom Palmer](#)

THE LEDGER

Published: Wednesday, August 27, 2014 at 11:54 p.m.



TOM PALMER | THE LEDGER

SNELL CREEK is a blackwater creek that begins near Davenport and eventually flows to Marion Creek, one of the tributaries of the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes.

HAINES CITY | As more than 8,000 motorists a day zip between Haines City and Poinciana on Cypress Parkway, many are probably unaware of the unusually rich natural habitat the highway bisects.

Much of the land on either side is public conservation land crisscrossed by hiking trails through scrub and pinelands or along old logging tram roads.

People familiar with the area remark that this land contains a complex mosaic of habitats – scrub, seepage slopes, riverine swamp, bay swamps, cypress swamps, pinewoods – in a relatively small area.

Green things can come in small packages.

There are access points for outdoor recreationists ranging from hikers to hunters to amateur naturalists all along the highway.

Altogether, the public lands here cover 12,915 acres, roughly the size of nearby Haines City.

This was where the first piece of land purchased by Polk County's Environmental Lands Program was located to protect rare plants.

But the multiple access points have a downside:

Visitors are sometimes greeted with the sight of piles of tires or roofing materials, a recurring problem in relatively isolated areas of Polk County.

Law enforcement officials say they're investigating.

But once visitors get past the land's ragged edges, the view is more pleasant.

One trail runs through open pinewoods decorated with colorful wildflowers – vanilla plant, blazing star, goldenrod – that this time of year attract equally colorful insects, such as butterflies, flower beetles, flower flies and other pollinators.

Another trail turns uphill through soft, white sand.

Scrub buckwheat, feay's prairie clover and scrub mint provide the color.

A scrub lizard or racerunner may be visible darting for cover. Sand skink tracks decorate the otherwise bare sand.

The entrances to gopher tortoise burrows lie half-hidden among wire grass or saw palmettos.

The undulating landscape quickly drops to maple, bay and cypress forests as the land drops and water levels rise.

On the way downhill, visitors might pass a wild azalea at this time of year or something else interesting.

ABUNDANCE OF PLANT SPECIES

More than 700 plant species – wildflowers, shrubs, trees, grasses – have been identified here, according to the South Florida Water Management's management plant.

This is the southern range of some plant species such as star anise and witch hazel that grow at the forest's edges.

One of the sites will become a venue for a wildflower hike during the Florida Wildflower Symposium next month. The hike passes through an area where a prescribed burn occurred earlier this year and the fall wildflowers are expected to explode.

Since Polk County's Environmental Lands Program purchased land here almost 20 years ago, the Southwest and South Florida Water Management districts have purchased land to protect creek basins under the Save Our Rivers program along a network of creeks – Snell, Horse, Marion, Reedy – that form the northwestern flank of the Kissimmee River Basin.

It is part of a much larger drainage basin.

Horse Creek, which begins west of Davenport near U.S. 27 in an area known as Crescent Valley, flows 9.8 miles to join Snell Creek.

Snell Creek begins flowing from a swamp just south of Davenport and winds southeasterly for 5.2 miles until it empties into Marion Creek north of Marion Creek Road.

To the north is Reedy Creek, whose drainage basin includes land along Cypress Parkway because it is a much larger system.

Reedy Creek, the namesake of the Reedy Creek Improvement District that is Walt Disney World's independent local governing board, flows 30.2 miles from swamps north of Interstate 4 under U.S. 17-92 near the Polk-Osceola line through portions of Poinciana into Lake Russell and ultimately into Lake Cypress.

This place is about more than wildflowers and blackwater streams.

Wildlife is diverse here.

On one trail, you may spot some deer for a few seconds before they disappear into the shadows around the bend in a trail.

On another, a small flock of wild turkey emerges from tall grass. Two birds glance your way before they take wing.

Wild hogs' presence is obvious from the disturbed earth, but occasionally a group will crash through the palmettos, startled by your approach.

Life in the trees can be noisy at times.

Various species of frogs and toads call from the tree canopy or wet depressions along the trail.

In one stand of live pines, near a stand of dead ones, red-headed, red-bellied, pileated and downy woodpeckers feed and call.

They're joined by tufted titmice, blue-gray gnatcatchers, a ruby-throated hummingbird and a mockingbird.

Colorful butterflies are visible at times, especially from spring to fall when various species of wildflowers are at their peak.

So are dragonflies, damselflies, beetles and other colorful insects.

The extent of the invertebrate population here is largely undocumented, according to the management plan.

That means there's still plenty left to explore.

[Tom Palmer can be reached at tom.palmer@theledger.com or 863-802-7535. Read more views on the environment at <http://environment.blogs.theledger.com> and more views on county government at <http://county.blogs.theledger.com/>. Follow on Twitter @LedgerTom.]

Copyright © 2014 TheLedger.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.