

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN.....Alison Ackerman

This newsletter contains several timely announcements that should be of interest to Calusa Land Trust members. None of them can wait for our annual meeting, which will be held in late January. (You will receive a notice of its time and place in the next month.)

First of all, if you haven't already heard the good news, Lee County and the Florida Communities Trust (through the Preservation 2000 Program) have completed their acquisition of a Bald Eagle Preserve near St. James City! This preserve adjoins the Calusa Land Trust's large St. James Creek Preserve, and will share its name. And if that wasn't enough, the previous landowner, Dr. John F. Johnson of Rockaway Beach, Oregon, has made a \$20,000 donation to Calusa Land Trust to help manage this preserve (cutting down invasive exotic vegetation, planting native trees, etc.). This acquisition is the very first Florida Communities Trust project finalized in the entire state of Florida. Needless to say, there are many people to thank who worked very hard on this project and deserve recognition. We will present a complete account in our next newsletter.

Second, member Cindy Bear is helping coordinate a volunteer group to monitor wading birds in our area. She has written the report presented below and needs more help. The first meeting is very soon, but hopefully some of you can still adjust your schedules.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need for our members to write letters of support for the purchase of the Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods area and the Myakka Estuary through Florida's CARL program (Conservation and Recreation Lands). Board member Jim Beever has discussed this program in previous newsletters. Since the CARL selection committee is about to meet and make their decisions, a stack of letters from local residents could persuade them to give these parcels high rankings. Please read his report below and take a few minutes to send a note or letter to Tallahassee.

Be sure to check your mailing label on this newsletter. An asterisk by your name indicates that your membership is expiring. The Board of Directors and officers hope that you approve of the way the Calusa Land Trust is performing and that you will renew your membership for another year. Also, to date our members have donated almost half of the \$6150 cost of acquiring the Castile Corridor, which links the Bald Eagle Preserve to the main portion of the St. James Creek Preserve. Additional donations of any size towards this project are badly needed! Individual acres of the Castile Corridor can be purchased for \$100, and personalized Certificates of Appreciation will be awarded to all those contributing for an acre or more.

WE'RE LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD BIRD WATCHERS.....by Cindy Bear

The Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission is seeking volunteers to assist with a nesting census of wading birds on two local islands. The census follows ten years of aerial surveys by the Commission. Information gathered in those surveys resulted in the identification of the top one hundred wading bird nesting sites in Florida. Species diversity, the presence of rare or endangered species, and the presence of large numbers of birds were among the criteria used to rank the sites. These sites will now be monitored from the ground by volunteers who will collect data on several aspects of bird nesting. They will also be responsible for management activities, including removal of exotic plants, sign posting, and the removal of any litter from the sites.

While two sites in Pine Island Sound will be monitored, only one was in the top one hundred sites. Another will be monitored because it historically ranked high for supporting birds, although nesting on the site has declined dramatically in recent years for unknown reasons.

The Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission will provide training sessions for volunteers. Frank Stapleton and I are serving as volunteer coordinators for the local sites and will host the training sessions. Volunteers must have a basic knowledge of bird identification, but need not be experts. Access to a boat is helpful. Volunteers must also be willing to dedicate the equivalent of at least two full days per month (from February to August) to the project. The first training session requires four hours over two separate evenings. These sessions will be held Wednesdays, December 8 and 15 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the office of Gulf Coast Kayak, 4882 Pine Island Road, Matlacha.

If you would like to volunteer, please call Frank or me at 283-1125 before the first training dates. Thanks!!

THE CHARLOTTE HARBOR FLATWOOD PROJECT.....by Jim Beaver

The Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods project area is a unique matrix of reticulated pine flatwood uplands and freshwater wetlands. It is the last large intact tract of coastal hydric pine flatwoods (a wetland/upland system unique to southwest Florida), mesic pine flatwoods, xeric pine flatwoods, and cypress strand west of Interstate 75 that is not currently platted or approved for development. The current project boundaries encompass approximately 28.5 square miles, approximately 18,608 acres, in Charlotte and Lee Counties located between U.S. 41 and Burnt Store Road north of the City of Cape Coral.

The site is 60% forested with approximately 30% in hydric pine flatwoods, 15% in mesic and xeric pine flatwoods, 10% in cypress, and 5% in oak hammock, cabbage palm hammock, and coastal scrub hammock. Approximately 12% of the site is freshwater marshes including seasonal and perennial ponds and wet prairies. Approximately 20% of the site is open grasslands with little or no slash pine and cabbage palm upperstory. This includes palmetto prairie, dry prairie, mesic prairie, and seasonal sloughs. Approximately 5% of the site is flowways, including the Zemel Canal which conveys freshwater from the Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area to the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserves and State Reserve, Yucca Pen Creek, and tributaries to these two main flowways. The Zemel Canal is freshwater in the eastern and central portions of the site, and brackish west of Burnt Store Road in the Section 20 portion of the project. The remainder of the site includes a subdivision outparcel, dirt roadways, and utility easements.

The hydric pine flatwood is a habitat dominated by a slash pine (*Pinus elliottii* var. *densa*) upper story with a wetland plant understory. The wetland understory can be any of, or a combination of, a variety of wetland plant community types including wet prairie, freshwater marsh, freshwater slough, freshwater seasonal ponds, cordgrass prairie, beakrush prairie, scrub cypress, dwarf cypress, or hatrack cypress. Mid-story plants of the hydric pine flatwood include the ubiquitous natives such as cabbage palm, wax myrtle, strangler fig, and the shrub species characteristic of mixed hardwood swamp forest and cypress forest of south Florida. The hydric pine flatwood is a unique habitat which functions as both a wetland and an upland in the seasonal hydrologic cycle.

The mesic pine flatwood on the Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods project area possesses a variety of herbs, forbs, and saw palmetto. Insular pockets of xeric flatwoods and xeric scrub possess a canopy of pine and oak with xeric species such as fetterbush, rusty lyonia, pennyroyal, paw paws, and prickly pear.

Long (1974) lists 361 species of plants in wet pine forest habitat of south Florida. This is the most diverse habitat in plant species in south Florida. Hardwood hammock is second (306 species) and dry pine flatwood third (303 species) in plant species diversity.

The pine flatwoods, and in southwest Florida the hydric pine flatwoods in particular, provide hydrologic, aquifer recharge, fishery, and wildlife habitat values. This habitat has typically been unrecognized as a valuable habitat for a variety of reasons. The lack of recognition of this habitat has resulted in conflicting regulatory and resource management of this habitat, resulting in disproportionate loss. The South Florida Water Management district recently identified the pine flatwoods and associated freshwater wetlands as the habitats with the greatest proportionate loss in South Florida.

To date biologists have identified 29 mammal, 123 bird, 38 reptile, 14 amphibian, and 21 fresh water and brackish water fish species from the site, including 5 endangered species, 5 threatened species, 10 species of special concern, 2 USFWS candidate species, and 4 CITES species.

Regionally the habitats of this site are critical for black bear, wood stork, red-cockaded woodpecker, bald eagle, eastern indigo snake, gopher tortoise, Sherman's fox squirrel, Bachman's sparrow, bobcat, and long-tailed weasel. With the completion of existing permitted development plans for Charlotte and Lee Counties, the site will become regionally critical habitat for Florida panther, limpkin, northern harrier, southeastern and eastern American kestrels, Florida sandhill crane, and potentially snail kite.

Documented eagle nests and red-cockaded woodpecker colonies are present within and southwardly adjacent to the project boundaries. The project area functions as a wildlife corridor and critical foraging habitat for Florida black bear, Florida panther, long-tailed weasel, bobcat, and river otter which travel between the Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area and the Charlotte Harbor State Reserve lands.

Fourteen listed plant species have been confirmed onsite including the beautiful paw paw, Florida bear grass, Florida coontie, golden polypody, royal fern, and giant leather fern.

If the project site is not protected, this area can be expected to be developed in one or more major developments of regional impact (DRIs) within a relatively short time period. Since the site is dominated by pine flatwood forests not regulated by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, regulatory protection by wetland permitting agencies will be minimal for habitats critical to the Florida black bear, Florida panther, eastern indigo snake, gopher tortoise, bald eagle, long-tailed weasel, red-cockaded woodpecker, Sherman's fox squirrel, Florida bear grass, and beautiful paw paw. Two existing DRIs (Caliente Springs and Fairway Woodlands) adjacent to this site demonstrate the anticipated fate of this unique example of the native Florida sheet-flow reticulate mosaic of upland and wetland habitats.

THE MYAKKA ESTUARY CARL PROJECT.....by Jim Beaver

The Myakka River, a designated Wild and Scenic River, is a vital tributary waterbody of the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve. The Myakka Estuary project is located on environmentally sensitive lands forming part of the Myakka River watershed.

Three bald eagle nests occur within or very near proposed Myakka Estuary project boundaries. The waters of Charlotte Harbor and the mouth of the Myakka River are important habitat for the West Indian manatee in spring and summer months. A wading bird rookery, including wood storks, is very near the site. Wetlands and open waters associated with the proposal provide important foraging habitat for eagles and a variety of wading and other birds. Gopher tortoise, Florida scrub jay, Florida sandhill crane, and bald eagle occur within the boundaries of the Myakka Estuary project.

The acquisition of the Myakka Estuary project complements existing and proposed preservation land acquisitions by the Conservation and Recreation Lands and Florida Communities Trust programs.

The preservation of native habitats and species within the Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods and the Myakka Estuary project is essential to maintaining the biological diversity of southwest Florida. The acquisition of these lands will maintain the quality of life enjoyed by the residents and visitors of the Charlotte Harbor region and the State of Florida. These projects are exceedingly valuable resources for all the citizens of Florida, providing exceptional ecological, recreational, hydrological, aesthetic, and scientific benefits.

Literature Cited:

Long, Robert W. 1974. The vegetation of southern Florida. Florida Scientist 37 (1): 33-45.

ACTION NEEDED BY MEMBERS NOW!

Please send letters to the Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) committee urging them to support the acquisition of the Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods and Myakka Estuary projects and to rank both projects high on the CARL priority list.

Please send your letters to the Conservation and Recreation Lands Committee, c/o Dr. Greg Brock, Land Acquisitions Planning Section, Department of Environmental Protection, 3900 Commonwealth Boulevard, MS-140, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-3000, before January 1, 1994.

CALUSA LAND TRUST MEMBERSHIPS AND DONATIONS:

- | | | | |
|------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| _____ \$15 | Individual Member | _____ \$100 | Contributor |
| _____ \$25 | Family Member | _____ \$500 | Patron or Business Patron |
| _____ \$50 | Donor | _____ \$1000 | Benefactor |
| _____ \$50 | Business/Organization | _____ \$ _____ | for _____ Acres in Castile Corridor |

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Phone _____

Date _____ Is this a membership renewal? _____

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