

Calusa Land Trust

and Nature Preserve of Pine Island, Inc.



Newsletter

www.calusalandtrust.org

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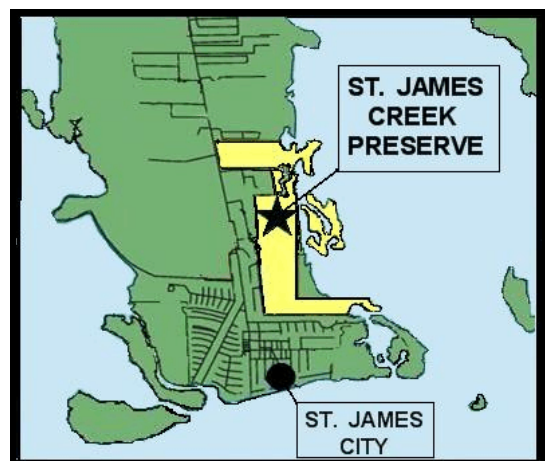
SPECIAL EDITION

A Wonderful Opportunity to Expand the St. James Creek Preserve

In our summer newsletter we announced a 9-acre expansion of one of our flagship preserves, the St. James Creek Preserve. That donation was part of a continuing sequence of acquisitions around the edge of this preserve which has brought its total size up to 362 acres. This is now our second largest wholly owned preserve (only our Big Jim Creek Preserve, at 375 acres, is larger).

Many of our acquisitions are the result of years-long efforts on parcels of particular significance. For a prime example: for years we have had our eye on the land that separates the St. James Creek Preserve from St. Jude Harbors. It has never before been available to us.

We are dedicating this entire issue of our newsletter to this opportunity, so read on for details about the history of this preserve and its St. Jude Nature Trail and learn why this particular expansion is so vital.



AT LONG LAST... ST. JUDE TRAILHEAD VISTA CONSERVED!

At the head of our beautiful St. Jude Trail, partially blocking public access, is a stretch of property we have always wanted to own. After a decade of trying, we finally have the chance to do so. The trailhead parcel is actually part of a larger tract, 18 lots in total, with approximately 20 acres of salt marsh, mangrove forest, and pine uplands.

This tract includes 3,750 feet of frontage on Crestwell Court, Stabile Road, and Franzone Road. The map on the next page shows the extent of this tract and its relationship to the St. James Creek Preserve, making it clear why we could not let this opportunity slip by.

In late summer our land acquisition chairman, Harold Bruner, negotiated a contract to purchase this entire tract, and we closed the purchase on September 22. Fortunately the seller was willing to accept an initial payment of \$100,000 and finance the remainder of the \$250,000 purchase price over twelve months. Now all we need to do is raise the money!

Much of the long stretch of road frontage included in this purchase is smothered with Australian pine trees. Removal of these invasives will afford a beautiful vista overlooking a large portion of this magnificent preserve. This preserve is a key piece of the Pine Island ecosystem and is conveniently located for public use and enjoyment as well.

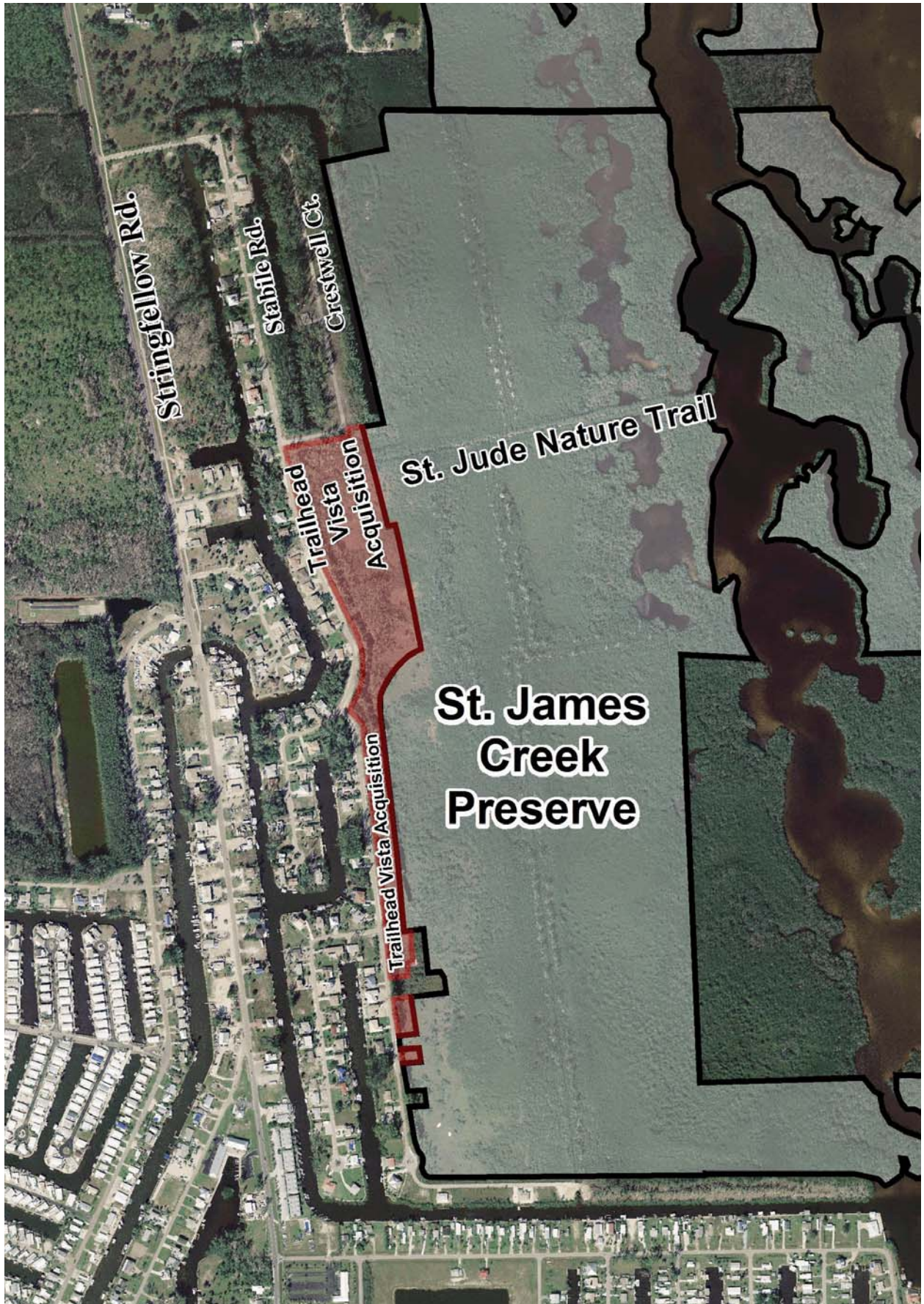
In years past, visitors to the St. Jude Nature Trail have had to use an easement to cross over private property, which is covered with Brazilian pepper and other invasive exotics, to reach the trailhead. With the acquisition of this property we will now be able to remove the invasives and replace them with native plants, extend the trail all the way to the road, post a nice sign, and have a proper entrance to the trail and the entire preserve. The St. Jude Nature Trail is our most visited property – a peaceful path dotted with memorial benches among the flora and fauna, ending with a boardwalk and observation deck onto St. James Creek. (See Brenda Anderson's article later in this newsletter for a full description of this trail.)

We are paying a fair price in today's hot economy, but the \$250,000 commitment for all 18 lots is beyond our current abilities. Our ongoing efforts to repair Hurricane Charley's damage to our preserves have seriously eroded our financial situation. Only an unprecedented outpouring of financial support from members and friends of the land trust will make this possible without hampering our ability to maintain our other preserves and remain alert for additional acquisitions. We are asking all who are able to make a special donation today to help in this endeavor. Questions should be directed to Norm Gowan at 239-283-8203.

Your contribution to this worthy cause is needed now - and is very much appreciated.



Hikers slip through pepper trees to reach trail



Trailhead Vista Addition to the St. James Creek Preserve



Location and evolution of the St. James Creek Preserve



Australian pines before clearing



The messy stage of native restoration!

History of St. James Creek Preserve By Bill Spikowski (334-8866)

Many people know the St. James Creek Preserve from a visit to St. Jude Nature Trail, which bisects the preserve, starting from high ground at Stabile Road and running to the east all the way to St. James Creek.

This preserve was destined to be part of the St. Jude Harbors subdivision which had been started in the 1960s. The original developers had planned to extend this subdivision through the salt marsh and mangrove swamp. Until this practice was halted in the mid-1970s, this was an accepted way to create neighborhoods!

The Lee County Commissioners created a plan in 1984 allowing owners of wetlands to transfer development rights to more suitable locations. In 1987, the developers of St. Jude Harbors were the first to take advantage of this program. In exchange for this transfer of rights, they placed a conservation easement on 60 acres of wetlands they had planned to dredge and fill.

In 1990, the developers offered to donate that land to the Calusa Land Trust. It was already protected from development due to the conservation easement, but by taking over ownership, the land trust would be able to restore damaged portions of the land and open the entire site to public access. The land trust named this land the St. James Creek Preserve.

In 1992, Rich Larkin, CLT president at that time, negotiated with the developers to purchase their remaining 210 acres of wetlands. A major fundraising campaign was launched, and the land was purchased in installments over the next two years.

The following year two more additions were added to this preserve. About 55 acres were acquired from the Castile family. The land trust also acquired an option to purchase 118 acres just to the north, about half wetlands and half pine flatwoods with an active bald eagle nest. Since the \$460,000 price tag greatly exceeded the land trust's finances, Rick Moore and Bill Spikowski persuaded county and state officials to split the cost of this land. This land is now owned by Lee County and maintained by county staff and land trust volunteers. All of these parcels together are now known as the St. James Creek Preserve.

A detailed plan for a nature trail was created by Lisa Dodd Beever in 1993. This trail came to be known as the St. Jude Nature Trail and it follows a roadbed that had been created for a highway to be named "St. Jude Boulevard." This road was apparently intended to lead to a new bridge to what is now Cape Coral! The nature trail was completed in 1996 with the addition of a chickee to provide shade and a boardwalk and overlook leading to St. James Creek.

During this period, attorney Charles Bigelow helped the land trust obtain a pedestrian easement across a strip of land fronting Stabile Road whose title was held by another party but which potentially blocked public access to the St. Jude Nature Trail.

Just south of the St. Jude Nature Trail is Cussell Drive, which runs between the neighborhood and the preserve. One row of private lots separates Cussell from the preserve. In 2003, the land trust was able to acquire six of these lots from Beatrice O'Shea, the daughter of Elmo Bracci who was one of the original investors in St. Jude Harbors. The land trust has since cleared Australian pines from these lots, creating a beautiful vista along nearly 500 feet of Cussell Drive.

Further south on Cussell Drive, just past the bend, are two more tracts of pristine wetlands. In the last two years, both were donated to the land trust, one tract by Pete Vossler of Nevada and the other the local residents Timothy and Jacqueline Bruehl.

Now the Calusa Land Trust has yet another opportunity to expand this preserve!

St. Jude Nature Trail

By Brenda Anderson (283-1878)

Written after a walk in late May:

Don't be fooled by the inauspicious trailhead of this ¾-mile nature trail. The large mailbox housing the printed trail guides is the only clue that you've arrived at the right spot on Stabile Road in St. Jude Harbors. To reach the actual trail, you need to walk through a narrow clearing in the tangle of Brazilian peppers. The land trust cannot remove these pepper trees because the first lot on Stabile Road is owned by another party; the land trust only has an easement at this point on the trail. *[Editor's note – no longer just an easement!]*

When you arrive at the interpretive trailhead sign and walk through the gate, you'll realize you've discovered something special. The trail is on high ground that had been intended to be a roadbed through the mangroves ultimately leading to Cape Coral. Fortunately that project was halted before it got too far along! Over the last decade, with the help of many CLT volunteers, the invasive exotics were removed from the old roadbed and native trees and shrubs were planted which are now thriving.

A variety of trees, including live oak, sea grape, wild olive, and strangler fig have created a beautiful canopied trail. The long leaf and slash pines, some of which were planted as seedlings, have obtained substantial height. American beauty berry with their bright purple berries shout for your attention at the beginning of the trail. Spider lilies hide among swamp ferns and the bright blue flowers of porter weed peek out from under the cabbage palms. Further along, some ancient-looking coonties are interspersed with butterfly-loving lantana. Great coco plum shrubs sport their red-tipped leaves and the dark black fruit for which they are named.

Beautiful wooden benches, carved with the names of those honored by friends and relatives with memorial donations, are placed along the trail for stops at strategic points. About half-way down the trail, a thatched chickee affords a sheltered spot to duck in out of a sudden rain shower or to just rest and enjoy the scenery.

Further down the trail, large silver buttonwoods compete with the wax myrtle and salt bush for your attention, while railroad vine with its bright pink-purple flowers run around the feet of all of them. Huge, six-foot tall leather fern, with their edible (actually very tasty) tightly-wound fiddleheads, fill in the spaces to the sides of the trail. White mangroves begin to shade the trail here, together with the black mangroves in the wetter areas behind.

At the end of the trail a spectacular boardwalk and observation deck awaits you. The planks are carved with the names of the donors to "Plunk-A-Plank," an ongoing CLT fundraiser. Perhaps you can spot your name, or the names of friends and familiar organizations on Pine Island who have made donations. There are some interesting nicknames among them. From the observation deck you can watch the mullet jump, an occasional angler hauling in the big one, or a paddler exploring the numerous mangrove islands that make up the boundaries of St. James Creek.

If you're lucky, on your trip back to the trail head you might spot a green-backed heron or a yellow-crowned night heron perched in the mangroves just beyond the trail edge — you never know.

**PURPOSE OF THE
CALUSA LAND TRUST:**

“... to acquire, hold, and manage environmentally sensitive lands, archaeological and historic sites, and other natural lands; to encourage education and research in the fields of conservation and preservation; to establish nature preserves or other protected areas to be used for scientific, educational, aesthetic, or passive recreational purposes; to cooperate with other entities having similar or related objectives; and to engage in any other activity relating to the furtherance of the foregoing objectives.”

— *From the articles of incorporation
of the Calusa Land Trust (Article II)*

