



# FootNotes \*



\* Newsletter of the Highlanders Chapter,  
Florida Trail Association  
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## Mission of the Florida Trail Association

The Florida Trail Association develops, maintains, protects and promotes a network of hiking trails throughout the state, including the unique Florida National Scenic Trail. Together with our partners we provide opportunities for the public to hike, engage in outdoor recreation, participate in environmental education and contribute to meaningful volunteer work.

### Highlanders Nature Notes – Black Panthers in Florida ?



Public domain National Park Service.  
Photo by Rodney Cammauf: Everglades Wildlife Images

Back in the mid to late 1980s my parents claimed they saw a “Black Panther” drinking from Deerhaven Lake in the Ocala National Forest just as the sun was setting. The old caretaker of our church campground there also claimed to have seen one crossing the road just outside the campground entrance gate some years later. Even the former Head District Ranger of the Seminole Ranger District, Jim Thorsen, once told me

that he saw one in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park many years ago. I’ve heard this same testimony from many others over the years. A biologist friend of mine informed me that he’s also heard these stories, but added that there is no such thing, technically, as a “Black Panther.” What has been called a black panther by some is really a black **Leopard** (the melanistic color morph of the African Leopard) and lives only in Africa.

So what are these people seeing? Many would say they’re only seeing a large house cat which, from a distance, especially in poor light, appears to be a Florida Panther (*Felis concolor coryi*). Size is often difficult to judge at great distances. Others say these sightings are merely Bobcats (*Felis rufus*) mistaken for panthers. But most sightings come with the insistence that the tail was ‘very long,’ not short and stubby like a Bobcat’s. And quite a few of these sightings have come from reliable sources, folks who spend much of their time in the wild, such as hunters, foresters, etc., and are unlikely to mistake a Bobcat or house cat for a panther.

There is another possibility. The Jaguarundi (*Herpailurus yagouaroundi*) is a Central American wild cat that may have escaped captivity here. According to the sources below, they normally range from South

America into northern Mexico and individuals have wandered into Texas and southern Arizona. I don't think it unreasonable to imagine that if the Coyote has made it to Florida from west of the Mississippi, that the Jaguarundi could do the same. They're not afraid of water and can swim. They only grow to half the length and much less the weight of a full-grown Florida Panther. But from a distance, they might appear very panther-like, and much larger than a house cat. In addition, there is a dark color phase of this species that is almost black; in poor light it would look very **black**. On page 230 of the Tekiela reference below there is a photo of one in this "dark morph."

In addition to these sightings there have been numerous reports of actual Florida Panthers in Lake County over the past few years. One of my hospice clients actually took a picture of one drinking from her garden fountain in front of her home near Groveland after watching it come through her yard on several different occasions. But when she sent it in to the officials at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as verification, their reply was an accusation that she had "photo-shopped" it. One of the members of my church claims to have recently seen one walking down the driveway of his home in Spanish Village, south of Leesburg. Finally, a photo was sent to the Lake Sentinel and printed in a recent issue, of the unmistakable back-end of a Florida Panther as it

passed a motion-sensing, trail camera set-up somewhere near Lake Jem.

So it would appear that there may be at least a few of these large cats in our area. Perhaps you'll be the next lucky one to see one of these elusive phantoms. But don't get your hopes up too high. My biologist friend also told me that there are Florida field biologists who have spent their entire careers in this state, never having seen one in the wild. You probably have a better chance of seeing Elvis! But don't let that keep you from looking. ☺

-Mike Barnett

Sources:

Gingerich, Dr. Jerry Lee. *Florida's Fabulous Mammals*. Tampa, FL: World Publications, 1994.

Tekiela, Stan. *Mammals of Florida Field Guide*. Cambridge, MN: Adventure Publications, Inc., 2010.

## Hikes at Sunnyhill South and Seminole State Forest

*Photos by Judy Leavers*





### Notes from the Chair

We are drawing to the end of cool weather events. It has been a good season, especially with the trail work. We accomplished all of the trail maintenance in what seemed to me record time. This was aided by the great turn out of volunteers for each work hike. With the excellent organization of Francis and Bobbi Keenan on most days we were able to put out three teams to trim the trail. In the fall I hope some of you will think of taking the sawyer course so we have more people to share this tough job.

I feel we can offer more activities next season and I encourage each of you to think about becoming an activity leader. Have an idea of something you want to do, contact an activity leader, and assist in setting up and carrying out your idea. Assist in a couple of activities and you can be on your way to becoming a certified FTA Activity Leader. During the summer months

our hikes go out, but you can still set up bike rides and kayak/canoe trips.

We will have a meeting in July as usual, but two picnics - one in June and one in August as summer events. Look for more information nearer the dates.

Now that I have recovered some from all my surgery, I was ecstatic to be able to lead a hike again at Ferndale Preserve. We will soon be heading north to New Hampshire for the summer. Keep yourself healthy and happy this summer. Enjoy all the traveling you do and keep hiking.

—Gene Bouley, *Highlanders Chair*

### Highlanders Activities for May and June 2017

#### Friday, May 5, 2017

**Tubing Party with Weenie Roast - 9:30 AM.** Meet at 9:30 AM at the picnic grounds at Kelly Park. Tube Rock Springs Run a couple of times, then share a weenie roast lunch at noon. Bring a tube, sunscreen, insect repellent, folding chair, and a dish (side, drinks, chips, or dessert) for the communal lunch. Contact the leader no later than May 2nd to confirm the dish you will provide. (We will supply plates, cups, napkins, and plasticware.) To participate in this activity you must be a member of the FTA or a personal guest of a member. In case of rainy weather this activity will be rescheduled. No pets, please. Howard Pospesel hikeft@embarqmail.com.

**Directions:** Kelly Park is located at 400 E Kelly Park Road in Apopka. GPS coordinates: **28.757901, -81.498942**

**Additional information:** Admission to Kelly Park is \$3.00 per vehicle for one or two people, and \$5:00 per vehicle for three to eight people. Tubes cannot be rented in the park. They may be rented at Rock Springs Bar and Grill (4939 Rock Springs Rd.) for \$5:00 per day. Tubes are large; you may need rope to tie the tube onto your car. Note that the renter will keep your ID while you have their tube. GPS coordinates for tube rental: **28.757008, -81.508480**

**Thursday, May 25, 2017**

**Highlanders Chapter Monthly Meeting – 6:00 PM.** Leesburg Public Library, 100 E. Main Street. Use the entrance on Main Street. Meeting room just inside the entrance to the library. Bring a snack to share and your aluminum cans to recycle. Questions? 352-787-8654 or email Bobbi Keenan [bobbiszoo@yahoo.com](mailto:bobbiszoo@yahoo.com). Program: "Bicycling the Keys" from Key Largo to Key West by Jim and Nikki Thorsen **28.811093 -81.874858**

**Thursday, June 22, 2017**

**Highlanders Summer Picnic Pot-Luck – 5:00 PM.** Hickory Point Recreation Area, 27341 FL-19, Tavares, FL 32778. The park is on Lake Harris and Highway 19, between Tavares and Howey-in-the-Hills. Bring a cold dish to share and your own drink. Meet at about 5:00 PM and we will eat at 6:00. After 6:00 PM there is a \$2.00 charge per car; before 6:00 admission is free. We will have plates and silverware. Contact Mary Ellen Milton for more details E-mail at [mem32735@aol](mailto:mem32735@aol) or 352-669-3628. No Pets Please. Google Maps GPS: **28.745985, -81.765867.**

### **Chapter Officers and Committee Chairs**

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## Trailmasters and Activity Leaders

Trailmasters: Arlene Beal, Dee Bender, Gene Bouley, Stuart Force, Karen Harrington, Francis Keenan, Kathy Lamb, Bill Leach, Jon and Judy Leavers, Mary Ellen Milton, Steve Nemeth, Howard Pospesel, Mary Ring, Diane Roesch, Jane Williams, Wade Williston, and Bruce Zollner.

Activity Leaders: Mike Barnett, Arlene Beal, Gene Bouley, Diane and Ken Dammiller, John Grob, Brad Hoopes, Bobbi and Francis Keenan, Jon Leavers, Bill and Mary Ellen Milton, Steve Nemeth, Howard Pospesel, Bob and Suzanne Sippey, Don Valcheff, Wade Williston, and Bruce Zollner.

## Links

Florida Trail Association: <http://www.floridatrail.org>  
Highlanders Chapter, FTA: <http://www.highlanders.floridatrail.org>  
Meetup for Highlanders: <https://www.meetup.com/Florida-Trail-Association-Central-Florida-Chapter/>  
Highlanders Photos: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/highlandersfta/albums>

