



Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway Newsletter



A National Scenic Byway

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Across the River and Through the Forest A Florida Wilderness Adventure

By Tom Rose, Photos by Diana Rose

The Great State of Florida has so much to offer the hunter, fisherman, hiker, outdoorsman, and adventurer. However, as our state has grown over the years many of our visitors and even our residents know very little of the real Florida. The forests of the Indians and the primitive jungle discovered by the Spanish explorers are what I call "the real Florida." Florida has been settled and claimed over the years by the English, Spanish, French, the Confederate States, and the United States.

outpost named Fort Gates.

It was established during the Seminole War on the western shore of the St. Johns. It was used to support Confederate troops during the Civil War. It also provided an excellent location to keep tabs on river activity. A cable operated ferry had been at the location since 1780. The ferry was used to transport troops and supplies from the eastern shore to the fort. The old fort was dismantled in 1938. The area remains sparsely populated to this day, with the Ocala National Forest, the Welaka State Forest, and isolated location protecting Fort Gates from mass development. Visiting the area today, it is not such a stretch of the imagination to picture in one's mind what it was like back in the beginning.



Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway

Help with Up Coming Events

October

- 2 ArtoberFest, Palaka
- 9 Friends/Sponsor Picnic, Juniper Springs Rec Area

November

- 6 & 7 Pioneer Settlement Jamboree, Barberville
- 13 & 14 Ocali Days, Silver River State Park
- 13 & 14 Lake Green Days, Taravas
- 13 River Fest, Ormond Beach

Contact Tony if you want to help.

I have a real Florida outdoors adventure that will appeal to all. Whether you are a veteran of the Florida outback or new to it, you'll have a great time crossing the mighty St. Johns River in Putnam County on the Fort Gates Ferry. The two hours you'll spend on this trip will translate into a lifetime of memories. And, if you're so inclined, you can experience this wilderness adventure without even getting out of your car.

I've made the trip on numerous occasions. I've done it by car, bicycle and motorcycle. I find it a quick and easy, laid back way to get away from it all. It's guaranteed to clear your mind and give you a fresh perspective on our complicated fast paced world.



Ferry Crossing 1900 (Photo courtesy Florida State Achieves.

Let's step back in time 192 years to 1818! Deep in the jungle that would become the Ocala National Forest was a small fort and



The ferry approaching the landing. Tugboat hull dates back to a 1918 sail boat.

Today we'll approach the river from the eastern side taking County Road 308 near Crescent City. Just follow the signs to the ferry landing. The final mile is a dirt road through the woods that dead ends at the St. Johns River. Here we find a small store and a settlement of some 25 cottages and mobile homes. The store serves as headquarters for the Fort Gates Ferry. The river is narrow here, about 1/2 mile across. We are about 110 miles south of the river's mouth, Mayport, where the mighty river's northerly flow empties into the Atlantic Ocean.



Ferry is loaded and ready for the crossing.

The original ferry was pulled across the river by a cable. Today's ferry is a barge that will carry 2 cars, about 20 motorcycles, and numerous bicycle and foot passengers. It is pushed through

the water by a small tugboat which was built of cypress wood in 1918, powered by an Isuzu Diesel engine. It is Florida's oldest continuously operated ferry and also the only privately owned and operated ferry in the Florida transportation system.

Ferry Captain Dale Jones has 11 years on the job and knows his business well. He lowers the ramp with a hand crank and the vehicles drive onto the barge.



Captain Dale Jones logged over 60,000 crossings in his 11 years as captain of Fort Gates Ferry.

Once loaded the tug pushes us forward and we begin the spectacular 15 minute journey. This isolated area of the river provides some great wildlife viewing.

It's a good bet that you'll see ospreys, anhinga, and blue heron. Also watch for the alligators, out for a river cruise. On occasion bear and deer have been known to swim the river. As we reach the western shore the ramp is again lowered into place and the vehicles drive off. The ferry ride is over, but the adventure continues.



Fort Gates Ferry underway in mid river.



Captain Dale Jones lowers ramp so that the vehicle can safely and smoothly exit the ferry.

We now face 7 miles of dirt and gravel on Forest Road 29, traveling through a primitive part of the Ocala National Forest. Anything is possible on this lonely stretch of road. The forest abounds in Florida white tail deer, black bear, wildcat, fox, and turkey.

All too soon we hear the sound of vehicles on State Road 19 at Salt Springs. Now your adventure into the Florida outback is over. But once you've made this trip you will indeed have an insight into the real Florida. You'll know a little of what it was like when the early settlers arrived. You'll have crossed Florida's greatest river the way other adventurers have before you for over 150 years!



Ferry 1893 (Photo courtesy of Florida State Achieve).

Ferry Facts: The Ferry and the approach on Forest Roads 62 & 29 are a part of the **Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway**. One way fare: car, \$10; motorcycle, \$5. It operates from 7 am to 5 pm daily except Tuesday. Approaching from the west, pull up to the landing and blink your headlights. The ferry will come get you. It is a good idea to call ahead to be sure the ferry is operating. Traveling from Crescent City to Salt Springs via the ferry is 20 miles, a savings of some 35 miles. The ferry has a capacity of 5 tons. **FORT GATES FERRY 229 FT GATES FRY RD CRESCENT CITY, FL 32112 Phone: (386) 467-2411 Contact Person: DALE JONES, Vice President & Ferry Captain.**



Watching Grass Grow! – Enhancing the Byway

By Tom Rose

Yes, watching grass grow may not sound very exciting, but there are a number of Central Floridians who are excited about doing just that since the State Road 40 Roadside Re-Vegetation Pilot Study began last June.

On June 23rd my wife Diana and I met with Jim Thorsen at 9:30 a.m. in the Ocala National Forest on SR 40 just west of Juniper Springs. It was our opportunity to observe first hand the beginning of a native grass and plant study on the roadsides of the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway.



Site 1, North Side of SR 40. Photo Diana Rose

The study consists of four 7-foot by 400-foot plots on SR40 between Juniper Springs and Mill Dam. Three plots planted in native plants, grasses, and wildflowers, and a fourth plot, which will be used to test

the effectiveness of the herbicide Imazapic (Plateau) to control Bahia grass without damaging the native plants.

It all began with a request from the USDA, Forest Service that a plan be developed for the introduction of native species along the right-of-way. This project is the initial phase of a program that, if successful, will result in native grasses and plants lining SR 40 from the Lake George Ranger Station to Juniper Springs.

The labor was provided by a crew from the Marion County Correctional facility at Lynne working in conjunction with



Variety of Grasses ready for planting. Photo Diana Rose

the Florida DOT. Other individuals key to the pilot study include Steve Tonjes, FDOT Environmental Scientist, Carrie Sekerak, ONF Wildlife Biologist, and Larry Ackerson, FDOT/Ocala Operations Maintenance Shop.

The plantings consist of Elliott Lovegrass (*Eragrostis elioti*), Purple Lovegrass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*), Silkgrass (*Pityopsis graminifolia*), October Flower (*Polygonella polygama*), Chapmans Goldenrod (*Solidago chapmanii*), and Lopsided Indian-grass (*Sorghastrum secundum*).



Jim Thorsen, Forest Resource Consultant, watering the new grasses. Photo Diana Rose

Jim Thorsen, Forest Resource Consultant for the project, reports very positive results at 60 days. The survival rate was about 90% with the Purple Lovegrass, Elliott Lovegrass, and Lopsided Indian-grass looking strong. The Chapmans Goldenrod was also growing well and in bloom.

Earlier, on June 14th, a separate planting was conducted as a public service project by The Order of The Arrow, a national honor society of the Boy Scouts of America. They planted Bunchgrass and other wet-land species to control



Juniper Creek Bridge Rd. SR 19. Photo Cathy Connolly

erosion at the Juniper Run Bridge on SR19. When last checked this planting also appeared to be doing well.



Order of Arrow Boy Scouts planting for erosion control as a public service project. Photo Cathy Connolly



Watching Grass Grow—Con'd

The long term goal is to introduce native plants along the right of way between Mill Dam to Intersection of SR 40 and SR 19. The benefits will be to enhance the scenic beauty of the right of way and reduce the costs of watering and mowing.

Check it out the next time you travel SR 40 through the Forest. You see, watching grass grow can be exciting when you think about what it can mean in the future for the natural beauty, economics, and esthetics of the Ocala National Forest and the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway!

Linda Stewart named Honorary Lifetime Friend of the Florida Black Bear CME

At the Lake County Commission Meeting on August 17, 2010, Linda Stewart received a certificate naming her the first Honorary Lifetime Friend of the FBBSB. In his remarks during the presentation, Tony Ehrlich said, "She has gone beyond her duties as an elected official and volunteered her time as part



Commissioner Linda Stewart receiving a certificate declaring her an Honorary Lifetime Friend of the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway from Chairman Tony Ehrlich at the Lake County Commission meeting on August 17, 2010.

of the grassroots effort to establish the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway. The designation by the State of Florida provides an environmental and economic benefit to the residents of Umatilla, Altoona, Astor, and Astor Park in Lake County; as well as the cities and communities throughout the corridor."

News Clips

Emporium—Our website has a new feature, our own store. We carry t-shirts, hats, and our new calendars for 2011 will be featured soon. All items with our logos and banners. Stay tune for store specials.

CycloCross—Greenway Bike Shop and Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway have partnered to put on a CycloCross at Santos, Marjory Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway. All proceeds go to Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway. Mark your calendars January 23, 2011. Website for more details, if you would like to help email: fbbsb99@gmail.com.

Bear Sighting Stories

By Tom Rose

Laurie Andrews of Altamonte Springs reported her bear sighting and included some interesting Native American folklore:

We've actually had a couple of bear sightings now since moving into our new home in Altamonte Springs which is a mere 4 miles south of Wekiwa Springs State Park. I thought we'd be more likely to see an alligator because of our home being on a small lake, and never even thought of the rare and privileged possibility of having a black bear on our (and the bear's) property. Our first hint would come in April after going outside to find our trash cans turned over and holes in the ground made from the digging claws of what we assumed to be a raccoon. However, quickly realizing just how difficult it would have been for a raccoon to turn over the trash cans, our excitement began to grow to think that it could have actually been a black bear. A few days later I went for a jog around 10:30 am. Only ten minutes into my jog, I took a turn and was abruptly stopped in my tracks. With eyes wide open and jaw completely dropped I watched as a 5-6 ft black bear (who was about 60-ft in front of me) ran out of a back yard, crossed over the sidewalk and into a 2-lane road where, luckily, a white van leading 2 other cars heading west slowed down just enough for the bear to finish his astonishing lap across the road into the adjacent neighborhood. I literally almost covered my eyes because it looked to me that the van wasn't going to slow down in time. The man in the van looked over at me with the same amazed look on his face as I'm sure was on mine. I have to admit, for a moment there, I felt quite vulnerable and actually thought I should head back home. I soon understood how foolish that idea truly was. That bear could care less about me, didn't even know I existed. He was simply going about his day as all of us do.



Bear Sighting Stories—Laurie Andrews Con'd

On one other occasion, my husband sat outside hoping for an encounter of his own and was soon obliged by what had to have been the same bear. He just barely caught a glimpse of his back end while the bear went around the side of the house. When Mike ran inside to tell us, we all went to the window and waited anxiously. The flood light was on so we knew the bear was still there, but we never saw him. The next day, after finding the bear's dung on the side of our house, we humorously realized just why we were kept waiting. And we've been waiting ever since as that was the last time the black bear came around...that we know of.

As an interesting side note, my sister-in-law gave me a piece of information pertaining to a Native American belief for those the bear reveals himself to. The bear symbolizes a time to awaken the spirit within that has been slumbering in its "bear cave." Whether it means to conjure up one's natural abilities or those that have been hidden, the bear reminds us how powerful we are and to fulfill our true potential. I believe this can be relevant to anyone at any time, and truly nature is speaking to us all with every call of a mother bear or cry of a hawk and what we need to do is make sure we're always listening.

Executive Committee Member at Large Linda Stewart provided us with this bear sighting story: My husband knows a man who was hunting at Rock Springs Preserve last hunting season. He had a bad back so couldn't climb up the tree stand. He chose to sit under a tree when suddenly he heard rustling in the bushes and out came two tiny bear cubs, rolling, tumbling, and playing. They ran right up to him and playfully jumped in his lap. It scared him to death because he knew the mama bear must be somewhere close. After a few minutes, the cubs ran back into the woods. Just when he was breathing easier, out the cubs came again, but this time, followed by mama bear. They immediately ran to him and then climbed up the tree he was leaning against. Mama bear started woofing and pawing the ground, and he thought for sure he was done for. He slowly got up, started yelling, "No Bear!" and backed away. She did not charge him, fortunately. Since he survived, how lucky he feels that two bear cubs played in his lap.

Here is one from Tom & Diana Rose of Umatilla: As coordinator of the newsletter bear sighting reports, I have dreamed of the day I could experience a sighting myself. After traveling the roads of The Ocala for more than 10 years and more trips than we can count, on September 8th it happened! Eureka! It was 4 PM. We were cruising along slowly, having just turned north on FR17 off of FR14 in the southwestern part of the forest near the bombing

range. There were dark clouds over head, and threatening rain. There he was standing in the middle of the road facing us, his head bobbing and turning from side to side, sniffing the air. We quickly noticed the road was an incline enough to coast so killed the engine and with a foot on the brake coasted quietly and gradually toward the bear. We had 30 to 45 seconds for a photo op through the windshield before he bolted into the woods. Exciting stuff! Yes, we were face to face with the king of the forest, a Florida Black Bear!

Bear Sighting Reports are a regular feature in our quarterly newsletter. Have you seen a black bear in the Central Florida area? We want to record and track sightings in the Newsletter and on the website. Report where, when, and other details of the sighting to: tomrose43@gmail.com.

Our Friends

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