



A National Scenic Byway

Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway Newsletter

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The Return of the Black Bear Festival

January 30, 2026

Submitted by Nikki Thorsen

Sadly, quite a few years ago a longstanding annual event came to an end in Umatilla, FL. The Black Bear Festival had been a tradition for years. Why it ended I don't recall, but it has been missed by many! And then, rumor had it that the festival was planned to be reinstated on January 31, 2026 in Umatilla, FL. For the Board Members of the Florida Black Bear National Scenic Byway (FBBNSB), this was very exciting news for our group. The festival had always provided us with a platform to raise awareness to visitors and locals alike about the mission of our group. Additionally, we offered bus tours into the Ocala National Forest during the festival to various springs and making unusual stops such as Scrub Jay sightings, the Yearling Trail, the iconic Central Fire Tower and much more. So as of 2026... the tradition of the Black Bear Festival has returned to Umatilla. Yay! And a wonderful surprise for Black Bear Scenic Byway - Lakeview Terrace, a CCRC Retirement Community located in Altoona, FL. volunteered to provide our Byway with one of their buses so we could continue the tradition of tours into the Ocala National Forest. In the past, FBBNSB had used existing operating funds to pay for the rental of a





commercial bus in order to provide tours. Unfortunately, at our current juncture we are very low on donated funds so being offered the use of transportation to carry on an old tradition was exciting. Jim and Nikki Thorsen put together an itinerary for this year's tour to find Scrub Jay clans and visit Juniper Springs and Wildcat Lake. Fortunately, the Scrub Jays got the memo and performed magically for

both the AM and PM Tours! The tours proved to be a great success and it is our hope that the festival will occur again in 2027. For more information about becoming a volunteer member of the Florida Black Bear Byway or if you would like to make a donation, please scan the QR Code located on the Black Bear website. The mission of The Byway is to preserve and protect Florida's wilderness and wildlife with information sharing and events that promote awareness to visitors and locals about the importance of retaining habitat for Florida's treasured wildlife.



NOTE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN...Jim Thorsen

We are excited about our recent events with the Umatilla Bear Festival and a print our group donated to Silver Springs State Park. Even with a strong "cold" front on January 31st that entered Central Florida, the bear festival was a success. We are so glad that this event is back in Umatilla. Recently, Nicole (my wife) and I travelled to the



west side of our Byway to Silver Springs State Park and donated one of our prints “Lure of the Springs.” The print shows and describes all the natural springs along the Byway. It was presented to Andrew Jenkins, Park Services Specialist with Florida Department of Environmental Protection. This print will be displayed in the newly formed “Discovery Center” room along the boardwalk.

While we were at the Springs, we enjoyed the famous “glass bottom boat” experience with Captain Luke.



My first experience at Silver Springs was in 1956 and I was ten years old. The park has definitely changed through the years. At that time, I was amazed with the boat rides, the alligators and other reptiles and Ross Allen’s show with the rattlesnakes. We are glad that the Park is doing well and one important ecological observation while on the boat ride - the eel grass looks healthy in the Springs!

Jim Thorsen, Chair thor1505@aol.com

FLORIDA BLACK BEAR NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY
KIDS FREE TRY FISHING
CAST YOUR LINE & REEL IN THE FUN!

- Ages 6-12
- Free Pre-Registration Required

REGISTER HERE



SATURDAY APRIL 11
ESSEX SEAFOOD
1360 SR-40
PIERSON, FL 32180
9:00AM - 12:00PM



website: floridablackbearsenicbyway.org

Contact us: fbnsb@gmail.com

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Board Meetings: Board meetings are held periodically throughout the year. Visitors are welcome. Attending a board meeting is a great way to learn more about the byway. Let us know if you would like to attend and I'll send you details. tomrose43@gmail.com

Our Mission: To enhance, encourage and promote the preservation and protection of the outstanding natural, ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway for its residents, inhabitants, visitors and future generations.

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Editor: Tom Rose Contact: tomrose43@gmail.com. Your letters, comments, suggestions and submissions are encouraged and welcome.