



A National Scenic Byway

Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway Newsletter

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Same Spring, a Decade Apart

Byway memories by Jessica Meinhofer

I spent a lot of time along the **Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway** before I even knew what it was. I visited Silver Springs State Park during a school field trip, I spent my days riding horses in Umatilla during my college years, and when we had kids, my husband and I loaded up our Subaru station wagon and visited Alexander Springs.



I remember arriving at Alexander Springs on our first visit. It was nearly empty because a thunderstorm had blown through just 30 minutes before. We were thrilled to find a great parking spot and unloaded all our inflatable tubes and made our way to the spring. While we waited to make sure the

storm had moved on enough, the kids, who were 3 and 6 at the time, played in the sugar sand on the beach. We were happy to find that the spring is quite shallow, with plenty of room for the littles to play in the clear, crisp water and soft sandy bottom.

We spent hours playing, floating above the limestone cave of this first-magnitude spring, splashing in the shallows and making memories.

On our way home, we saw a mama bear cross the street with her cubs.

A decade later, we returned.

This was the first place I actually saw alligators while paddling, and I was surprised and relieved that I could excitedly and without fear say, “Look!! It’s an alligator.” It took me years to get here. When we first started paddle boarding, we would only do salty and brackish water because I couldn't deal with



A sandy beach and shallow area makes Alexander Springs ideal for young kids.

alligators. Logically, I knew they didn’t want anything to do with me. But my imagination would come up with every possible kind of scenario. It felt really good to finally be confident around alligators.

Now that our kids are teenagers, my husband and I are often out without them. Instead of going to the recreation area when we visit Alexander Springs, we are more likely to approach the spring on our paddle boards. We launch from the Ocala National Forest CR445 Bridge Boat Ramp and paddle upstream towards the boil.

It is such a beautiful paddle up the spring run, with so much wildlife above and below the water and the bottom alive with aquatic grass. I love that there are little islands dotting the run, forcing you to choose which way you go, although some are clearly more inviting than others (no one wants to portage when there is a perfectly “good” route on the other side).

And although I've paddled here a few times, I've only seen one otter. It was swimming around, pausing to look at us, back to swimming around, and then as I grabbed my phone to get a clip of it, it was gone.

Everyone is a decade older and the admission price has gone up \$10 or so, but the pull of Alexander Springs is still there. It's just as beautiful as I remember, and it's the reason why we keep coming back.

Jessica Meinhofer [Walk and Paddle](#) [Portfolio](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Activity Book](#)

NOTE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN...Jim Thorsen

It has been a long hot summer and now we are looking forward to a Florida Fall. It's also time for events that are featured along our Byway. Wonderful events that will be happening include:

*** Pioneer Settlement Fall Country Jamboree**



in Barberville. This will be there 50th anniversary and will be held on November 7th and 8th. We will have our Florida Black Bear Scenic exhibit at the event and offer educational materials. We also will have William Bartram at our tent for storytelling and of course lots of Black Bear stories. Hope to see you those

two days in November.

*** On January 30, 2027 the Umatilla Bear Festival will be held at Cadwell Park. Of course, our Byway will be there and offer tours to the Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway. Please mark your calendars for this event.**

As Fall arrives, Florida Black Bears are packing on the calories for the upcoming winter. Our black bears are on the move and they stay busy up to 20 hours a day looking for food to increase their body fat. In result, it's a great time to observe a black bear traveling. Also, please secure household garbage



and place garbage out in the morning pick-up rather than the night before. Finally have a Fun Fall and Be Bear-Wise! See you in Barberville on November 7th and 8th!

Jim Thorsen, Chair thor1505@aol.com

ATTENTION READERS:

Website & Facebook: Learn more about the byway at our website

<https://floridablackbearsenicbyway.org> and our Facebook page

<https://floridablackbearsenicbyway.org/facebook>

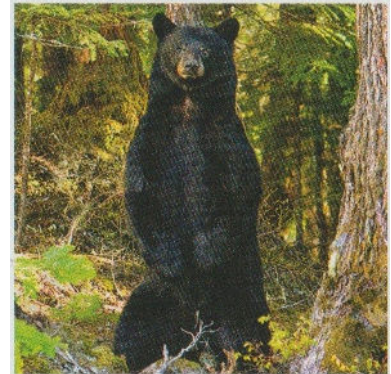
Board Meetings: Our next board meeting is October 6th, 2 pm, at the Pioneer Settlement in Barberville.

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.*

Officers: Jim Thorsen, Chairman - Kristee Booth, Vice Chair - Nikki Thorsen, Secretary. Board of Directors: Tony Ehrlich, Georgia Turner, Mike Cross, Janet Lewis, Jessica Meinhofer, Carlee McKinney, Tom Rose

Editor: Tom Rose Contact: tomrose43@gmail.com. Your letters, comments, suggestions and submissions are encouraged and welcome. Please share your stories and photos of the Byway, the Forest and wildlife.



A bear standing on its hind legs is just trying to better identify what has caught his attention — it's much easier to see, hear and smell things from a standing position, than down on all fours. It is certainly not a sign of aggression.