

A Singular Swamp

By Ted Levin

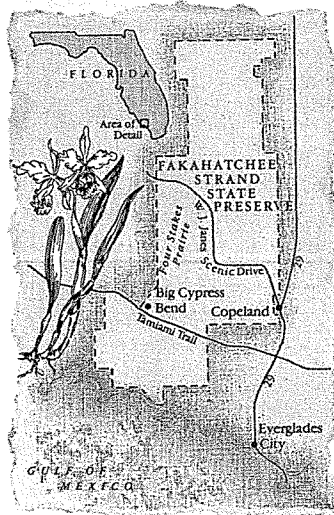
Florida's Fakahatchee Strand is too wild to be wholly known—or even surveyed.

SOME YEARS AGO *The National Enquirer* reported, "Girl, 10, Raised by Panthers in Florida Swamp," east of Naples. A latter-day Romulus or Remus, she had vestigial language skills: She could only growl, the story said. An illustration accompanied the headline in which the surrogate parents appeared huge and boxy, more like fangless sabertooths than Florida panthers. Nearly a decade later the front page of the *Weekly World News* announced, "Half-Alligator, Half-Human Found in Florida Swamp!" Calling the creature "the missing link"—to what, I'm not sure—the story framed a photograph of a wizened human head spliced onto an alligator torso and said the beast had been taken alive, a few miles east of Naples, while sunbathing in Big Cypress Swamp.

I know of only one swamp in southwest Florida singular enough to provoke such outlandish stories: Fakahatchee, the largest, wettest cypress strand in Big Cypress Swamp. It is like no other swamp in Florida. The state preserve there covers more than 70,000 acres and is the least visited state-owned land in Florida. There is no lodging. No visitors' center. No stores.

No bathrooms. Just swamp-land broken by a road.

Because of its size—approximately 20 miles long by 3 to 5 miles wide—Fakahatchee exerts a gentle influence on the climate. Temperatures here almost always remain above freezing, even when frost curls the rest of south Florida. This unique microclimate supports the largest Florida royal palm hammock and the most diverse assemblage of West Indian air plants—orchids,



bromeliads, ferns—in North America.

Indeed, some of the swamp's orchids grow nowhere else outside the Caribbean, which makes the area a prime target for plant

poachers. One preserve manager told me of catching a group of German tourists wandering through the swamp earlier this year: They didn't speak English but had with them a carefully drawn map highlighting the exact locations of various rare orchids.

I once stood waist-deep in Fakahatchee and glimpsed what I thought must surely have been the source of Florida's skunk-ape legend: an eerie pop ash so fuzzy with thin, reddish bromeliads that the tree bore a simian likeness and appeared ready to waltz through the green-filtered light.

I first went there in 1985 to see royal palms, tall and smooth like Greek columns. Although I found some growing close to W. J. Janes Memorial Scenic Drive, an 11-mile road littered with fossil clam and scallop shells, I also found quintessential wild Florida: panther tracks in the mud. Like embers from a dying campfire, the sign evoked the image of a twilight animal, a fellow traveler whose tenure on earth is all but over.

A strand—a linear swamp that grows in a groove eroded in the underlying limestone—

is a landscape best appreciated on foot from the inside, where dark, dense vegetation fashions dreams. I immerse myself in it, literally and figuratively, for I crave unimproved Florida wildness. I want to be alone, beyond the sound of gas-powered engines, out of sight of the endless contrails of overhead jets.

Yet, Fakahatchee is not an inviolate swamp. From 1944 to 1952, robber barons logged approximately 5 million board feet of cypress and pine. Trains running along 20 engineer-straight narrow-gauge railroad tracks called trams, precisely 1,650 feet apart, removed the timber. When Florida began acquiring the strand in 1972 to protect its unusual association of rare plants and animals—including



ing black bear and everglades mink, as well as panthers and orchids—they kept six of the trams open as hiking trails.

Last December, my wife, six-year-old son, and I walked the length of tram 7. A mile down the fern-lined trail, as the eye-high plants converged in the distance to progressively restrict visibility, my wife saw a man in the distance and proposed to ask him how far

we were from the opening to Four Stakes Prairie. I leveled my field glasses and announced that her man was a shaggy black boar, rooting beneath the droopy frond of a cabbage palm.

Bushwhacking Fakahatchee is even more interesting. A mile west of Janes Scenic Drive, I once stood in a pool of tea-colored water, cool and gently flowing, that eddied around my thighs. My heart quickened when I looked down, for I was sure that somewhere below the surface nightmares lurked. Sunlight spangled the slough. Carolina wrens crooned in pop ashes and pond apples; orchids bloomed yellow, orange, and white; blood-red lichens stained the trunks; and tropical butterflies fluttered by like

ter table and another network of straight roads embossed on the wilderness. He gave the roads pleasing urban names like Miller Avenue and 98th Street, rather than more ap-

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propriate place names like Hawg Wallow Road or Avenue of the Snakes. Spurious salesmen sold 29,000 house lots over the phone to people who had no idea that by late June they would need inner tubes and flippers to reach their land. The enterprise eventually turned belly-up, and piece by piece the state is buying back the remaining parcels, which will

press in a lover's grip. At the end of the boardwalk, where the slough deepened into an opaque pool, garfish gulped air, dimpling the surface.

Across the water, barely vis-

Past twilight, Fakahatchee becomes another world, the stuff of dreams. I often drive Janes Scenic at night, high beams cleaving the ground fog, hoping to glimpse a panther. No way. Plenty of turtles and snakes, however. Even bobcats and otters, and a lumbering alligator, up on all fours like an antediluvian specter. I did find the link between reality and fantasy one February night—a pair of barred owls in a leafless cy-

A SENSE OF PLACE



erratic beams of light.

It's strange to think that such primal therapies exist so close to development. Janes Scenic Drive—the only road in the strand—ends in Golden Gate Estates South, one of Florida's most nefarious real estate scams, and the catalyst for many of the state's subsequent land acquisitions. In the 1960s a developer had a series of canals dug to lower the wa-

ter become a state forest run by the Division of Forestry.

Last January, I stopped at Big Cypress Bend, a one-way, 2,000-foot boardwalk through Fakahatchee's only stand of old-growth cypresses. Halfway along the walk, where the trees gain in stature, a bald eagle sat by its nest, silhouetted in tangerine twilight. A Florida strangler fig clutched the trunk of a cy-

hell. Out of the twilight, an answer.

The second owl, obviously the female, landed next to her mate and accepted his gift. The birds faced each other, inches apart, and sang a haunting duet. My head swelled with owl music. My skin puckered. A minute later, gift in tow, the female glided above the boardwalk to another cypress.

Fakahatchee Strand: the least visited state-owned land in Florida.

press; backlit by an electrical storm rolling west from Miami. They hooted in a blackness thick enough to carve. Each explosion of light momentarily revealed the owls and seared an after-image on my retinas, which lasted longer than the actual silhouette of the birds, as I stood, eyes wide and blinded by lightning. 🦉

CAMERON DAVIDSON FOR AUDUBON; MAP BY BETTY DUKE