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Desperately seeking Old Florida



**WELL HIDDEN BY URBAN SPRAWL,
PARADISE CAN STILL BE FOUND
IN THE SUNSHINE STATE**

Snowy egrets, hunted nearly to extinction a century ago, are safe at the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

BY SHARON BLOYD-PESHKIN

DRIVING SOUTHWEST FROM ORLANDO

to Naples you leave behind everything you think Florida is about — entertainment, shopping, retirement communities — and discover what you thought Florida was supposed to be about: oranges, cattle, swamps and dusty little towns. But just as you settle into the idea that Old Florida still exists, you reach the outskirts of Naples, where golf courses sprout like swamp grass. Construction crews are everywhere, widening the roads, building gated communities, erecting shopping malls. And you realize that if you want to find Old Florida here, it's going to take some effort.

The palm trees were still adorned with holiday lights when we arrived in Naples just after Christmas. We drove past the New Florida hotels and resorts and settled into a relic of the past, the Lemon Tree Inn, a single-story, pastel-yellow structure with a neatly manicured courtyard and a small heated pool. The route to the beach, just

a short walk away, was strewn with upscale shops, galleries and restaurants.

The next morning, we took off for Everglades City, formerly a company town run by Barron Gift Collier, the wealthy advertising man for whom the county is

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Dolphins that live in Naples Bay have adapted to human traffic. They love to play in the wake of powerboats. —ALEC BLOYD-PESHKIN/PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES

DAVE HOEKSTRA

DETOURS



Totally in tune

**Musician/politician
hits the right key
in Marathon**

KEY LARGO, Fla. — John Bartus looks out at the Gulf of Mexico and sees a world of tropical beauty. This must be just like when Mayor Richard M. Daley gazes at Grant Park and daydreams of tumbling tumbleweed.

Bartus is the former two-term mayor of Marathon (population 11,000) in the Florida Keys. He also is a popular singer-songwriter who just re-released his CD "Keys Disease." (Radio Active Productions, www.JohnBartus.com.) Bartus sings original songs about palm trees, a tribute to the Challenger and Columbia astronauts and an exotic dancer in Key West.

Daley always has professed to be a big country music fan. And for several consecutive years during Chicago's country music festival I tried to get a comment from Daley on his favorite country music. Anything. Even something about Alabama. I never got a response and finally gave up.

Living his mojo

Bartus puts his mojo where his mouth is.

He is a 45-year-old plain-speaking native of Fort Wayne, Ind. In 1984 Bartus was booked into the Compass Lounge at the Holiday Inn/Marathon Inn as part of a top-40 duo with a singer named Sallie Foster. He never left.

"There was no reason to leave," Bartus said during a February conversation down the road from Marathon at the Caribbean Club (mile marker 104, U.S. 1) in Key Largo. "At that time there were more places to play music for a living on a few square miles than anywhere else I have seen. Of course, that was the tail end of the cocaine cowboys and the smuggling. You could tell when somebody had a deal go down. They'd be in the bar that night buying everybody drinks. The \$100 bills would be like wallpaper."

The Keys are rich with subjects for songs and folks like Jimmy Buffett and Jerry Jeff Walker who took that to the bank. The title track of "Keys Disease" is an Allman Brothers-meets Tex-Mex workout about a guy who was a successful New England attorney. He gave it all up, moved his family to the Keys and has been bartending along U.S. 1 for 30 years.

Trying a new key

Bartus is working on new songs and they reflect new issues in the Keys.

Like Cuban exiles. "Drugs don't come through any more, but refugees get dropped off at shore," Bartus said. The Keys are ramping up for an exodus of Cubans who are expected after the death of Fidel Castro. Officials are looking at options such as closing down marinas and shutting airports. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has been conducting mock drills in preparation for any mass migration.

Bartus explained, "What we

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Alligators glide around in Trafford Lake, where Ski Olesky offers airboat rides for gator and other wildlife sightings. —ALEC BLOYD-PESHKIN/PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES

EVERGLADES

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Old Florida still shines despite urban sprawl

named. Collier helped complete the Tamiami Trail, a road linking Tampa to Miami, by dredging canals to divert water and fill the roadbed, facilitating the transition of a quiet fishing village into a boomtown. Today Everglades City is primarily supported by tourism and fishing — particularly for stone crabs — and though it appears to be a quiet and laid-back place, you'd be hard pressed to buy a small home for less than half a million dollars.

Wildlife haven

We met Capt. Charles Wright and naturalist Laura Lee French at the dock for a guided kayak eco-tour of the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, an off-coast expanse of red mangrove colonies that protect the mainland from ocean storms. Wright's Everglades Area Tours offers numerous ways to lose yourself in the Everglades without getting lost: guided tours by kayak, canoe, bike or foot; power boat and airplane tours; fishing and birding tours; and drop-off, pickup service for backcountry campers.

We motored down the Barron River and through some of the 10,000 islands. This is the only place in the world where alligators (which are freshwater reptiles) and crocodiles (saltwater denizens) meet. It's also home to a wide array of wading birds, including roseate spoonbills, egrets and great blue herons. After zipping through the islands and around barely submerged oyster bars, Wright threaded his way up a small waterway, dropped anchor and placed our kayaks in the water.

We paddled up through the mangrove canopy, an environment rich with marine and bird life. Wright left his job as an environmental engineer years ago to devote himself to helping visitors explore and appreciate the Everglades. His tours are hands-on

ecology lessons, complete with sunscreen and calluses. While we paddled, he and French pointed out birds, bugs and barnacles, helping us adjust our urban eyes to this unfamiliar environment.

It was easy to feel like we were a million miles away from civilization and its influences, but the impact of housing and agriculture is everywhere here. Plants and animals are affected by what washes down from Lake Okeechobee, from agricultural runoff to exotic plant species, as well as what doesn't: a consistent supply of fresh water. Water has been diverted in the interests of agriculture, roads, housing and golf courses. Already, more than half of the "river of grass" — the unique watershed that made the Everglades an ideal habitat for a host of plants and animals and sustained the Native Americans for more than 10,000 years — has been destroyed. "Paradise has a price," French told us. It was a simple statement that would haunt the rest of our time in southwest Florida.

The price mainly has been paid by wildlife and the indigenous people. Snowy egrets were nearly hunted to extinction to provide plumes for ladies' hats around the turn of the last century; cypress trees were logged to make pickle barrels and stadium seats in the 1920s and 1930s. The ongoing contamination and destruction of wildlife habitat has drastically reduced the populations of many species; 21 are either threatened or endangered. No more than 500 Miccosukee Indians remain in the area.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

But some people also have been paying the price of preservation. There have been some heroic and highly successful efforts to preserve local habitats and species before it's too late. In 1905, Guy Bradley, who was hired by the National Audubon Society to protect the egrets from illegal hunting, was murdered by poachers, but his death led to protection for egrets and other birds and eventually to the establishment of the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a must-see on the Old Florida itinerary.

The 13,000-acre sanctuary is home to the largest bald cypress forest in North America. Ed Carlson, executive director of the sanctuary, calls it "Muir Woods with alligators and wading birds,"



Capt. Charles Wright and naturalist Laura Lee French conduct guided kayak eco tours of Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

and with good reason: Cypress trees are relatives of the towering Redwoods and similarly in need of protection.

A 2¼-mile boardwalk wends through a small portion of the sanctuary, acquainting visitors with Old Florida's native flora and fauna. In low-lying areas, cypress knees jut up from the ground and the trees host a riot of bromeliads, resurrection ferns, mosses and lichen; in higher, drier areas, slash pines predominate. As you walk past the "lettuce lakes," egrets and ibises practically spill out of the trees; anhingas spread their inky black wings to dry between fishing expeditions. Soon the endangered wood storks will come to nest.

"This is natural Florida. This is what Florida looked like 5,000 years ago," says Susan Schumann-Skehan, who has volunteered here for 16 years.

There's another pocket of Old Florida in nearby Immokalee, where Ski Olesky offers "Airboats and Alligators" tours of Lake Trafford. Olesky is respected for running an ethical airboat business. Unlike some other operators who have been fined for feeding the gators to attract them, Olesky makes no promises about what you'll see on a tour. "If I catch one of my drivers feeding them-

harassing an alligator, they're gone," he says.

After we piled aboard the 10-person boat, our driver, Bubba, distributed hearing protectors. We were grateful for them as soon as he started the engine. We roared around the lake through areas too shallow for a kayak. Bubba called out the names of the birds that scattered before us: egrets, herons, greenbacks, moor-hens, anhingas, roseate spoonbills, ospreys, purple gallinules. Eventually we came upon some small gators sunning them-

IF YOU GO EVERGLADES, FLA.

Lemon Tree Inn: (239) 262-1414; www.lemon-treeinn.com

Everglades Area Tours: (239) 695-9107; www.evergladesareatours.com

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary: (239) 348-9151; www.corkscrew.audubon.org

Airboats & Alligators: (239) 657-2401; www.lake-trafford.com

Naples Water & Land Tours: (239) 793-7529; www.napleswatertours.com; www.naplessegway.com

Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention & Visitors Bureau: 800.688.3600; www.paradisecoast.com

Trafford for 30 years and has offered the airboat tours for the past 10. But despite the bustle of tourist and fishing traffic inside his small bait and tackle shop, the marina still feels like an outpost. "This is Old Florida," he says. "I don't want to modernize it."

Touring modern Florida

He may be able to protect his small corner of southwest Florida, but modernization is all around. Back in Naples, we went for a Segway tour of modern Florida with Rick Clouston, owner of Naples Water & Land Tours. After a brief lesson on how to ride a Segway, we glided past million-dollar homes and through beautiful public parks. Then Rick Traver took us out into Naples Bay, where three dolphins played in our wake, and down to Port Royal, where Naples meets the Gulf of Mexico. He pointed out a lot that sold for \$11 million, an estate with a 24-car garage, a mansion that sold for \$29 million, and another under construction for \$400 million.

It's no mystery why people want to build homes here. It is a little slice of paradise. But as the human population increases, it threatens to obliterate what's left of Old Florida. That's the price.

Fortunately, there are federal and state protected lands as well as private efforts to preserve what's natural and native to this area. Old Florida is still here, and it's worth the effort to visit it.

Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin is a Chicago-area freelance writer.

Birds and fauna abound near Trafford Lake, where visitors can still glimpse Old Florida.



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