

Biota of Florida

In March 2012 Dr. Pablo Delis, Dr. Larry Klotz and I journeyed to Florida over spring break with 12 students in the Biota of Florida class. We spent 10 days driving over 1200 miles throughout Florida, camping at six different campgrounds. We saw many different Florida ecosystems and left knowing more about Florida’s biota than most Floridians. This was my first time teaching the course, and really my first time botanizing in Florida, so luckily for all involved Dr. Klotz agreed to join us on the trip and impart his knowledge of the Florida flora. All 15 of us flew on a direct flight from Harrisburg to Orlando and arrived at our first campsite in Wekiwa Springs State park late in the evening. This was to be the norm for our trip, as we only set up our tents during the day once throughout the entire trip. Luckily, the students had practiced setting up the tents before we left so they could easily set them up in the dark and had it down to under 5 minutes by the end of the trip!



As we were greeted by the dawn chorus of birds on our first morning in Florida we all got out of our tents and were amazed at the sight—right across from our tents was an area that had recently been burned in a prescribed fire. It was a pretty amazing landscape to wake up to. Right away we spotted woodpeckers galore, including pileated, red-bellied, and red-headed woodpeckers, we learned our first plants of the trip, and the students found a gopher tortoise burrow with a gopher tortoise inside! This was all just steps from our tents and it was hard to tear the students away from the plants and animals they were finding to head to breakfast. We knew then that we had an amazing group of students and that this would be a great trip.

Our daily routine consisted of waking up, usually packing up camp, heading to Publix, the local supermarket chain for breakfast and lunch supplies, and then packing in the vans for our next destination. Publix often conveniently had comfortable plastic lawn chairs for sale outside of their stores which made for a good place to sit and enjoy our breakfasts. Down time was spent writing in journals all that we did and every plant and animal species we encountered in each habitat.



During the first few days of the trip we hit the water, snorkeling in Wekiwa Springs and Alexander Springs. The students caught an



amazing number of different turtle species snorkeling in Alexander Springs. I must admit, I was absolutely no help with the turtle catching. Good thing we had many quick swimmers with good eyes on the trip! We also headed to Blue Springs State Park where we saw about 35 manatees, bald eagles, longnose gars, anoles, and our first of many alligators. And of course, plants--it’s difficult to take two steps in Florida without encountering a new plant species. Everyone quickly filled up their journals with long lists of all the plant species we were seeing and descriptions to help keep them all straight. By the 4th day everyone pretty much had the plant species down...and of course that’s when we headed further south and hit an entirely new flora of mostly tropical species.



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Mid-way through our trip we visited Archbold Biological Station. When we first arrived Dr. Delis stopped a woman walking by to ask her some questions and she turned out to be an extremely friendly post-doctoral research who was studying the Florida Scrub Jay—one of the more charismatic fauna there at the station. Using the peanuts we had bought on our way there, she called them in for us so we were able to get a great view. After hiking through the unique Florida scrub habitat, we were surprised by a visit from Dr. Delis's former Shippensburg Master's student, Zach Forsburg, who was living there and studying the federally threatened Eastern Indigo Snake. We were in luck because he had a snake with him that he was about to release so we were able to see this special species and hear more about their biology and the work that Zach is doing with the Orianne society to better understand the habits of this rather elusive snake.



The next stop on our trip was Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a haven for wildlife and plants galore. Here we were able to get great views of wood storks in the ditches as we drove in. We spent much more time here than we had planned, but were treated to so many great sights. The boardwalk takes you through really striking



transitions between several distinct habitats from pine flatwoods to wet prairie to pond cypress forest and then to bald cypress forest. While there we befriended one of the volunteers who made sure we didn't miss the coiled water moccasin, banded water snake, and two barred owls that were hidden in the forest. He also took several of us off the beaten path to see a flowering cowhorn orchid, which is an epiphyte that was growing on the upper branches of a tall cypress. It was a pretty special sight. Some others in the group were treated to close-up views of a river otter. This was an amazing stop and we ended up eating our lunch around 5pm at the picnic tables outside of the sanctuary---slightly behind schedule but well worth it. Our next stop was our first swim in the ocean since arriving in Florida.

After heading further south along Florida's west coast we hit tropical hardwood forests and commenced learning a new flora. We canoed through mangrove forests, learned to distinguish red, white and black mangroves from one another, and were amused by the many mangrove crabs skittering about. We then headed south to our campground in Everglades National Park. We started our day in the Everglades by first stopping for breakfast at a great fruit market called 'Robert is Here.' This place was fabulous and most of us had tropical fruit milkshakes in a huge variety of flavors. What better breakfast could you ask for? After getting our tropical fruit fix and having our picture taken with Robert himself we headed back into the park where we spent one extremely full and wonderful day hiking six trails and seeing wide array of bird, plant, amphibian, and reptile species. Anhingas and Cormorants were everywhere, and here we also were able to compare tricolored, green, great blue, and little blue herons side-by-side. Driving along and missing our intended trail turned out to be one of our best mistakes as we turned around at a pond that was filled with wading birds. It was the pink roseate spoonbills that first caught our attention. However, after getting out and scanning the pond we also discovered Northern shovelers, moorhens, lesser yellowlegs, green winged teal, black-necked stilts and more! Finally, the many u-turns that were so characteristic of our trip paid off!



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We squeezed as much as we could into this one day in the Everglades, ending our day botanizing by flashlight through pine flatwoods. After finally bidding farewell to the Everglades we commenced our long drive to the Keys, finally setting up camp around midnight. That evening several in our group got their first glimpse of the diminutive endangered Key deer as they walked to the bathroom, which we found out were to be a regular sight in the evenings at our campground. These deer are a subspecies of the white-tailed deer and are only about waist high.



Our first hours of relaxation on the trip took place at Bahia Honda State Park on the afternoon of day seven of the trip. Of course, we could not spend very long without learning something new, so we did some snorkeling in a sea grass bed where we



learned a variety of algae and aquatic plant species as well as many sponges. Many in our group also mastered the art of the sunburn that day. Needless to say, we had to make a stop at the grocery store that evening to load up on aloe. Our next day in the keys we headed out on a boat to do some snorkeling on a coral reef. As soon as we jumped in we were met with a huge variety of marine species and this was truly a gem. Unfortunately, the

very choppy waves caused a few of us (myself included) to succumb to seasickness. We helped the rest of the group out by providing 'chum' to draw the fish in.



Our final day was spent botanizing and looking for lizards at Jonathan Dickinson State Park where Dr. Klotz and I fell far behind everyone else looking at many plant species not yet encountered on our trip. The rest of the group found numerous amphibians and reptiles including a scrub lizard. We spent our final hours in Florida swimming at a beach on Ft.

Lauderdale before heading back to the airport to return to life in Pennsylvania. We returned to Shippensburg tired, salty, slightly sunburnt, our heads filled with the names of a staggering number of new plant and animal species, and with a newfound appreciation and understanding of Florida ecology.



Dr. Heather Sahli