

Ocala National Forest - South Section Overview

Clearwater Lake to Farles Lake (19.9 miles with 1.0 mile out and back side trail to Alexander Springs and 0.7 miles side trail around Buck Lake)

Directions to Clearwater Lake Trailhead: The Clearwater Lake Trailhead is in the Clearwater Lake Recreation Area near the small town of Paisley, Florida. Enter the address: 24511 County Rd. 42, Paisley, Florida, into your GPS. It's 49 miles from Orlando, 115 miles from Tampa, 279 miles from Miami, 118 miles from Jacksonville, and 230 miles from Tallahassee. Overnight parking at the trailhead is allowed but it's unprotected so it might be better to leave your vehicle at the end of this section at Farles Lake and arrange a shuttle to the trailhead. Farles Lake is also unprotected but it's miles of dirt road away from the main highway so it's probably the better option.

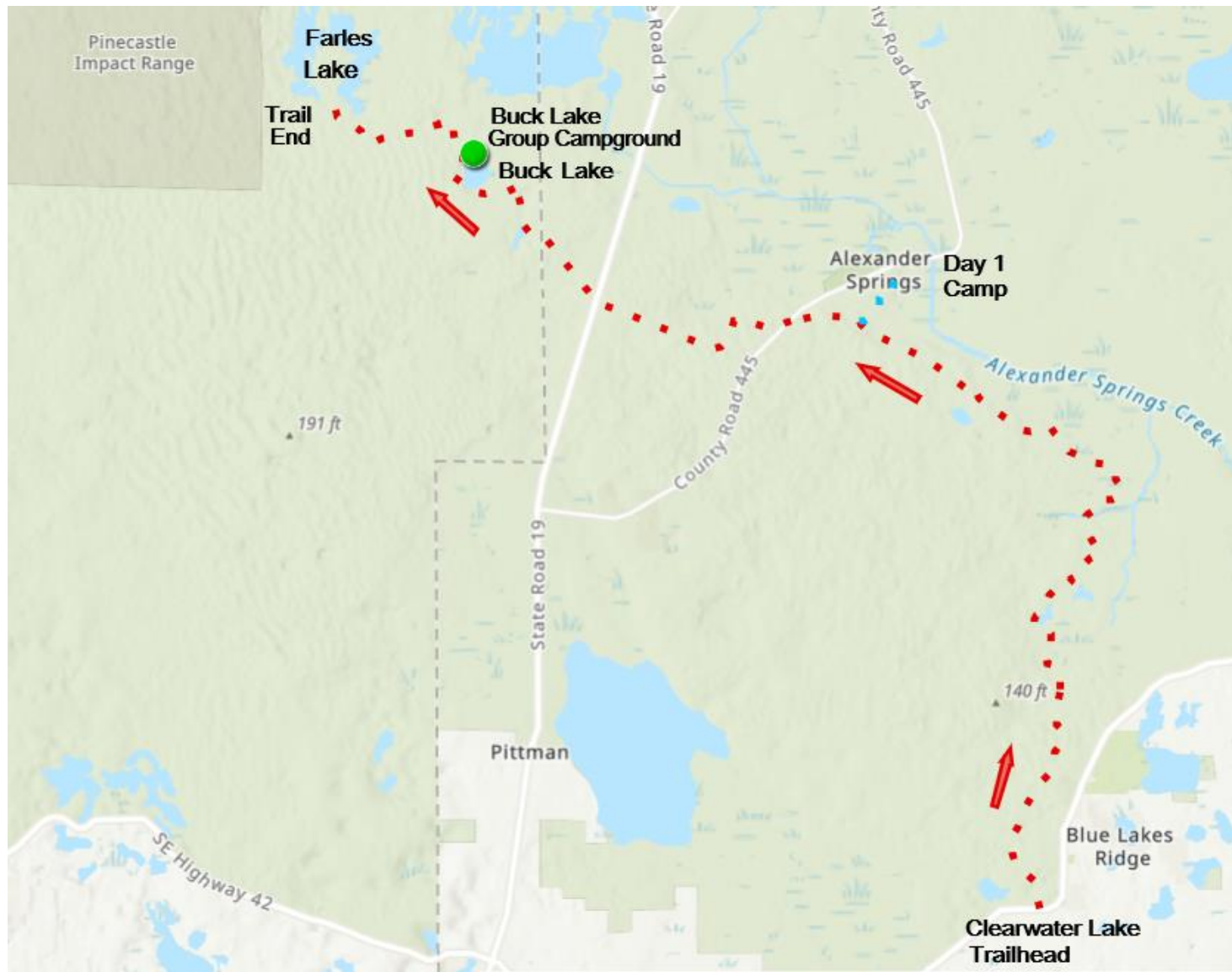
Directions to Trail End: From the Clearwater Lake Trailhead, take County Road 42 west several miles to State Road 19, then north and go several more miles to Forest Road 535. Head west on this dirt road to Farles Lake Parking Area where there is a picnic area on the lake, pit toilets, and a water pump.

This is the first of the three section hikes the WCBI has completed on the Florida Trail in the Ocala National Forest (ONF). This section is very interesting and scenic because it goes through many different types of terrain and depending on how you plan your trip, you can spend your first night wrapped in the luxury of the Alexander Springs campground. As we've said before, unless your bucket list includes experiencing heat stroke, we recommend doing this hike only from November to mid-March because a large portion of this section is open and exposed.

Potable water is available at the Clearwater Lake, Alexander Springs and Buck Lake campgrounds and at Farles Lake. Non-potable water that requires treatment is available from the abundant prairie ponds and occasional creeks, though you may want to bring something like Gatorade powder to mask the earthy taste.

The Alexander Springs Recreation Area is a top-notch destination with a great campground with hot showers, a small store for drinks and snacks, and the wonderful spring for swimming. The campground is extremely popular so if you intend to camp there during your hike, book your reservations at least 2 months in advance. They do hold back a few campsites for people that show up without reservations but these are first come first serve so you have to get lucky to get one. You could also camp somewhere on the 0.5-mile side trail that leads from the Florida Trail to the recreation area and still take advantage of the facilities. The spring itself consists of multiple spring vents under a limestone ledge that discharge clear and nearly constant 72°F water, forming a large spring pool. The bottom of the pool is a combination of sand and aquatic plants. One portion of the shoreline has a sand beach and stairs leading to the gently sloping spring pool; the remainder of the shoreline is the native floodplain forest of maples, sweetgum, and cabbage palms. The one-mile Timucuan Trail goes through the floodplain, sometimes on boardwalks, with two overlooks along the spring run.

Other interesting features of this section include a number of extensive board walks across the Glenn Branch wetlands, the 7,941 acre Alexander Springs Wilderness, Dora's Pond, Buck Lake, and Farles Lake.



South Section Trail Map. Clearwater Lake Trailhead to Farles Lake

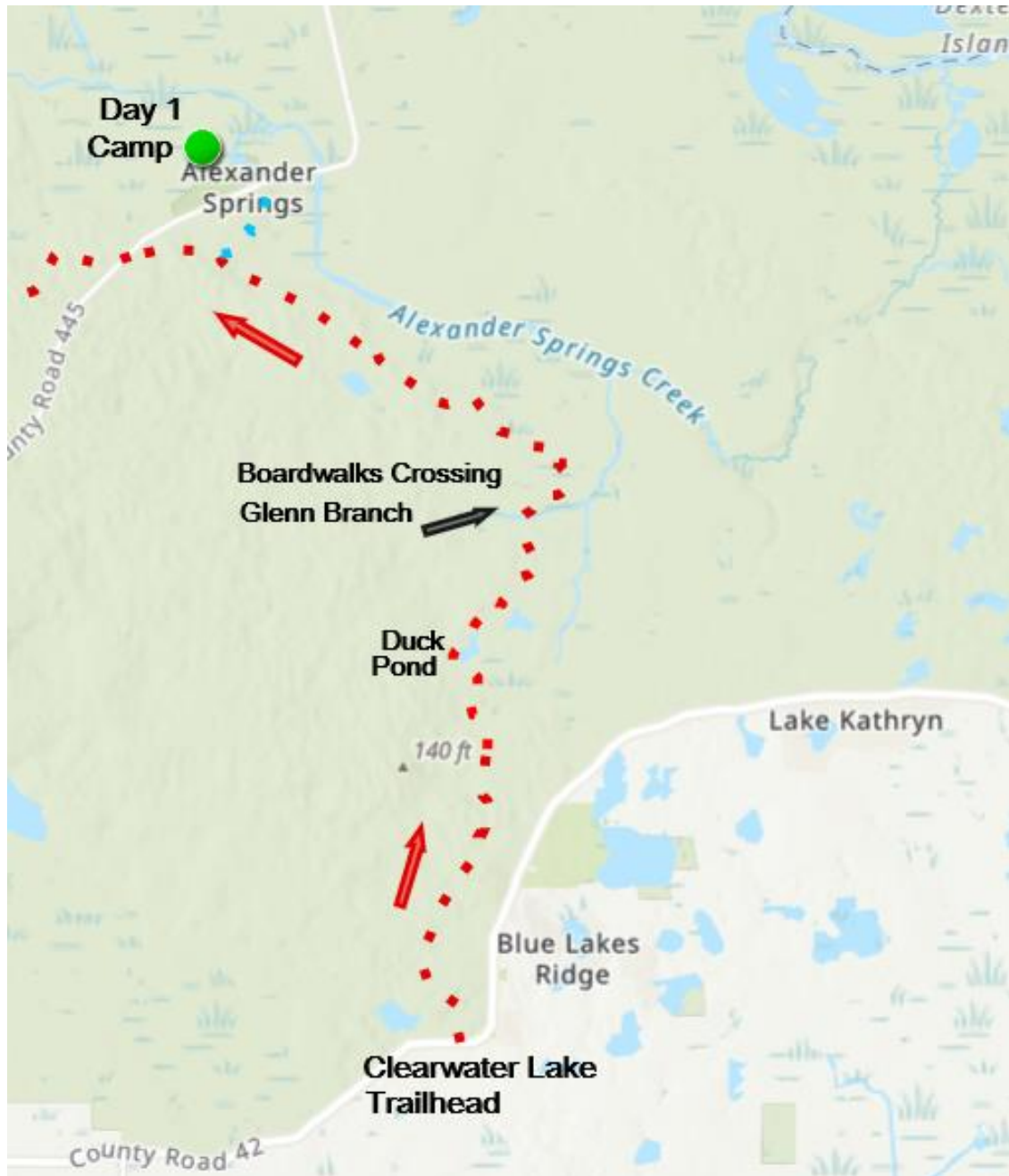
Ocala National Forest Southern Section – Trip Log

Day 1 – Friday, October 11, 2018

Clearwater Lake Trailhead to Alexander Springs Recreation Area

10.5 miles

Day 1 Trail Map



This expedition was to be different than most WCBI journeys because Doc had experienced a total replacement of his right hip four and a half months earlier and this led him to decide he wasn't quite ready to carry a 25-pound backpack. To accommodate Doc, they brought two vehicles which allowed them to stage one at Alexander Springs Campground so they could drive to the Trailhead to start the hike on the first day and stage a vehicle on the second day at trails end where they would complete the hike. Though this may sound confusing, the beauty of the plan was that they would spend both nights at the Alexander Springs campground.



Posing at the Trailhead "Birth of the Florida Trail Sign."



The Trail in an Open Long-Leaf Pine Forest on Rolling Sand Hills

After completing the shuttle, the WCBI contingent of Doc Livingston, Madhatter, the Hatter's son Coy, and the Navigator posed for pictures in front of the "Birth of the Florida Trail" sign at the Clearwater Lake Trailhead. The sign explained that the first 26-mile section of the Florida Trail was started at this location on October 29, 1966.

They began walking north over low rolling hills through an open Long-Leaf Pine forest. Much of the trail in the ONF passes through similar terrain and the many

species of interesting plants and wildflowers, long views across the pine-covered hills, and numerous prairie ponds, provide the hiker with a very enjoyable experience. The downside of this type of terrain is its openness, which can make for a very hot day when temperatures are high. As the morning turned to afternoon, the temperature reached 90 degrees and they all began to think that mid-October was too early to be backpacking in this part of Florida.

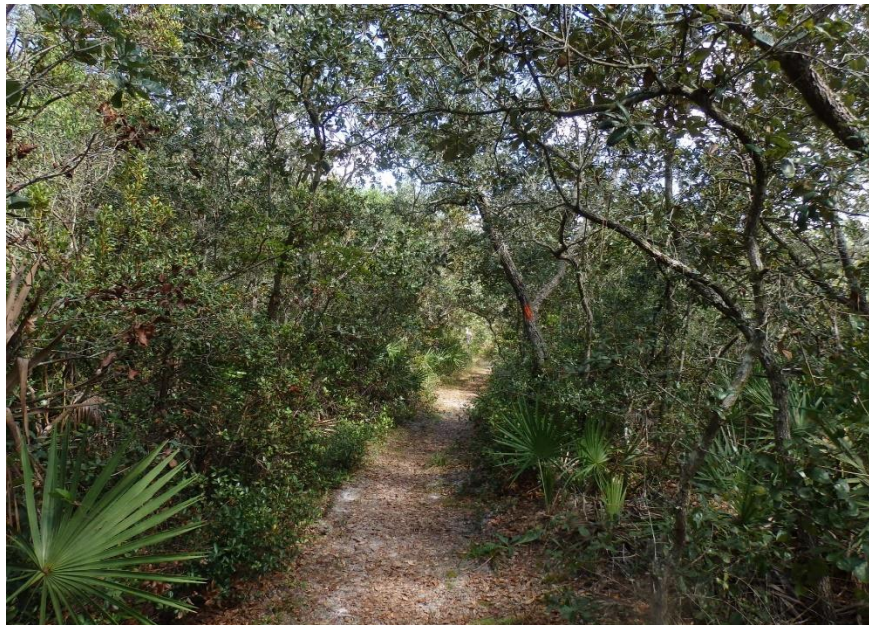
At about mile 2.0 they crossed Forest Road 69, a dirt road that was surprisingly well traveled considering the remoteness of their location. At about mile 4.0 they began weaving around the first of the many prairie ponds they would encounter. This one, known as Duck Pond, was very scenic and there were many pleasant views across the shallow water. They soon passed another much smaller pond, then at mile 4.9 crossed under a power line.



Duck Pond, the First of Many Shallow Prairie Ponds

For about a mile beyond the powerline the terrain alternated between pine flatwoods and sandhills covered with low growing oak scrub. The interlocking branches of the scrub oak created a nice canopy that helped block the sun.

At about mile 6.2, they entered a wetter area that was associated with Glenn Branch, a tributary of Alexander Spring Run. There were four crossings of small creeks associated with the branch



Passing through a Scrub Oak Forest

and at each one they traversed a dense hardwood swamp forest on long boardwalks. They took their time with these crossings because the dense canopy offered a welcome respite from the oppressive heat.

Beyond the creeks they rested in the shade of a large scrub oak. Laying on their backs under the branches, and staring up at the sky, they speculated that other than the Everglades and the western panhandle, they

Boardwalks through Glenn Branch Floodplain Hardwood Forest

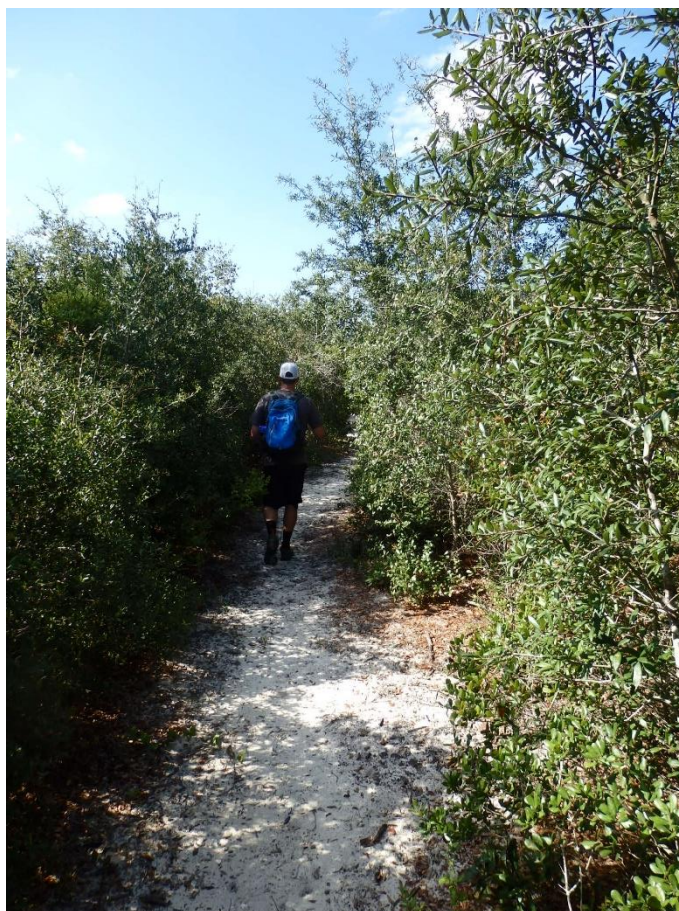


were probably about as isolated as one could get in Florida.

They crossed Forest Road 06 at mile 6.8 and turned northwest as the trail took them through a very open area of low growing scrub and small Sand Pines. This area had either been logged or burned and was just beginning to grow back. After a couple miles of this very open terrain with the sun oppressively beating down on them, they transitioned back into pine flatwoods.



Logged or Burned-Over Area Aspiring to be a Forest Again



Hiking through the "Hedges" of Recovering Forest

Since it was becoming late afternoon, the trees blocked the sun and temperatures began to drop slowly, giving them a well-deserved break from the heat for the last couple miles of their day. As they approached Alexander Springs they again hiked into open country and crossed a wet area on a long board walk at mile 9.7.

At mile 10.0 they reached the blue-blazed side trail to Alexander Springs and followed it for a half mile and at about 5:00 pm, they left the forest, crossed County Road 445, and walked into Alexander Springs Recreation Area where their truck was parked at a campsite.

A huge benefit of staying at the campground was the great pleasure of swimming at the amazing Alexander Spring. After dropping their packs at their campsite, they walked to the spring, bought cold drinks at a vending machine and plunged in. After the long sweaty day in the blazing Florida sun, submerging

themselves in the spring with its crystal clear 72-degree water was like being born again. They lounged in the cool water, rehydrating and recovering from the rigors of the day.

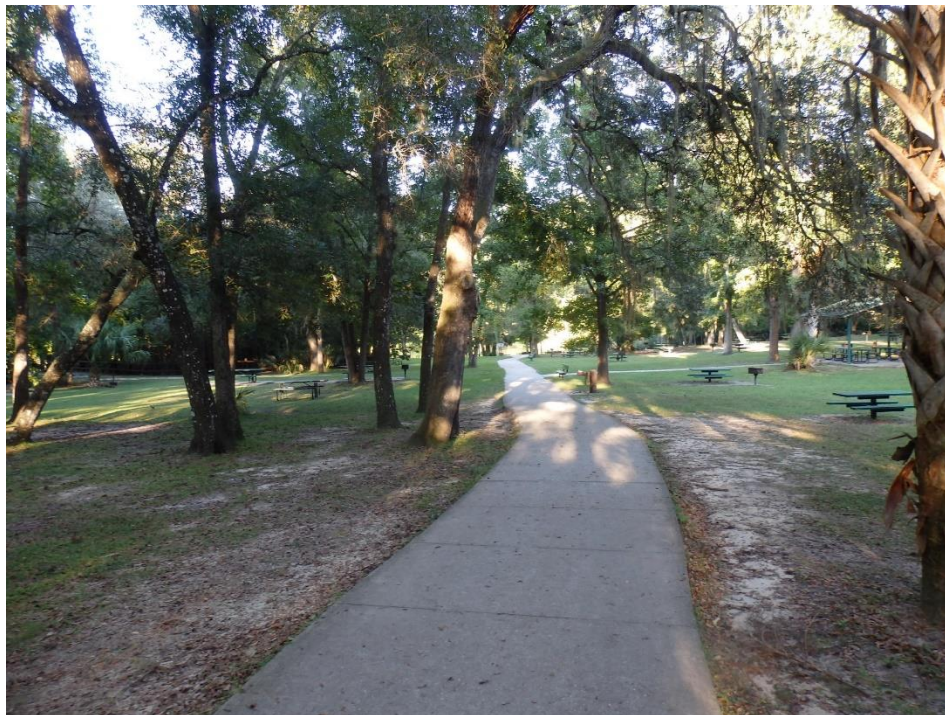
They reluctantly left the spring after about an hour and returned to the campsite, set up their tents, and took hot showers in the well-maintained bath house. Doc and the Navigator then drove back to their starting point at Clearwater



Coy Checks Out an Interpretive Sign in Front of the Alexander Springs Store and Bath House.

Lake to retrieve the Navigator's car to bring it back to the campground. Soon after, they were lounging in camp chairs, drinking beer and talking about the day. A fire was started as Doc prepared a dinner of hamburgers on the grill and they ate by lantern light at the picnic table. Sitting around the fire, they talked about all the benefits afforded by this type of hike/camping. While it made for a nice change, they all agreed that they looked forward to returning to their

traditional style of self-sufficient backpacking because it was more challenging, gave them more of a feeling of being away from it all, and provided more of a sense of accomplishment.



Walkway through the Picnic Area to the Spring

Late Afternoon at Alexander Springs

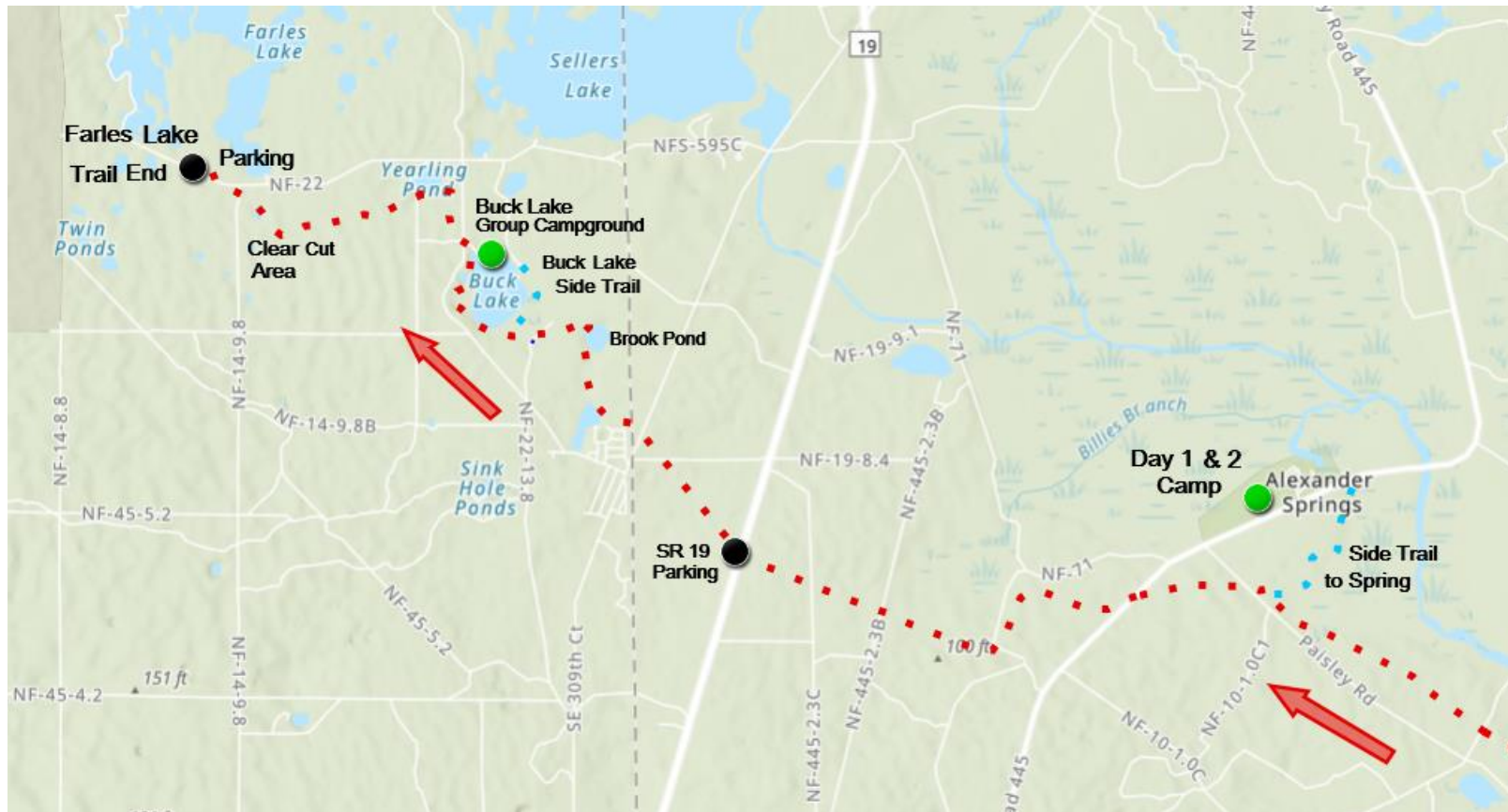


Ocala National Forest Southern Section – Trip Log

Day 2 – Saturday, October 11, 2018

Alexander Springs Recreation Area to Farles Lake
9.4 miles

Day 2 Trail Map



They slept in Saturday morning, rolling out of their tents about 8:30 am. After preparing a simple breakfast, Doc and the Navigator left to drop Doc's truck off at Farles Lake, their end point for the day. When they returned to the campsite, they packed up, headed out to the side trail, then made their way back to the Florida Trail. They hiked through a dense oak and pine forest, crossed Forest Road 69 at mile 10.3, then broke out into an open Long Leaf Pine forest. As they



Abrupt Transition from the Dense Oak/Pine Forest to the Open Longleaf Pine Forest

hiked through this terrain, Doc dropped further and further behind, photographing the amazing profusion of wildflowers of all different colors and varieties. In some places they were so abundant that they imparted a yellow hue to their views across the sand hills. At mile 11.0 they crossed paved County Road 445 and continued walking through the open sand hills before reaching a large area that appeared to have been recently clear cut. The trail hugged the boundary between the forest and the clear cut for about a half mile before the trail entered a dense scrub oak forest. The scrub oak forest provided welcome relief for the sun for about a mile but soon Doc started to notice they were hiking in a very narrow forested corridor about 40



Back in the Open

feet wide with clear cuts on either side. Doc thought it was rather sneaky of the Forest Service to do this but he had to admit he was grateful they hadn't been forced to hike completely exposed to the sun through a logged wasteland. At mile 13.5 they crossed State Road 19 where there was a designated parking area for Florida Trail hikers. Beyond State Road 19 they entered a dense oak and pine forest where they were pleasantly shielded

Profusion of Wildflowers in the Pine Forest





A Large Patch of Fruiting Lichen with a Hat for Scale

from the sun. They rested at a spot where the ground was covered by clumps of something called Fruiting Lichen. At mile 14.7 they passed Summit Pond and a very nice campsite that was very close to it. At mile 15.2 the trail circled around the southern rim of very scenic Brook Pond (aka Dora Pond). Although the map indicated a designated campsite at the pond, they found no trace of it.

At mile 15.8 they reached the blue-blazed side trail that makes a complete circle around Buck Lake. They took the side trail and



Buck Lake from the Campground

Chiggers!

Chiggers are the Larval stage of a type of mite. In a state known for its infestations of despicable native and invasive creepy crawlies, like pythons, fire ants, and love bugs, to name just a few, chiggers are near the top of the list of critters that will make you wish you'd never left home. Only the larval stage bites and while they're all but too small to be seen, their effect on you is amazingly out-of-proportion to their diminutive size. Contrary to popular belief, they don't burrow into your skin, they just inject digestive juices into it and suck out the decomposed tissues - sort of like tiny vampires only garlic won't keep them away and they mostly bite your legs rather than your neck. They lurk in dry pine needles, which are pretty much everywhere in the ONF, and when you sit down, your exposed legs are a tantalizing buffet they will gratefully flock to. Red bumps will appear on your skin in a day or two and you will be inexorably compelled to scratch them until they bleed! To avoid these nasty little buggars, never sit on the bare ground, wear long pants, and spray your legs with repellent. Happy hiking!



Hand Pump for Drinking Water at Buck Lake Campground

began walking around the eastern shore, although the lake wasn't visible due to a very dense screen of trees. They broke out of the trees when they reached the north shore about three tenths of a mile from the Florida Trail and got their first views of the lake. This was also the entrance to the Buck Lake group campground, which has drinking water obtained through a hand pump, pit toilets, and campsites that are available through reservations. However, even if the campground

was full, there's enough open area around it that no one would hassle weary but reservation-less backpackers looking for a place to spend the night. They found an open picnic table that overlooked the lake, had lunch, tossed a frisbee, and napped in the shade.

After about 45 minutes they walked along the lakeshore through the campground, filled their water bottles at the hand pump, and found the side trail as it continued back to the Florida Trail. The trail headed up a sandhill and gained some elevation so that the lake appeared to be well below them. They reached the Florida Trail and after another three quarters of a mile, broke out into an open expanse of a large clear cut. The trail followed the boundary between the forest and clear cut for another half mile before heading back into a dense forest. At about mile 18.0 the trail circled the eastern side of an unnamed pond and at mile 18.3, they reached Farles Lake, the end of their journey. At the lake there were picnic tables and pit toilets and



The Florida Trail at the Margin of the Forest and a Large Clear Cut

although the guidebook and map indicated the presence of a campground, they couldn't find it. They retrieved beers from the cooler in the truck and rested on a picnic table enjoying the view of the lake. Then it was time to pack their gear into the truck and drive back to their campsite at Alexander Springs for another evening of swimming at the spring and enjoying the superb campground.



Contemplating Farles Lake at the End of the Hike

As they drove back to Tampa the next morning,

Doc reflected on his replaced hip and how pleased he was with the way it had performed. He had felt no pain, even after completing two 10-mile-hikes in two days. He marveled on how miraculous it was that his old worn-out body parts could be replaced with new ones that would allow him to continue backpacking. Time to go to the next level with a backpacking trip in the mountains!



Large Banana Spider "Hanging Out" Over the Florida Trail