

Trip Log

Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area Loop

Distance: 15.3 miles (approximately)

Directions to Trail Head: From the City of St. Cloud, drive 25 miles south on Canoe Creek Road to the Prairie Lakes/Lake Jackson entrance sign on the right (west) side of the road.

Day 1 February 26, 2016.

Parking Area to Parker Hammock Campsite

3.2 miles.

Day 1 Trail Map



Madhatter, Doc Livingston, and the Navigator, started hiking from the parking area about 3:00 pm on the side trail portion of the loop trail. It was a glorious Florida spring day with temperatures in the mid 60's. They initially hiked through open pine flatwoods and dry prairie thick with low-growing Palmettos with views of a large Cypress dome in the distance. Cypress Domes are round clusters of Cypress Trees growing in shallow water. Larger, older trees grow in the center, which creates the dome effect.



The Florida Prairie - Pine Flatwoods with a Cypress Dome in the Distance



Small Creek through an Oak Hammock
passed back and forth between the scrub oak forest and the open prairie, spooking four deer that quickly bounded away into the trees.

They passed through an area that looked as if it had been roto-tilled by heavy machinery. The damage had actually been caused by the rooting of feral hogs and was the first of many such areas they would encounter over the next couple of days. Feral hogs are a destructive nuisance in many parts of Florida and even though they're highly sought after by hunters and trapped by land managers, their prolific birth rate keeps them common in many areas.

They soon entered an open oak hammock as the trail paralleled a small flowing stream. Many of the oaks along the trail were covered with a profusion of Epiphytes such as bromeliads and orchids. They crossed a small creek on a bridge then



Red Lichen on an Oak Tree



Live Oak Tree Festooned with Bromeliads

only be choked down if heavily disguised with gatorade powder.

For some reason, the campsite was situated in a wet area that had been heavily rooted by wild hogs. To remedy this, they carried one of the picnic tables about 50 feet into a much

They passed into a wetter Oak Hammock with groves of Sabal Palms (Florida's state tree). A side trail led off to the north a half mile to a group campground. Soon after, they reached the Parker Hammocks campsite, their destination for the evening. The campsite consisted of 2 picnic tables and an old hand pump that was probably a relic of the former cattle ranch. The water from the well was clear and had an iron taste but was infinitely preferable to water in the local creeks that could



Evidence of Feral Hogs was Everywhere

drier oak hammock and set their tents up around it.

The Hatter has never been one to worry about carrying weighty luxuries on backpacking trips, while Doc with his surgery scarred knees, will routinely saw tooth brush handles off to save a tenth of an ounce. One of Doc's greatest pleasures in the evenings is watching the Hatter pull all manner of unnecessary gewgaws out of his pack. The Hatter had been especially creative for this trip, first producing a pair of miniature speakers for his cell phone



Wild Orchid Browning between Bromeliads

that would allow him to broadcast music. Although Doc's a firm believer in leaving media technology back in civilization where it belongs, he didn't complain because the Hatter did a respectable job of selecting music that blended well with the experience. Next he



Waiting for Doc to Catch Up

An argument ensued as to how one gets a trail name, with the Hatter maintaining that one cannot pick their own trail name but must have it assigned by another, while Doc was certain that picking one's own trail name was acceptable. The actual rule, according to the internet, is that individuals can pick names for themselves. However, for those that do not have trail names, their companions can pick one for them, and if they respond to it, they are stuck with it in perpetuity. When Doc pointed this out

brought out a large Frisbee about the size of a garbage can lid that was complete with a battery powered light, presumably for those who can't bear to limit their Frisbee tossing to only the daylight hours.

The temperature began to drop rapidly as the sun set so Doc started working on a fire. Because Doc is highly skilled at rapidly conjuring up a blaze no matter what the conditions, the Hatter decided that his trail name should be Fireman.



Crossing the Prairie



Happy Hour Around the Campfire

to the Hatter, his response was "Ok, whatever you say Fireman".

About a quarter mile from the campsite was a large cleared area where a water control structure had been built across a creek to regulate movement of water between Lakes Jackson and Marian. It was an ideal location for star gazing so after dinner they started on the short hike. On the way, three pairs of eyes briefly shone in their lights before they disappeared into the forest. Doc

speculated it was a mother raccoon and her two kits.

The star gazing was something of a disappointment because the lights from the Orlando area 70 miles to the north, washed out the sky to some degree. “It’s only a five sky tonight” Doc stated with a note of disappointment in his voice. Doc’s personal star-gazing scale ranged from zero to ten, with ten being the sky he’d experienced while on a kayaking trip in the Grand Canyon, where the milky way blazed across the heavens like a roman candle and satellites were constantly visible moving rapidly between the canyon rims, while zero was the sky in an urban area where even the brightest stars and planets were barely visible.

After about an hour, they walked back to camp and warmed up around the fire, talking and listening to DJ Hatter’s music. They finally made for their tents when the fire burned down and no longer kept the cold at bay.



Parker Hammocks Campsite

Day 2 February 27, 2016.

Parker Hammocks Campsite to Lake Jackson Observation Tower to Dry Pond Campsite

7.7 Miles

Day 2 Trail Map



The temperature when they awoke was about 45 degrees, which is pretty much the dead of winter for most dyed-in-the-wool south Floridians. Doc soon had a fire going while the Hatter boiled water. They sat in silence, warmed by the fire and their coffee, watching the forest awaken as the sun rose enough to shine through the oaks. They discussed the events of the night before because the Hatter and Navigator said they heard the grunting and snorting of feral hogs around their tents. Doc hadn't heard any



A "Cold" Florida Morning



Crossing the Bridge to the Water Control Structure

northwest end of Lake Marian. The lake covers 5,739 acres, is relatively shallow and is well known for its Speckled Perch fishing. Most of the southern side of the lake is part of a working cattle ranch while the northwestern side is part of the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area. After leaving the platform, they hiked through an oak hammock, paralleling the western shore of the lake for about a half mile and passing many circular

grunting and snorting and decided it was more likely human snoring than hog grunting. Once the temperature reached a respectable level and breakfast was finished, they began to break camp and were soon packed up and on the trail. They retraced the route of their hike the previous night, which included crossing a bridge over the creek between the lakes and passing the water control structure before re-entering the woods. After about a half mile they took a side trail for 0.2 miles along an earthen causeway that led to an observation platform on the



Water Control Structure

grassy wetlands. Most of these had small ditches leading out of them that were dug by the ranchers to drain them toward Lake Marian. They turned west and began paralleling another creek that connected Lake Marian and Lake Jackson. After about a half mile they reached the Florida Trail, which they would be on for most of the remainder of the hike. Doc somehow got confused at this intersection and led them about a quarter mile north on the trail rather than turning south toward the tower on



On the Way to Lake Marian



View of Lake Marian from the Observation Platform

They retraced their steps and headed south on the Florida Trail for about a mile before encountering a side trail that led 0.6 miles to the Lake Jackson observation tower. The tower is an impressive wooden structure about 50 feet high with three levels. From the top level, nearly all of Lake Jackson is visible. The Lake is shallow and covered by emergent aquatic vegetation, which makes it look more like a very large wetland than a lake. They climbed to the top level and opened their packs to

Lake Jackson. After realizing his mistake and announcing it to the group, he endured a minute of good-natured ribbing, which is the standard and expected punishment in the WCBI anytime there's an error in trail navigation. They took a short break and were soon joined by a hunter who was just finishing his morning hog stalking. He talked about a friend of his who, in another part of the state, had watched a panther jump three times out of the undergrowth into a herd of hogs, each time taking a piglet.



Hanging Out at Lake Marian



The Impressive Lake Jackson Observation Tower
Gatorade powder couldn't make it drinkable. They followed and crossed the creek and shortly after turning north and paralleling the shore of Lake Jackson, they reached Dry Pond Campsite. This campsite had a lot of positives including a great view looking out across the wide open prairie, sheltering oaks, and abundant firewood. It also had a hand pump but they were disappointed to find that it didn't work. "Putrid swamp water tonight" Doc announced regretfully. They spent another pleasant evening listening

make lunch but a cold wind soon drove them to the ground where they spent an hour lounging in the sun. After packing up they retraced their steps up the side trail where they picked up the Florida Trail and hiked north back the way they had come. Upon reaching the creek that connected the lakes, they filled their water bottles and disinfected them with their UV Steri Pens. Unfortunately, the taste was somewhere between mud and decaying vegetation and even the addition of



View of Lake Jackson from the Tower



Hanging Out at the Lake Jackson Tower

to music through the Hatter's sound system, tossing the Frisbee, preparing the evening meal, and sitting around the fire swapping tales. It turned out that Navigator was an accomplished backpacker having hiked a portion of the Appalachian Trail in the Great Smokies in the winter and summiting 19,340 foot Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. Doc related his adventures on Mt. Rainier in Washington, and the Hatter talked about his hikes on the Appalachian Trail in Georgia with his father and brother. Doc always looked

forward to the Hatter's family backpacking stories because they were quite funny and sounded more like episodes of Family Feud than backpacking adventures. After the Hatter and Navigator turned in, Doc stayed up and fed the fire till late in the night, stargazing and staring out over the wide-open prairie.



View of the Prairie from Dry Pond Campsite



Walking on an Old Levee near Lake Jackson

Day 3, February 28, 2016

Dry Pond Campsite to Parking Area

4.4 Miles

Day 3 Trail Map



There is magic in a cold Florida morning in the woods that most people never get to experience and as Doc rose just as dawn was breaking, he wrapped himself in the wonder of it. He revived the fire and made coffee to warm up then watched a spectacular sunrise through the mist that sheathed the prairie. A pair of majestic Sandhill Cranes flew past, trumpeting to each other and breaking the stillness of the dawn. Doc often wondered why they trumpeted so. Was it as simple as each letting the other know their location, or



Sunrise from the Dry Pond Campsite



More Sunrise

something deeper? Were they complex enough to express joy at the exhilaration of flying through this rich tapestry of cold mist and sunrise, lakes and prairie? Doc preferred to think so.

His companions soon rolled out of their tents and gratefully seated themselves by Doc's fire. They watched as the sun rose and talked quietly about the journey so far and what was in store for the day ahead. Once breakfast was finished they started

packing up and were soon ready to go. The first stop after only a half mile was the boat ramp on Lake Jackson. Here there were a few campsites consisting of picnic tables and grills, a restroom, and the boat ramp itself. They searched for fresh water and were disappointed when they found none. Continuing on, they walked through a mosaic of habitats ranging from oak hammocks, to wetlands, to dry prairies. They emerged from the forest out into the open of a large dry prairie. In the distance they



Doc Breaking Camp



One of the Many Wetlands Near the Trail

getting spongy, they were delighted to see a boardwalk that extended a hundred yards through the slough with a viewing area in the middle. This was one of the things Doc liked most about the Florida Trail. So much standing water everywhere and in most instances, it was conveniently crossed on bridges of all shapes and sizes. Once they crossed the slough, they could see the truck in the distance, which meant the trip was nearly over. For the last half mile, Doc

saw a fire tower that was located at a maintenance yard for the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area. They crossed an oak Hammock and came out into a prairie that extended far into the distance. The trail headed straight towards a Cypress slough (pronounced "slew" - a shallow stream filled with cypress trees). Doc thought this might be a problem because it had been a wet spring and they might have a long stretch of bare footin' it. Just as the ground was



Fire Tower at the Maintenance Yard



Boardwalk through the Cypress Swamp

and the Hatter discussed how well the trip had gone – perfect weather, having the entire area almost entirely to themselves, great scenery, and the added bonus of having Navigator along. He had demonstrated all the prerequisites for a great backpacking companion; no whining, quick set up and break down of camp; volunteered for camp chores without being asked; and had an ample supply of good adventure stories to tell and the ability to shamelessly embellish them. They

both agreed that having some new blood in the WCBI was good thing, if for no other reason than to keep the original two members from getting bored with each other. So Navigator would be invited on future expeditions. With that out of the way, they loaded their gear into the truck and started the 2 hour drive home.



Doc and the Hatter Pose at Trail's End



