

Eelgrass Roots

Read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life...

Walt Whitman: Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855)



The Wild Part of the Little Wekiva River: Clean as Can Be

3/26/05

A handful of people are standing around a large commercial parking lot just below SR 434 for our annual Little Wekiva River Cleanup. Deborah Shelley of the Aquatic Preserve is leading the loading of canoes down a steep bank of sand, fifteen feet below, into the narrow channel. When my turn comes, Deborah tells me I am the last person who is actually taking a canoe. The others who have been helping with registration or driving the vans have other plans or tasks.

So, after waiting for someone else to arrive late, I set off down stream, alone with my long-handled net and a paddle. Navigation without a partner in the bow will be a small challenge when things get thick or swift. Twenty canoes preceding mine have already gobbled up the trash like the cake at a five-year-old's birthday party. That's what we came for. Veterans among us have a certain pride in these cleanups to somehow manage the biggest or most remarkable piece of junk.

As I am catching up to the last launchers, going under the 434 bridge and past The Springs

development, my hunger for trash begins to focus on collecting as many tennis balls as I can. That seems just about the only item my colleagues are overlooking. Some balls sit submerged on the bottom and others are sucked up under the mats of aquatic plants along the side. With only the rubber core left, they are smooth and slippery, as though long ago fish or snails lunched on their lemon-fuzz. Strangely they look quite organic and bulbous, except for the fact that they retain their spherical shape and tell-tale size.

The weather woman predicted rain today, but it turns out to be a perfect Saturday morning for reading the water's leaves in the clear, sunny outflows from Sanlando Springs. In the middle of the channel you can see the sandy bottom, often with patches of chocolate icing from the decomposing forest gathered up toward the banks. The freshwater beach below can be smooth or lumpy, but out of such lumps often a cluster of long dark-green and algae-coated leaves, needles an inch wide and many feet long, flow downstream. They remind me of the dry blond leaves we used to wave on Palm Sunday.

This green stuff is eelgrass (*valisneria americana*), also called tape grass, that spreads out with runners along the bottom from clump to clump. It constitutes the best evidence of a healthy aquatic habitat. The state of Florida's Aquatic Preserve Act of 1975 included this portion of Wekiva and has been taking the measure of Florida's *vallisneria* ever since. Ducks of many species are pleased to have their tables set with such delicious vegetables and many other critters attach their hopes for the next generation to the twirling leaves.

In the spring pool to the east, without the bowing down and arcing force of the current, eelgrass stands upright with fuzzy leaves that point to the surface and at the top bend, only slightly, toward the weir. When you swim with the fish at the sandy bottom, you can more easily notice the long stems with single white flowers, no bigger than a baby's breath. If you pick up the runners that spread the plant across the entire pool, you can see the nodes of each new plant with its cylindrical fruit sticking up like a thin, half-smoked cigar.

With my long net, I fish a tennis ball out of the eelgrass. It is heavy with water that spurts out of two tiny holes as I squeeze. The surface is mottled with brown and grey patches, adaptations to its new underwater life. This instar itself may have aesthetic value of its own, but it will go to the dump anyway, so that the Little Wekiva will be looking just a bit better. But if I can find some abandoned fishing hooks, lines, or bobbers, then a real gain is made, admittedly small. You can make it much bigger, though, by imagining all the other small steps for earthkind taking place in our community every week: canvassing your neighbors for the cancer fund, your PTA activities, your church's day to visit the elderly, support for local art shows, and your rescue mission work. Every litter bit counts, as they say.

Eelgrass is one of a host of submerged plants that grace Wekiva's bottom, but the other two major aquatic habitats of Wekiva are the dollarweed colonies and the communities of spatterdock. These plants float along the surface edges where the shoreline catches them into broad patches, ideal for the concealment of hundreds of species of wee fish and other wildlife.

The concentration of food web activities in here is amazing, the complete department store of aquatic biology, buyers and sellers of every shape and stripe.

Any tennis ball in here has to be a fairly recent deposit since it hasn't yet given up its sac of stale air and sunk to the bottom. With my paddle I comb the beautiful uncut blades of spatterdock to find the errant overhead smash. Florida has several species of *nuphar*, sometimes called a cow-lily because of the golden yellow flower that sticks up prominently on a thick stalk between the heart-shaped leaves. Some leaves open out like little green tables in the air; others settle down on the surface to make a pad with wavy margins, about the size of a bear's foot, some larger. The flower is a sphere, slightly smaller than a handball, that when it opens with a shallow little cup at the top, reveals a green daisy wheel inside.

The roots of *nuphar* are extensive and as thick as my forearm. They remind me of palmetto roots and stumps. Sometimes they float to the top, helping to form large mats. In a kayak of course, when a river pathway seems clogged, you can easily slip through much of the biomass of spatterdock, not like the blockages created by the non-native hyacinths that can grab your river car by the gunnels, it seems, and stop both forward and backward progress.

Florida's other great aquatic habitat is made of dollarweeds, seven different species of hydrocotyle, called generally water pennywort. The leaves are very shiny and leathery, the size and shape of the old half-dollar, except the margins are bound in a series of small arcs connected at their bases to the light yellow veins. Often they lie down on the surface and take turns turning yellow, like the late fall hickory leaves. Their flowers occur in a ball with spikes, like the dandelion, only larger.

Sometimes the dollar weed and spatterdock build a community together and often they admit other surface residents like watercress (edible for humans), the non-native water lettuce (Bartram mentions the large hairy leaves in 1774), and several sizes of the tiny duckweed. It makes a large multipurpose development that grows out into the current and releases some of its children into the wind and the stream for further colonization.

At the mouth of Palm Spring I turn in toward the rectangular walled pool, showing its century of age. Just outside in the deep waters I start to spot and retrieve a few shiny soda and beer cans that the FOWR and the Rotarians have missed or just couldn't reach. I join several pairs who have been lingering over the spring. We stop and tell the stories of our wildlife encounters and our trash trove, hauling ugly samples out of muddy canoes. Our minds, however, are full of clarity, liberated. Morning has broken on a day for cleaning the river, and we find that the river has cleaned us in return.

At Katie and Russ Moncrief's house, our final destination, I count my coup: two dozen bottles and cans, plus seven of the saddest-looking tennis balls on record. My ad. However, Arlen, our treasurer, takes the prize, struggling into port with a large metal grate slung across the middle of

his canoe. Now it looks like an old bomber with well-strafted wings, and he the surviving pilot, stands triumphantly on the tail.

*...Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that
pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein
and poke-weed....*

Whitman: from **“Song of Myself” 5**