

Mary McKey

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She's sitting still in her sandy crater as we float slowly by. I turn back quickly to see her fat, still body, the size of my foot, turning calmly like a weathervane in a soft breeze. Her colors are magnificent, a light green background on which along her bottom is painted a bright, red-orange streak accentuated by a deep dark "eye" the size of a dime.

The Little Wekiva is clear shallow and the bottom dark brown, except for this one circle of sand where she plans to lay her eggs. Will she wait for rain? The whole state of Florida is holding its breath, praying for rain to dispel months-long drought and the threat of fires that is already in the smoke-feathered air.

I have spent fifty years studying and exploring Florida, but I know nothing of this fish. As a writer, I often have to write about things I entirely don't know. I have never seen such a fish in Wekiva nor in a fish tank. When I described it the other day to Bill, he thought it was probably a tilapia, an exotic relative of the farmed fish we often serve up for dinner.

I turn to Mary in the bow of the canoe to see if she knows. Mary McKey is a longstanding Friend of the Wekiva and a member of the board. Soft-spoken, peaceful and kindly, she mostly stays out of the political wrangles of our group and concentrates her energies on imagining the river through her many photographs of river scenes. At the annual banquet last night and at other presentations during the year she comes with boxes full of images mounted handsomely for lovers of the river to hold dear. She doesn't recognize the fish either, but she certainly knows a great deal about their habitat for me to learn.

Today's trip started at Katie's Landing with two dozen folks loading into vans to take them to the launching site nine miles downstream. For years Russ and Katie have provided canoe service for FOWR events with remarkable good cheer. Riding with Katie and Suzie, her large and very affectionate black poodle, I get a shower of kisses in the back seat before Katie calls the dog to attention. It is a moment of laughter I exploit with a quip about how, at my age, I have to be happy with whatever I can get. We ride to the Moncrief's house, a fifteen-sided, two-story log cabin right on the Little Wekiva. In a matter of minutes the troop of a dozen canoes is spread out on our course and each hardly aware of the other.

The fun part of Wekiva River Awareness Day is to get out there in a canoe with someone who carries new parts of the river with them and to share it all for four or five hours. I know where the Twin Mounds are along our way this morning and promise to take Mary to that spot when we get to the main branch of the river.

Mary's spirit today is full of wishes, of wonderful things she hopes to see. A grey-haired grandparent like myself, she enters the Little Wekiva with eyes wide-open with desire. Just as we tunnel from the channel at the Moncrief's house into the swift-flowing stream of the river, she says, "I hope we see a swallow-tailed kite," recalling for me the last time she came this way and how that was the highlight of the day. Most often when I do the Rock Spring Run and sometimes over the Lower Wekiva, I see the long black and white figure high over the river and I can remember well spotting one over Wekiwa Springs for my students. The kite is a raptor that in Florida is listed as threatened, but I see them more and more each year, so my sense is that they are doing better, at least in the Wekiva basin.

We come around a sharp left hand curve, barely avoiding the swift current's intent to slam us into a log, when out over a wider open flats we spot first one, then the pair of swallowtails, squawking and circling in the sky, but largely playing within the window afforded our vision by the widening of the river banks. Mary's almost lifted out of the boat with excitement and we are both in celebration of what we take to be a courting display. The river is beyond new green, but the kites have gone a-maying. No raptor cuts a finer figure in the blue-white yonder than these two with streaks of yin and yang carving through the skies.

They know the river from above better than any of us, and we wonder if they are the same ones we've spotted elsewhere or whether we have several mating pairs in the sixteen-mile stretch of the river and the further reaches of its three major tributaries. How much does it take for a swallowtail to call up a date from Rock Springs to Little Wekiva or over Katie's Landing?

Mary is a deeply religious person and we start to joke about the powers of her prayers. I suggest we make a list of her wishes now and put them in priority so as to maximize our venture. Going along with my ruse, she says, "Oh, I want more than anything to get some RAIN." I add to the list a black bear or two—let them all mate before us—and we go happily on.

Mary knows Wekiva in its sounds. Recently when Paul Moler, herpetologist with Florida's Department of Game and Freshwater Fish, gave a talk about Florida's frogs at one of the FOWR wildlife programs, she got a tape from him of all the calls you can hear in Florida, the thirty species of frogs and toads that we have from tropical keys to panhandle ponds. So she is quick to recognize the sounds they make, even in the late morning we are drinking in.

Among the sounds of the birds, she teaches me the rising squeakings of the parula warbler, a lovely bird I have seen a number of times elsewhere, but never learned to hear. Now I know why, because at almost every bend of the Little Wekiva we can hear one, but always high or deep in the woods and out of sight. Is one invisible parula going along with us for the ride or are the bleachers in this ballpark fully stacked with them?



Photo by Mary Colby McKey

Today the river is graced with a number of waders caught between the plumage of the yearling and the uniform of an adult. White little blues and brown white ibis, even a few not-yet great blues, are tooling along the spatterdock and dollarweed beds or spooning the muddy banks of the Little Wekiva. It is a treat to see so much life in promising transition. What a lovely place for a bar mitzvah. These waders pursue with so much intent in their hunting that they seem to suffer none of the self-consciousness of their adolescence. They remind me of the teens I see occasionally on campus, celebrating their metamorphosis with locks streaked in purples, oranges, and reds that go beyond the spectrum of their species.

Gradually during the trip we learn more about each other. Mary belongs to the Unitarian Church where several of my colleagues and friends go. She has just returned from her annual visit to Missoula, Montana, where her daughter and grandchild live. I tell her my impressions of Missoula from a conference I attended three years ago, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. I gave a paper there on Whitman's environmental imagination which Mary can surely appreciate without ever reading it. Today is the day when the FOWR invites the whole community to celebrate the river and to join together in Whitman's spirit of ecology and democracy.

Then we start talking about the eagle's nest in Winter Park, at 700 Interlachen Avenue, where we both have watched the progress of adaptation of an endangered species to the suburban long-leaf pine trees along Lake Osceola. We enjoy this story of hope, when eagles too move into our neighborhoods.

Now the chance of rain begins to improve as darker clouds emerge. We hear a very strange squealing sound, repeated at intervals from the bottomlands on the left where soon we expect to meet up with the Wekiva main stream. I think it's a squirrel, maybe, and for once Mary thinks it's

a frog. Later a pair of canoes passes us and they ask if we saw the large owl and its baby. Every sighting on the river is a matter of timing, a lottery for free.

The rain begins to fall in earnest and we are feeling once again the blessings of this day. The shower is gentle and steady for about ten minutes and then hustles off to other wells. In the semi-darkness that follows, I spot a small bird on the left who seems to be following the pattern I know belongs to the prothonotary warbler, a relatively rare but magnificent inhabitant of the swampy riversides of Florida.

I stop the canoe, holding on to a snag because Mary has never seen the dark warbler with the bright orange-golden head. The bird is hopping back and forth along the tree roots and the muck when I see it clearly enough to be sure of its distinctive features. So we camp out there for ten more minutes, watching the solitary black figure, little bigger than your thumb, flitting back and forth from root to branch. The greyness of the hour accentuates even more the blazing sunlight of the warbler's mitre.

While we are sitting there, a couple with a child paddles through, and we meet them later again while sitting and eating some snacks. Mary strikes up a conversation with the woman in the stern and it turns out she is a school teacher in Lake County. She recognizes Mary as the one who had the photographs on display at last night's banquet and asks Mary if she would be willing to visit her classroom and give her students tips on nature photography for some projects they are working on.

Mary surprises me with a series of denials: "Oh, I'm really not a photographer, you know," she says, sitting there with her camera hanging around her neck. "I don't really do that sort of thing," she goes on, "I don't know that much about it. I just snap a lot of shots and take what I get from the drug store developers." The woman explains that just seeing her wonderful photos and hearing from her would be incentive aplenty for eighth-graders.

"Well, really, I don't take pho-to-graphs," she emphasizes the word as though it isn't really a part of her vocabulary, "I just honor creation," and she spreads her delicate hands wide to take in the whole river scene. She has been taking such pictures all along and the rest of us chime in that the children would be well served with such simplicity. So tentative assurances are exchanged to make that happen.



The Little Wekiva as Mystery

Photo by Mary Colby McKey

We enter the Wekiva now and I am looking for the pair of islands which conceal the Twin Mounds on the left. We follow up every promising little water path and find nothing for longer than the half mile I remember it should be. Now I start apologizing that we must have passed them. Much later, when we have stopped looking, I recognize some feature of the exit stream and we work our way back up to the landing site for the mounds, alighting among tree roots looking up at two meters of shell-packed earth.

It feels good to stretch our legs and move about on two feet. Even though we have another hour of paddling before we catch up with the rest of our tribe, for both of us this moment in archaic Wekiva time represents as well as any part of the trip the pinnacle of a day among our riverkind.

Mary's photographs, as you can see on our web site (www.friendsofwekiva.org) are almost always vistas shot from behind the blind of some canoe bow, but the undercurrent of those colorful Wekiva impressions is filled with swallowtail circles, fish-beds, frog-groanings, and the dark inner spaces generated in backwater habitats like Twin Mounds.