

Muckwalking The Lower Wekiva State Preserve



Did I Bring a Lunch? Blackwater Creek, near the Railroad Grade

5/20/00

Our purpose today is to go down from Katie's Landing to the point on the east bank of the river where the creek that follows out of Yankee Lake enters the Lower Wekiva River. A few weeks back, in hiking the four-mile trail north in the Lower Reserve, we found this creek at the high-ground of the pine flatwoods and promised ourselves, looking at the topo-map, that someday we'd follow the three-foot wide rill down to the swamp and then the river. On the map it certainly appears that way, but we have learned that thirty-five-year-old maps, even if they were accurate to start with, don't always show where the river is now, what islands are where, and what constitutes a river bank.

Imagine an island in the river today where the main channel goes west. Now let a sixty-foot tree fall across that space connecting the bank on your left to the island head. Watch the river debris start to gather along the great snag. If no boating interests or park agents come with chainsaws to relieve the situation, eventually the river itself can move readily over to the other side. The tree will likely continue to grow, putting out green leafy branches above to double those now

anchored in the muck below. New roots take hold in the sand and muck below. Eventually the west channel of the river fills in with humus from a dozen miles away. Voila! a great place for gators to rendezvous.

The new larger volume of water flowing on the east now has the power and thrust to reshape the bank in the other direction and the map begins to be even more wrong. Even in a matter of a year or two of traveling to visit the same site (for example, the Twin Mounds just above the old railroad crossing), I have seen the vista change so drastically that I could not recognize it from the river just a few months later. When the water level changes, the corresponding accumulations of debris and aquatic plant growth is amazing. Trees are your best landmark along the river, but some are falling every day.

Bill has paddled on ahead and I am just floating with the current, about a mile or two an hour. I love the feeling of being in river suspension, like a particle of earth or a bay leaf. This is a special kind of downer. I allow the kayak to reverse and without watching where I am going, I focus on what has just been, watch up into the sky the waves of high cirrus streaming above the canopy on both sides.

Suddenly from the immediate left a large bird dives down almost directly toward me, its bright red shoulders announcing its species. It slants across the river and lands on the shore at the right. A log obscures for a moment what was there to catch and I paddle a bit to find a way to see. But the hawk, now less ominous on the shore, steps out into the water, wading like a toddler and pecking at the surface, strong talons spread wide no doubt to give her balance for a harmless drink or two. The wind is so strong today, blowing up river against the current, that at times the kayak reaches equilibrium between the currents of water and air. I sit then like a tree in its midst, watching the tiny droplets of duckweed float by like little columns of green ants.

Right now the water level is so low that we can bushwack along this creek on ground that is normally under inches or feet of water, inviting all hikers to a blackwater swamp-bed party. We pull our kayaks up out of sight from the river where a trickle of a stream about two feet wide and an inch deep goes over sand into the bend of the river. Sitting on a tree trunk at that precise point during lunch, I watch thousands of tiny fish fluttering around the edges of sand and algal growth. It seems as though every square inch of surface contains at least one half-inch fish. The large bream nosing up under the tree roots are looking for lunch themselves, but in this little creekmouth, no depth allows them in.

Once we step away from the river opening, the terrain becomes darker and fairly uniform. Bill with short boots on slogs down the center of the stream. The trick is to find firm sand to stand on because once the foot sinks into the muck, a suction effect occurs and it feels as though someone has both hands on the shoe and is trying to pull it off without unlacing.

I am negotiating the higher ground where mostly adolescent sabal palms, 5-15 feet tall, block the way with their wide-ranging fronds. The ground here is mostly firm and dried out. Near the creek

the firmness under the dry leaves starts to be deceiving and each step is an adventure. It reminds me of backpacking across the tundra of Denali in the summer of '88, only here the depth of sinking is much less. Muck is always earth with the illusion of ground. In a very dry season it can be nothing more than air covered with leaves.

The creatures of the muck are myriad. One of my favorites is the shell-crawler who piles up little balls of mud like a gourmet chef making a mound of melon. One has to imagine that the caverns under such a construction are especially intriguing. My mind does an Alice in Wonderland down a crayfish chimney, walks down the stairs of magical muck into the halls of seed and leaf graves. The crayfish and beetles who make such apartments share them with many other swamp folk, not always benign.

How long does it take for the leaf-fall of the hydric hammock or wetland forest to produce such a kingdom of loam? On the north end of Lake Apopka when Zellwood farms were in their prime, you could see, when the irrigation channels were very low, something close to five feet of the blackest earth on gaia. Zora Neale Hurston's great novel celebrates with tenderness the same habitat in the 'glades where Janie and Teacake learn their grand lesson in love and sharing by working side by side on the muck. It's the real Florida, the forest washed down, dried and fired, churned and burned, then swamped again until just right.

Wherever the central ridge of limestone recedes and the lakes and springs flow forth, the forest undresses in a hundred colors that turn to the most beautiful of deep browns and a black, not empty like night, but with a powerful body. The chemistry of this process is extraordinary because the leaves and branches break down into carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and phosphorus. Creatures of the soil churn it up and are themselves bechurned by the beaks and snouts and claws of all the backboned swamper. Under every palm frond it pays to imagine a coral snake, next to every root a moccassin, among the dwarf palm and sawgrass a rattler; but year after year of such hiking, I almost never realize such marvels.

The creeklet moves deeper into the woods. Bill and I on different paths keep meeting up as the creek turns. Finally we get to a fork in the stream and follow the shallower one. The other bend seems deeper and blacker, not suitable for wading; but this one continues for a quarter mile or so zigzagging through denser and denser brush until it ends in a sump--a five-foot diameter of water oozing with green and brown stuff and having no further extension. On the far side of the creek a half-acre of saw grass is growing and beyond that we imagine the trail we were on last month when we descended from the flatwoods, but couldn't quite reach the river.

We cross with difficulty to the other side and decide not to proceed further since we are in effect looking at a not quite dry pond. Wishing we had long pants or better yet waders to forestall the fish-knife edges of the grass, we reluctantly reverse our path, legs fully scratched and boots covered with a boggy grime.

I remember well my first joy of sand and beach in 1952 when as a boy of eleven I moved from the Bronx to Holly Hill, Florida. The purity and fun of the salty ocean life thrilled me beyond expectation. But in my teen years as a camp counselor in western central Florida on the banks of Lake Tsala Apopka and along the Withlacoochee River I discovered soon the other real Florida where few yankees would want a condo or the briefest of time-shares. The thrill of watching dolphin and sharks in the early evening cruising the Halifax River above Daytona is equaled for me in the backwaters of Wekiva's swamps where limpkin reach down into the airy and watery muck for apple snails with that brown scimitar that preens his feathers bright black and brown with an occasional fleck of white meat.

The Common Earth the Soil

...The brown soil here, (just between winter-close and opening spring and vegetation) -- the rain-shower at night, and the fresh smell next morning -- the red worms wriggling out of the ground -- the dead leaves, the incipient grass, and the latent life underneath -- the effort to start something -- already in shelter'd spots some little flowers -- the distant emerald show of winter wheat and the rye-fields -- the yet naked trees, with clear interstices, giving prospects hidden in summer -- the tough fallow and the plow-team, and the stout boy whistling to his horses for encouragement -- and there the dark fat earth in long slanting stripes upturn'd.

Whitman: from *Specimen Days*