

V. The Promise of Restoration



Blackwater Creek and the Seminole State Forest

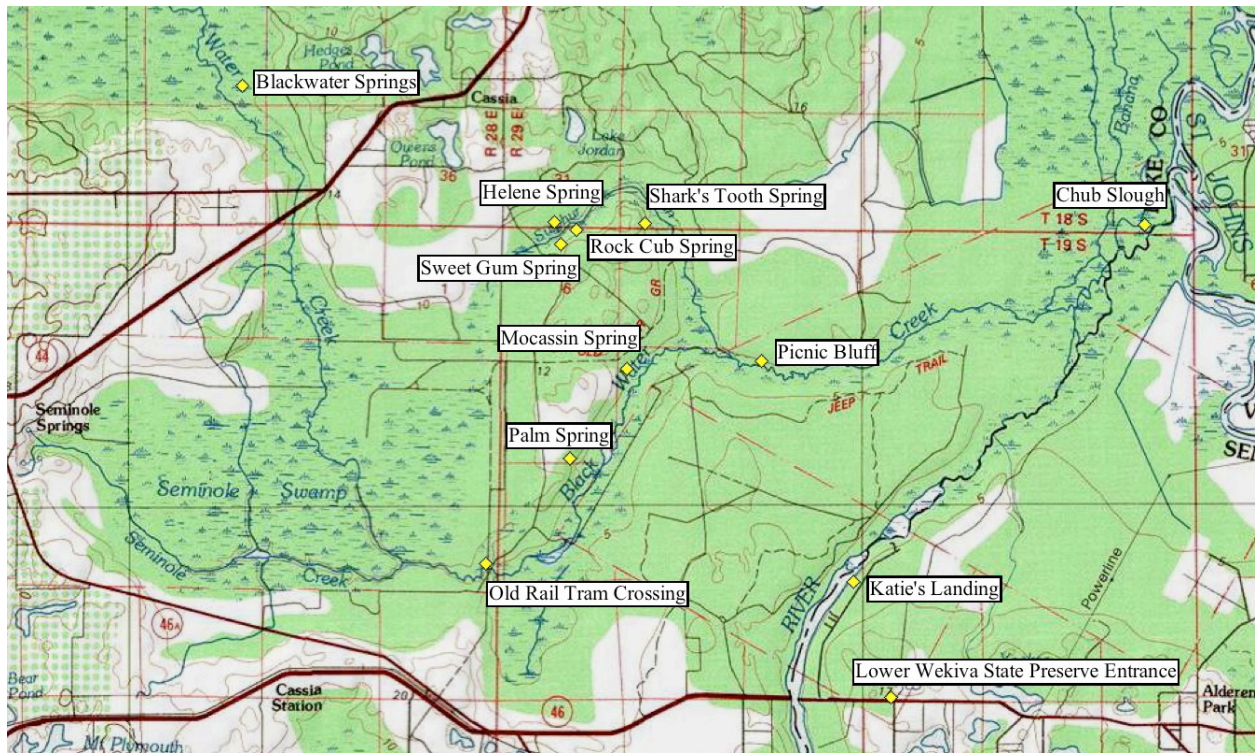
Blackwater Creek could be its own wild and scenic river if only it “paid tribute” to the St. Johns, instead of the Wekiva. We’re talking the difference of half a mile or so where one channel of the creek enters twice (and not so obviously) into the Lower Wekiva, while all the other channels and flows of the creek spill down farther into the larger swamp that feeds directly into the St. Johns River.

The Blackwater drains the largest segment of the Wekiva basin, an area equal to the other two sub-basins. It is the wildest portion of Wekiva and right now in a state of undevelopment that makes you wonder why it was originally left out of the Wekiva’s designation as an Outstanding Florida Waterway.¹ Most of what you find “way out here” in Lake County are nurseries, cattle and horse farms, and the remains of the timber industry now long past. Every October, in the small town of Umatilla about ten miles to the west, they hold the Florida Black Bear Festival.

¹ Some early nineteenth-century maps show the Blackwater curving like a bow from above Hontoon Island over to Tracy Lake (now a swamp) and then southwest to Seminole Creek and then southeast down to the Wekiva and the St. Johns. Of course, the same swamp can feed two or more rivers or creeks in opposite directions, as indeed the Green Swamp, west of Orlando feeds two major Florida rivers, the Withlacoochee running northwest and the Hillsborough southwest.

The Blackwater sub-basin provides the primary wildlife corridor for the bears between Wekiva and the Ocala National Forest, and hence the state is still actively adding on to the already large holdings of the Seminole State Forest, 25,000 acres so far. In the last fifteen years, this might be the only place in central Florida where preservation is outstripping growth. But don't count on that for long, because the land speculation in Lake County is now in a frenzy as the state legislature gets ready to decide with the expressway authority where to put the last leg of Orlando's outerbelt and hence where growth is going next.

The Blackwater gathers far north of SR 44 in the wetlands surrounding Lake Tracy and especially Lake Norris. It has a number of small springs, first at Camp La Noche (on the north end of Lake Norris) and then six miles south, along the east side of the run, just before the route 44 bridge. From there it skirts the west side of the Seminole Forest and is joined from the west by Seminole Creek, a trefoil of clear fresh streams emanating from Messant Spring (20 cfs), Seminole Springs (37 cfs), and Drotty Spring (much smaller). Most of these springs grace a single parcel of land called Seminole Woods: 6000 acres, about 1000 buildable. The state has been trying to negotiate the purchase of this property for decades and if the Wekiva Parkway is ever completed, Seminole Woods will be the primary land acquisition to mitigate the project.



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From the Seminole Creek, the Blackwater then charges briskly east across the middle of the Seminole State Forest, flowing under a bridge that links the north parking lot at route 44 with the south lot at route 46, just west of the bridge over the Lower Wekiva. The Florida Trail

coming from Seminole County crosses that bridge, enters the state forest, and takes you north to Ocala National Forest through the best hiking terrain in mid Florida. Open to the public on a regulated basis,² the SSF is the best-kept secret in central Florida outdoor recreation, esp. for hunting, fishing, horse trails, and undisturbed canoeing with a few primitive campsites.

Above the Blackwater bridge is Sulphur Island, 2.5 square miles of upland in the shape of a pear. Sulphur Run, the principal sculptor of this limestone base, starts somewhere in the swamp to the west, arches around to the north, and, fed by small springs there, settles down south again to meet the Blackwater a half mile east of the bridge.

Blackwater Creek, in some sense, is the Wekiva that time forgot. Much of the upper half of it is not really navigable now because in the private lands north of Seminole Creek no one removes the overgrowth and log litter. From Seminole Creek on down to the Lower Wekiva and the St. Johns, it is narrow and shaded, smooth and occasionally shallow. It has no homes or docks or traffic, few landing spots, but many little back alleys. It makes a very special day to paddle the whole stretch, from the bridge to the Lower Wekiva, and then upstream to pull out at Katie's Landing.

In the face of the river and its community, you can't wrap your mind around Blackwater Creek any more than the rest of Wekiva. In Seminole Forest, your I quickly becomes i. You can't see it or know it all, as an individual or a group. So much is simply unexamined life, indeed undiscovered species, esp. in the orders of cave creatures and the snails endemic to each spring run.

Strangely enough, as in the Little Wekiva, we find no evidence that the Timucuan settled along the creek. The State Forest has only one native mound listed, in an upland site that I have twice failed to find. However, in one of the following essays, we find a place along Sulphur Run where the tribe might have gathered to celebrate their forest rituals or hold their own version of the black bear festival.

As we seek to restore the Seminole State Forest to the sand scrub, longleaf pine, and wetland cypress that dominated the riverscape a century ago, the economics of transportation and development threaten this most primitive portion of Wekiva's basin. The addition of so many thousands of acres in the 1990's has made it possible to open the river basin to the Ocala National Forest and to embark on large-scale projects of restoration. If the forest continues to enjoy the current restricted human use for just 50-100 years, such as is now practiced, populations of scrub jays, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and even ivory-billed woodpeckers will potentially thrive again. In this chapter we will follow the history of cypress logging in the basin seventy years ago, and it will help us to realize that this time around we have full knowledge of the consequences of unrestricted development and the advantages of design with nature.

² Except for the scheduled hunting days, if you want to take a vehicle into the Forest, you have to get a permit from the ranger and the combination to the lock at the north or south gate.