

The Suite of Feathers and Wings



**Pitcher plants in an Herb Bog Seep
Rock Springs Run State Reserve**

Photo by Bill Belleville

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Sitting in the flats halfway down Rock Springs Run, you can imagine how natives and early settlers crossed back and forth here regularly for centuries. The water is shallow and you can step out of your canoe to wade around the sandy bottom. Young couples coming down from King's Landing often settle into watersplashing battles here, tumbling into ecstasy, skirted by wide patches of watergreens.

Today the run is at rest as I watch a single hunter gather and go. She dips at the knees, spreading her black toes, leaning forward her long white neck and yellow bill, and her almost five feet of wings shoot straight out, tail fanning out too and then down. Primary feathers tilt down, at the edges first, then the whole wing span bends at the elbows, defining the firmament with two grand arcs as she, the original airplane from genesis, fires off, legs dragging behind in one silent leap into the avisphere.

The wings now reaching high to a vee with secondary and primary feather-ends tucked down as additional flaps, binding slowly, just enough gravity of air to level off across my direct line of

vision, I see the long deep strokes, the soft nook in the neck, and the directing point of gold going forward to a new perch already perceived.

Inside the miracle of this vision many smaller miracles reside, even before she reaches her landing branch. A single feather stands in mind as the emblem of Wekiva's intricate community of water and land creatures. It is the feather's engineering that allows her distinctive and unmistakable fashion of flight, robbing energy from air through immediately adjustable featherings of many kinds.

Unlike the Boeing counterparts, each bird's feathers are in constant change of shape and form, providing flaps and slots, propellers and breaks, governing the concave and convex so as to streamline the flow of air above and below. Each feather's quill twists and turns, bends and stiffens, in myriad ways. This allows vanes of the feather to flex forward and backward, responding to air pressure (itself a consistent chaos), and each of those teeth of the feather's comb is braced with a web of barbs and fibers to make the spider's tangleweave seem elementary and just plain static by comparison. What an extraordinary, expert mind she has!

Yet how easy would it be for our egret to break a leg while landing on that branch sticking out over the edge of Rock Spring's Run. Were it not for a hundred million years of practical (genetic) engineering, drawing and redrawing, shaping and reshaping every saving feature, she would be gone. Broken legs don't mend well, fall short in the game of survival. There's no real runway to roll in on here, just a requirement to pull up, in the strongest of variable winds, with a glide, a slight banking up, and one gigantic backstroke of the twin-winged aircraft. It takes less than a second to park the two tripods firmly on the branch, to hold tight and upright.

Would that such precision and aplomb could mark all our activities and govern our Wekiva community from change to change and place to place. From the outside, her flight pattern has banks and curves punctuated by the equilibrium of two wings that seem largely in mid-flight to go straight up and down, but in reality she performs a compound butterfly stroke where the air currents against the underwing press broadly upward so that the edge formed by shoulders and outstretched arms vaults over the gravity of her tender wingload of two pounds or so. Also imperceptible are the actions of the wing-tips which enhance that simple stroke with the pin-wheeling motion only slow-motion photography can reveal.¹

One never gets any feeling that panic resides in the neurons and heartbeats of the American or great egret (*Casmerodius albus*). By what amazing chemistries does she glide and waft through the river basin, and even in our suburban world I see her walking down streets and sidewalks, slowly scoping out lizards and snakes from among the tall blades of iris and lilies that are the common fare of landscapers all over Florida.

¹ See John H. Storer's, *The Flight of Birds Analyzed through Slow Motion Photography*, a foundation for me in the imagination of this essay.