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Land Use and Private Property



The Secondary Fissure at Wekiwa Springs

Wekiwa Springs, the Upper Wekiva River

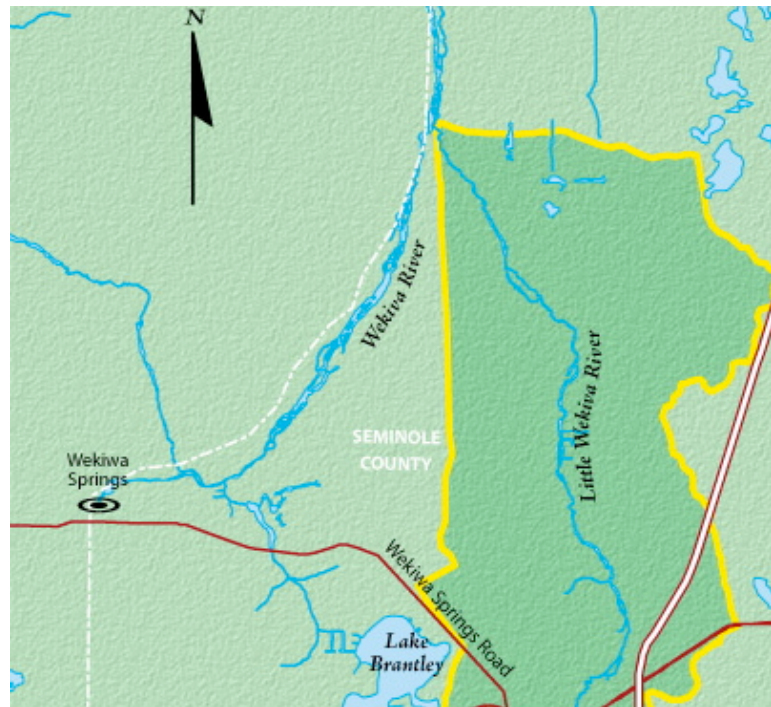
Moving from Rock Springs south and slightly east for four miles or so, you can find a ridge of elevation from bottomland to upland about 25 to 40 feet high; and where these contours start to tighten up and pinch together on the topo map, you often see a spring pops out. For example, Witherington Spring feeds out into Mill Creek that empties into the Wekiva Swamp; and as the ridge turns directly east, Barrel Spring likewise spills out and disappears into the lowland without much of a stream to paddle. It is remarkable then to find three native middens in the vicinity of Witherington, when the only practical access today would be an overland route.

Paralleling this east-west ridge above swamp and river is Wekiwa Springs Road and south of it a large development called Sweetwater Oaks. Everette Huskey, a local realtor, in the '70's and '80's looked at the beautiful rolling hills of longleaf pine with fox-squirrels and turkey oaks flying their bright colors and laid his money down. He saw this as the best place in central Florida to have an exceptional home. That would turn out to be a thousand families on one acre lots who would naturally be fed all the basic resources of 21st-century Florida living: golf

courses, riding and hunting clubs, malls and schools, all right across the street from the state park.

Wekiwa Springs, the crown jewel of the river system, gorges forth 54 mg/day, flowing directly east and then north toward the St. Johns River. In 1969 the state purchased the acreage around the springs and an additional 6000 acres stretching all the way up to Rocks Springs and created a magnificent state park. Open nowadays from dawn to dusk, the park averages 300,000 visitors a year, most of whom come to swim, but many to hike, run, ride horseback, or paddle downstream on a wild and scenic river. It also serves the school systems of three counties, providing free entrance for field trips exploring eight different habitats and their wildlife.

As a regional headquarters for the Department of Environmental



Courtesy of the St. Johns River Water Management District

Protection's Division of Parks, the rangers carry out an extraordinary amount of research, bio-monitoring, and controlled burning over a wide range of state land holdings in the Wekiwa basin. Since most of the visitors confine themselves to a small area, the bulk of the park is left open for studies of wildlife, habitat conservation, restoration, and management.

You can rent a canoe at the park, cross the lake beyond the bridge, and in a few minutes paddle to the end of Rock Springs Run, a half mile east. Just beyond that, at the end of Miami Springs Boulevard, you'll find the Bridge to Nowhere. Built to provide a road for development up to Lake County, the bridge is now a symbol of how some developments abort. The concrete structure goes over the river and directly down into the swamp. The road beyond that never got approval.

Just east of the bridge lies the Wekiwa Marina, the cultural center of the Upper Wekiwa.¹ Until a recent fire closed it down, the local folk used to come regularly to the riverside restaurant there for beer, catfish, and country music. There is something special about eating cornbread and fresh

¹ Current owners have spruced up the site and called it Wekiwa Island.

fish by candlelight, sitting at windows looking down past the pilings to the darkest of night waters. Canoe and boat launching here has been the major enterprise for fishers and river watchers for the past forty years.

As you paddle past the marina with its families of otters and raccoons that live across the way, the last vestige of Sweetwater Oaks appears on the right, Miami Springs Run. It is fed immediately by two small springs and beyond that by the whole floodplain coming out of Lake Brantley through the middle of the development, under the bridge, and past the place where two native sites once stood.

From Miami Springs the river gradually turns north and east through the fattest portion of the Wekiva Swamp, passing several small mounds and Shell Island, by volume the largest Timucuan archaeological site in the whole basin, before it meets the Little Wekiva. By contrast to Rock Springs Run, paddling the Upper Wekiva is a mellower enterprise and a constant adventure in island options, this side or that. In effect, a long chain of zig-zags runs down the middle of a dual stream. It reminds me of the pieces of cloth my mother used to braid together for some future project, each island a patch with its own distinctive colors.

The Wekiva's international reputation attracts eco-tourists, largely from Europe, Germany and Great Britain. Add to this the fact that the apron of Orlando's metro-population (spell that S-P-R-A-W-L), using I-4 and SR 434, can easily arrive at the park or the marina in a half hour, and you can see how this portion of the river has to be called busy.

However, once you get beyond the hour or two paddling stamina of the regular crowd or step outside their recreational time frame, the upper river has all the same qualities of repose as the unpopulated areas. For most of us locals, the main springs and the marina were our first introduction to the river and the best reason for expanding our species self by exploring all its other angles and arteries of wildlife.