

Lochloosa Wildlife Conservation Area Interpretive Drive

“Cross Creek is a bend in a country road, by land, and the flowing of Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake, by water. We are four miles west of the small village of Island Grove, nine miles east of a turpentine still and on the other sides we do not count distance at all, for the two lakes and the broad marshes create an infinite space between us and the horizon.”

So Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings begins her description of this area in her 1942 novel Cross Creek. We hope that you will have the opportunity to take this self-guided drive and view some of the very areas that Rawlings wrote about, while learning about the practices being used by land management organizations to protect these areas.

Auto drive

Welcome to the Lochloosa Wildlife Conservation Area Interpretive Auto Drive. This drive will provide you with the opportunity to view a freshwater lake and marsh system, surrounding forested lands, and the diverse techniques being used to manage those lands. The self-guided drive will also provide numerous opportunities to observe a wide array of wildlife species in their natural habitats.

This drive traverses many roads within and around public conservation lands. Specifically, these lands include the 10,338-acre Lochloosa Wildlife Conservation Area, which includes Lochloosa Wildlife Management Area (WMA), and the 16,610-acre Lochloosa Conservation Easement, which is included within the Grove Park Wildlife Management Area. Lands within the wildlife management areas are hunting areas. Please exercise caution when visiting the management areas during hunting season.

Special precautions

Fish Camp and Burnt Island roads are used primarily as logging roads. Please yield to logging trucks. At times, these roads may be impassable in a two-wheel drive vehicle. County Road (CR) 2082 may be used as an alternate route should Fish Camp Road be impassable. Please use caution.

Seemingly dry areas can quickly become very wet. Flooding can occur with small amounts of rain. Please exercise extreme caution and do not drive through areas when roads are under water.

The eastern side of Lochloosa Lake is adjacent to an active railroad line. In some areas, crossings are without crossing arms or lights. Please use extreme caution when crossing railroad tracks in the area.

Areas of interest

Nearby public lands include Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, Longleaf Flatwoods Reserve, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, M.K. Rawlings Park, and the Lake Lochloosa Park. The Gainesville-Hawthorne State Trail, a nonmotorized recreational multiuse trail, traverses the area as well, passing through portions of Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, Prairie Creek Conservation Area and Lochloosa Wildlife Conservation Area. These areas together encompass more than 50,000 acres.

This area is also a part of the Orange Creek Basin. This basin encompasses three major lakes: Newnans, Orange and Lochloosa (5,700 acres — 14th largest lake in the state). Newnans Lake and its tributaries form the headwaters, with the lake outflow going through Prairie Creek into Paynes Prairie. There the flow continues into Camps Canal and through the River Styx into Orange Lake. Lochloosa Lake also flows into Orange Lake through Cross Creek. Orange Lake flows into Orange Creek, which flows to the Ocklawaha River and then into the St. Johns River. Many of these water bodies are designated as Outstanding Florida Waters. Surrounding Newnans Lake is a conservation area by the same name (6,504 acres), while Orange Creek Restoration Area (3,642 acres) encompasses a portion of Orange Creek.

Facilities

As you travel around the auto drive, you will find these facilities at the following locations (see map):

CR 325 — M.K. Rawlings Park — Public restrooms and picnic shelters (handicapped-accessible), boat ramp and playground. This is also the parking area and entrance to the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park.

U.S. 301 — Burnt Island — Handicapped-accessible fishing pier and picnic pavilion.

U.S. Highway 301 — Lochloosa Park — Public restrooms, boat ramp, fishing/viewing pier (handicapped-accessible) and picnic tables.

U.S. 301 — Lindsey Phillips Park — Public restrooms and picnic shelters (handicapped-accessible), boat ramp, fishing pier, information kiosks.

1. North CR 325 — Lochloosa/Grove Park Conservation Easement

North of Cross Creek, on the west side of CR 325 and north of Fish Camp Road, the St. Johns River Water Management District (District) purchased a 16,610-acre conservation easement from Georgia Pacific in 1995. The property has been transferred and is now owned by Plum Creek Timber Co. The easement protects the land from being developed in perpetuity, contributing significantly to the protection of water resources in the region, while Plum Creek Timber Co. continues to actively manage the land as a productive industrial silvicultural site.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a private landowner and a government agency or qualified nonprofit group involved in conservation activities. With a conservation easement, a landowner gives up certain rights or uses but retains title to the land, such as Plum Creek has in this case. Purchasing an easement is a way for an agency or organization to protect significant amounts of acreage at a reduced cost.

2. Fish Camp Road — Different types of forest management

Though trees are harvested from both the north and south sides of Fish Camp Road, the goals for each area — as well as the management strategies used to attain those goals — are very different. Both areas were once managed as a single industrial silvicultural site. The District purchased the property south of Fish Camp Road, while the property north of the road was retained by Georgia

Pacific (now Plum Creek Timber Co.). Plum Creek sold an easement to the District in 1994 but retained the rights to manage the timberlands north of Fish Camp Road as an industrial timber site.

Plum Creek Timber Co.'s overriding goal in regard to forest management is to maximize productivity. In short, the trees are managed similarly to a long-term crop. Prior to planting, various site preparation methods are employed. Often, herbicide applications are utilized in order to reduce competition for nutrients and space. Wetter areas are often "bedded" prior to planting. Bedding is a site preparation method used to increase survival and growth of tree seedlings on wet soils and soils prone to flooding. This technique involves construction of parallel beds and furrows from surrounding soil. Seedlings are planted on top of the beds, where they are protected from excess water and where they benefit from a concentration of nutrients and organic matter.

Timber companies typically plant fast-growing species that can be harvested — often clearcut — and replanted on a short cycle. Once areas are harvested, they are replanted and the cycle repeats itself. Forest products companies use herbicides and fertilizers to increase yield. These activities occur once during the rotation, typically somewhere between seven and 10 years.

The overriding goals of the District are to protect the natural resources and to restore the natural communities within the area. For this reason, the District uses a different approach. In planted timber stands, overstocked areas are thinned to a more natural density. Selectively thinning trees from a forest provides a wide array of benefits. Thinning reduces competition among trees, which, over time, results in larger trees with fuller canopies. Thinning also allows more sunlight to reach the forest floor, stimulating the growth and reproduction of native grasses and forbs. Trampling from heavy equipment reduces the shrub layer for several years, giving native ground cover species a competitive edge while allowing District staff to introduce prescribed fire more safely and in a wider variety of conditions than would otherwise be possible.

In areas where all of the trees have been harvested — or clearcut — prior to acquisition, the District replants with an appropriate species for the site. Often this is longleaf pine, a species thought to have once been the dominant tree in the southeastern United States. As the trees mature, the District thins the timber as needed and implements regular prescribed burns. In the long-term, these activities will promote the growth and regeneration of a diverse assemblage of native plants and natural communities. As restoration progresses, the differences in management on either side of Fish Camp Road will become increasingly apparent.

3. East Fish Camp Road — Upland/wetland connections

Though it may appear that much of the terrain within the Lochloosa area could be considered upland habitat, wetlands are peppered throughout. Cypress ponds and domes are frequently found embedded in areas of higher elevation and many creeks and streams traverse the area. Orange Lake, Orange Creek, Lochloosa, Lake, Lochloosa Creek (which flows out of Magnesia Spring into the north end of Lochloosa Lake), River Styx and Cross Creek all contribute to the vast number of wetlands found in the Lochloosa area. Diversion, ditching and draining have altered many of these wetlands, but conservation efforts have increased in recent years and many areas are being actively restored. These wetlands are home to numerous species of wildlife,

including bald eagles, wood storks, Florida sandhill cranes, many species of egrets and herons, and numerous reptiles, amphibians, fish and mammals.

4. Burnt Island Road — Prescribed fire

An equally important tool employed by the District in the restoration of forested areas is prescribed fire. Natural fire, often initiated by lightning strikes, was once a prominent factor in the southeastern United States. However, as permanent human settlements were developed, aggressive fire suppression strategies were devised and implemented in order to protect these communities. As populations continued to grow, fire suppression became the norm. As development continues and natural areas become increasingly fragmented, the spread of natural fire is impeded even more. In an effort to mimic the effects of fire on natural communities, many land management organizations have begun to introduce prescribed fire.

The majority of natural communities within Florida are fire-adapted or even fire-dependent; different species depend on fire for an assortment of reasons. Fire can be useful in reducing competition among species, and many species rely on fire to promote flowering, seed production, or seed germination. With the application of fire, nutrients bound in standing vegetation are converted to ash, making them available for nearly immediate uptake and serving as a fertilizer of sorts. Fire can also reduce the spread of damaging disease and insect activity.

Prescribed burning serves another purpose as well. Florida's hot, humid climate produces lush, fast-growing vegetation. Fire-adapted species will burn readily in the appropriate conditions. Implementing prescribed burns on a regular basis can dramatically reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire by reducing the amounts of fuels available to burn. Implementing regular prescribed burns reduces the overall height and size of flammable vegetation, making fuels less continuous and less likely to promote the rapid fire spread often associated with catastrophic fire.

5. CR 325 — Cross Creek

The southern and western portion of the auto drive traverses the tiny community of Cross Creek, made famous in the writings of author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

Contact information

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