



Exploring the Wonders of Our Magnificent Preserves.

Beautiful. Yet Seldom Seen or Walked by Most Residents.

By Dave Gill, Member, Ponds and Preserves Committee

[Woodlands Word – June 2022]

Greg and Dave's Excellent Preserve Adventure

One day in mid-March this year, I had the rare opportunity to explore areas of our Rivendell owned preserves, seldom seen or walked by most Rivendell residents. I rode in Greg Volack's (current RCA Board member) converted golfcart/dune buggy through some very beautiful and interesting woods, along with Greg's Labrador, Grace.

The path we took started at the very southwest end of Scherer Lake at the end of Mill Pond Court. We then wound around east of Scherer Lake, along the Oscar Scherer State Park boundary, over the land bridge by Eagle Lake, along the shore of Eagle Lake and the big preserve then over the short bridge with Placid Lake and back to Scherer Way Street.



Rivendell's southeast corner has a unique preserve with several acres made up of a hardwood hammock of mostly tall slash pines, some with strangler figs binding their trunks. There are thick patches of Saw Palmetto and an open, round, small or micro wetland. Slowly and silently wandering through this natural forest was very moving. It was beautiful, with the sunlight piercing through the canopy of trees, the slight smell of pine needles and the absolute silence, except for the occasional sound of a critter.

Our Preserve Habitats are Home to Abundant Wildlife



We could hear the distant call of a Bluejay, a caw of a crow, the splashes of an alligator and a couple of turtles disturbed by our approach, jumping from their sunny spot on the shore back into the water. Deer can often be seen in the open grassy areas. A bobcat makes this area home too. Several years ago, I saw wild pigs rooting near the lake. The water was clear.

Over a bright sandy bottom, we could see some tilapia and bass. A wide path through the palmettos had been cut next to the park boundary fence as a fire break. Already, new bright green shoots poke up about two feet high, and multiple ferns now cover the forest floor.

A Little Historical Perspective

Originally all this area, including all of Rivendell, was **Calusa land**. The Calusa Indians made settlements locally on the high ground hammocks near the coast, eating fish and shellfish. They made their large houses out of our local hardwoods. In the 17th and 18th centuries, much of the southern pine forest was harvested for lumber. The resin was used to make tar to seal wooden ships and coat their standing rigging.

Much of what we see in the preserves was replanted. Many local pines were tapped to collect resin that was converted into turpentine. An abandoned turpentine factory is close by, in the woods just east of Old Venice Road, south of the Palms at Casey Key subdivision.

In 1911, the Barnum Circus had the Seaboard Railroad build the rail-line between Sarasota and Venice for their winter camp, using pine logs for rail ties. This line is now the **Legacy Trail**, running straight through the park just east of us. Then came the cattle farmers, clearing land for pastures. Cattle fences can still be seen in the park and in the northern preserve next to Park Trace.

Saw Palmettos and Slash Pines

Slash pines are fast growing and can reach 75 to 100 feet tall. They slowly drop their lower branches, live to 70 or 80 years and can withstand burning around their trunks, if the fire stays low enough. In the past, lightning started natural fires.

Today, prescribed burns in the park reduce the brush. In fact, fire can help the female pinecones on the ground pop open and spread their seeds. The smaller male cones stay longer in the trees and release their pollen in winter and early spring. Since the tree canopy is high, a thick understory of ferns and saw palmettos can develop.



Palmettos are fuel to a fire and can be a severe fire hazard. When cut or burned, the palmetto quickly come back with underground shoots. In some areas the slash pine has been replaced by the Loblolly and Longleaf Pine, which are hardier, grow taller and longer. Slash pines are prone to be infected with a Fusarium Rust fungus that will turn the needles yellow and weaken the tree enough for pine beetles to eventually kill it. Unfortunately, we have lost, and will lose, many slashpine trees in our parks, preserves and throughout Sarasota County to this deadly fungal disease.

Beneficial and Vibrant Wetlands



In the center of the southeast preserve we went through is a large (about 100 yards in diameter) open wetland with a perimeter of dry, dead grasses and a small center of water. In the water were several whistling ducks, with a great blue heron and two great egrets standing on the perimeter. We saw a Bald Eagle standing by the lakeshore and several Ibis flew by.

Come back through this area between June and October - the wetland should be filled with water. One of these round wetlands is in the center of all our eleven preserves and provide habitat for a multitude of wildlife, including deer, alligators, sand hill cranes and many of our wading birds.

Enjoy Our Preserves. Look, Listen, Smell, But Please Don't Touch.

The Rivendell Community Association manages our preserves under permits from Sarasota County. We are responsible for keeping them clean and natural. Nothing can be cut down, dumped or planted in a preserve. We must hire a contractor to help control exotic, non-native invasive plants such as melaleuca, and Brazilian pepper trees. They also control excess vines, reduce highly flammable plants and dead brush, keep fire lanes and paths open and correct incursions by homeowners.

All the paths are open for residents to walk. Be careful not to tread on private property at the access points. Enjoy seeing and hearing the wildlife, absorbing the intrinsic, natural ambiance of quiet woods with a verdant canopy above you. Enjoy the scenic value of open fields. Go in the morning, wear good walking shoes and long pants. Leave only footprints. Take a friend with you or have a cellphone. But turn it off. **Enjoy what is ours, so close to home.**



Editor's note: Special thanks to Dave Gill for sharing this personal story and his unique perspective with our community and to Nancy Dobias for her accompanying preserves photos.