Tarflower Nature Trail

This 1,900-foot accessible nature trail winds through a mixture of upland and wetland habitats. An observation platform provides a high and dry view of a wetland prairie.

1 A Disturbing Situation

The Palm Beach County Natural Areas System protects historic native ecosystems and their biological diversity. The natural areas are open to the public for passive recreation, environmental education, and scientific research. How do we solve the problem of saving the land but also providing facilities for public use? By carefully designing the parking lots and trails so they have minimal impact on native ecosystems. The construction of public use facilities occurs in previously disturbed areas. The parking lot for Sweetbay is located in an area that was full of the invasive exotic Brazilian pepper. The exotics were removed and the remaining native trees were relocated to another area of the site.

2 Rebirth by Fire

The pine forests of Sweetbay Natural Area depend on fire to maintain their health and viability. Periodic fires reduce hardwood competition (oaks, bays), improve wildlife habitat, and remove excess underbrush and dead vegetation. The thick bark of mature slash pines protect the trees from the worst of the fire, but the flames leave behind black fire scars. Plants such as gallberry, saw palmetto, and wiregrass burn quickly and intensely, but their roots remain alive. Days after a fire, fresh green shoots make an appearance in the charred landscape. The natural area is divided into five burn units, which are burned every 3 to 5 years.

4 Birds of a Feather...

Snowy Egret

Where there are wetlands, there are wading birds. Florida is home to more large wading birds than any other state - nearly twenty species. The snowy egret is easily recognized by its long black legs that end in yellow feet. They are often seen darting about in shallow water as they grab small fish.

Black-crowned Night Heron

The black-crowned night heron is a patient hunter. It waits for a fish to pass within range of its bill and then quickly nabs it and swallows it head-first. As its name implies, this heron is largely nocturnal. During the day it roosts in trees or reed beds.

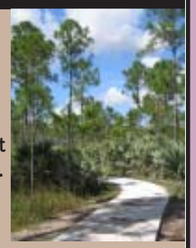
Little Blue Heron

A young little blue heron can easily be mistaken for a snowy egret because it has white feathers. Only when it becomes an adult does the plumage change to slate blue. The little blue heron eats more insects than the larger herons and can sometimes be seen in just-plowed fields searching for exposed insect larvae.

3 Little Bay Head on the Wet Prairie

In terms of surface area, wet prairie is the most abundant vegetation type in the Sweetbay Natural Area. These seasonal wetlands build up water during the rainy season (June through November) and then gradually dry up during the winter. A slight change in elevation can mean the difference between wetlands and uplands. The tree island in the middle of this wet prairie is called a bay head. It contains sweetbay, dahoon, coastalplain willow, and pondapple trees. The trees provide roosting and nesting habitat for wading birds, including egrets, herons, and wood storks.

5 A Woodland Wonderland



There are two types of pine flatwoods found at Sweetbay Natural Area. At the beginning of the trail the slash pines are growing in a high and dry area - a mesic flatwood. Other plants found there include saw palmetto, fetterbush, and wiregrass. This section of the trail is slightly lower in elevation and wetter - a hydric flatwood. Here the understory is dominated by blue maidencane.

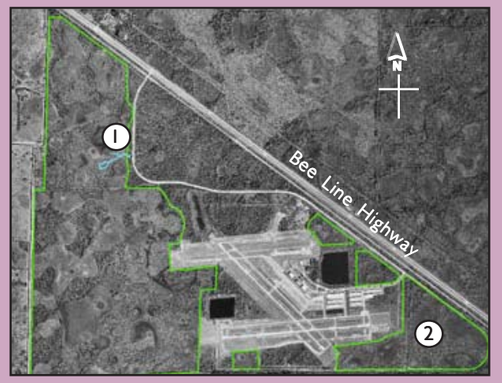
Pine flatwoods contain a large diversity of plant and animal life. Eastern lubber grasshoppers are one of the natural area's smaller residents, but they are easily spotted hopping along the trail edge. The young lubbers are brightly colored, with vivid red and black markings. Eventually they change over to dull browns and greens - the color of maturity.

Juvenile Adult

6 A Logger's Paradise

A walk through this forest 60 years ago would have found it ringing with the sounds of men cutting slash pines for timber. Most of the pine trees in the natural area were removed in the 1940s. Those that were small, worthless saplings at that time are now the biggest trees. They are the primary seed source for future pine trees. A portion of the Sweetbay Natural Area was also used for agricultural purposes. Drainage ditches and mounded rows are still evident where crops were grown.

Sweetbay Trail System



The Sweetbay Natural Area is located northwest of the intersection of Bee Line Highway (State Road 710) and PGA Boulevard in unincorporated Palm Beach County. This 1,094-acre natural area is divided into two sections, which are located on the east and west sides of the North County General Aviation Airport. Public use facilities, including a parking lot, information kiosk, and nature trail, are located in the western section of the natural area (#1). The eastern section (#2) does not have public use facilities. Both sections contain a patchwork of upland and wetland habitats, including wet prairies, bayheads, and pine flatwoods.

Please use the designated nature and hiking trails as you explore the natural area. This is especially important due to the increased security issues at the adjoining North County General Aviation Airport property. Do not feed the animals. When wild animals become dependent on handouts, they may lose their natural fear of humans and become aggressive and dangerous. Please dispose of your trash responsibly.

Sweetbay Natural Area Photo Album

Plants

Tenangle Pipewort
(*Eriocaulon decangulare*)

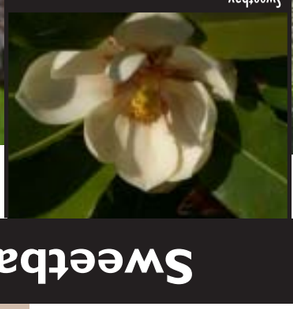
Tarflower
(*Befaria racemosa*)

Goldenrod
(*Solidago sp.*)

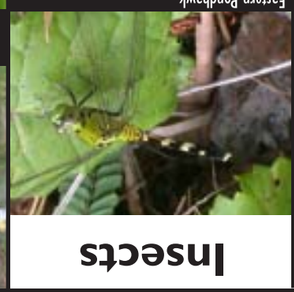
Pondapple
(*Annona glabra*)

Virginia Chain Fern
(*Woodwardia virginica*)

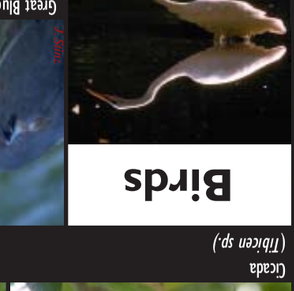
Shoestring Fern
(*Vittaria lineata*)


Sweetbay
(*Magnolia virginiana*)

Insects


Eastern Pondhawk
(*Erythemis simplicicollis*)

Cicada
(*Tibicen sp.*)


Eastern Lubber Grasshopper
(*Romalea microptera*)

Queen
(*Danaus gilippus*)

Reptiles

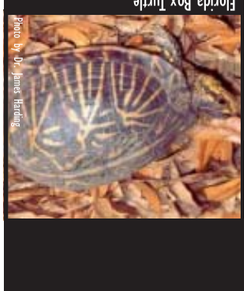
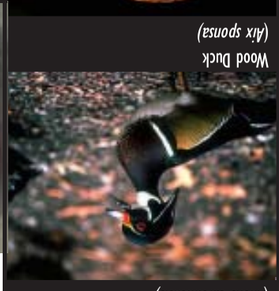


Photo by Alfonso Hernandez
Florida Box Turtle
(*Terrapene carolina baur*)

Six-lined Racerunner
(*Cnemidophorus sexlineatus*)

Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake
(*Crotalus adamanteus*)


Green Anole
(*Anolis carolinensis*)

Birds

Great Egret
(*Ardea alba*)

Great Blue Heron
(*Ardea herodias*)

Wood Duck
(*Aix sponsa*)

Black Vulture
(*Coragyps atratus*)

Pileated Woodpecker
(*Dryocopus pileatus*)

Red-shouldered Hawk
(*Buteo lineatus*)

River Otter
(*Lutra canadensis*)

Eastern Cottontail
(*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

Mammals

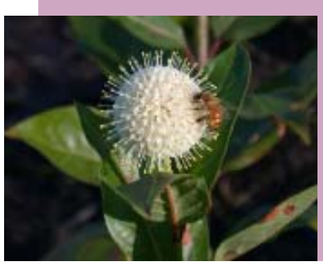
Preserving Palm Beach County's Good Nature

Welcome to one of Palm Beach County's natural treasures. The Sweetbay Natural Area is an environmental preservation area established by the Department of Airports during the planning and development of the North Palm Beach County General Aviation Airport (North County Airport). The natural area is a mosaic of wetlands, pine flatwoods forests, and oak hammocks.

The natural area is comprised of two sections - a 788-acre piece located west of the airport and a 137-acre piece located east of the airport. It lies in two historic drainage basins: the Hungryland Slough to the north, which connects with the eastern rim of the Everglades, and the Loxahatchee Slough to the east, which drains into the Loxahatchee River.

Over the past fifty years, development of the surrounding areas has changed the historic drainage patterns. Canals and agricultural use have diverted water from the natural area and reduced groundwater levels. Over time, drier soil conditions can lead to an increase in upland vegetation communities and a corresponding decrease in wetland communities. Land managers will focus on reestablishing historic wetland connections and increasing the amount of water within the natural area.

Sweetbay Natural Area is part of a countywide system of natural areas protected to maintain the diversity of biological communities and species in Palm Beach County. The natural areas are open to the public for educational and passive recreational use such as hiking, nature photography, and bird watching.



The Sweetbay Natural Area contains many water-loving plants like the buttonbush pictured here. Other wetland plants include pickerelweed, hatpins, sawgrass, bladderwort and arrowhead.

Rules & Regulations

Prohibited on the Site:
Smoking
Hunting
Firearms
Feeding wildlife
Alcholic beverages
Pets or domestic animals
Bicycles or motor vehicles
Collecting plants or animals

Use only existing trails.
This is a "no trash area".
All trash taken in must be taken out.

The natural area is open from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week, including holidays.

There are no toilets or drinking water at this site.

In an emergency, call 911 or the Palm Beach County Sheriff at 561-688-3400.

Palm Beach County
Board of County Commissioners
Karen Marcus, Chairman
Tony Masilotti, Vice Chairman
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In accordance with the provisions of ADA, this brochure may be requested in an alternate format.

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Environmental Resources Management
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West Palm Beach, FL 33406-1548
Phone: 561-233-2400
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Sweetbay Natural Area Trail Guide

Palm Beach County Department of Environmental Resources Management and Department of Airports