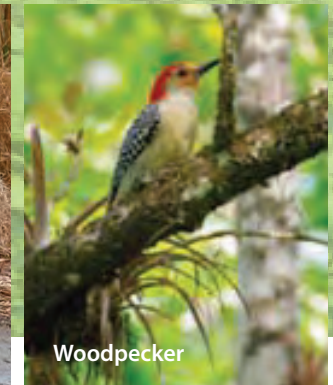


DISCOVER NATURE ALONG Florida's Tamiami Trail

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY WENDY & ROB LINDSAY



Great Egret



Woodpecker



Great Blue Heron



Pelican

The Tamiami Trail (US 41 on Florida maps) is an easily driveable link to the last pockets of Southwest Florida's indigenous wildlife and forests. It is also the path to discovering the grandeur of an old-growth cypress swamp. Prior to this trip, we never would have used "swamp" and "beauty" in the same sentence; nor had we seen so much wildlife.

On landing at the Fort Myers airport, we decided to pay the premium for a convertible to more fully experience the sights, sounds and scents of Florida. When we put the top down and the Florida sunshine began to melt the chill of a Canadian January from our bones, we knew it had been a wise choice.

Our first side trip was to the islands of Sanibel and Captiva. It felt as if we'd left the mainland hustle and bustle at the toll bridge to the islands. Shopping plazas resembled colourful villages and cycling seemed popular with both islanders and visitors, who were moving to the slower, friendly pace of island time.

Our destination was the 2,800-hectare J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, which covers a large part of Sanibel Island and is among the top 10 birdwatching spots in all North America. It can be explored by foot-paths, cycling paths, a six-kilometre guided tram ride, a pontoon-boat cruise or, our choice, a two-hour guided kayak trip with Tarpon Bay Explorers.

Numerous times our group "rafted" our kayaks together while our guide pointed out a rare bird, showed us a water creature we would have missed, or directed our gazes toward osprey making lofty dives into the bay for fish. As the sun rose higher and the temperature climbed, the shady cool of red mangrove tunnels was a welcome relief.

Further up island, where a bridge joins Sanibel and Captiva islands, we saw shell collectors of all ages on the beach, bent over in the "Sanibel Stoop" and the "Captiva Crouch." The lure of over 400 varieties of shells draws

thousands to the talcum-soft beaches yearly; the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum is well worth a visit.

A single plantation once covered the whole north end of Captiva Island. Today, it is covered by the immense, sprawling South Seas Island Resort — a combination of hotel and time-share where you can stay for a night or weeks. During our stay, we discovered that the yacht basin was an excellent spot to watch and photograph manatees first thing in the morning, and dolphins just before sunset.

A day cruise to Cabbage Key departs from here, too. It was Jimmy Buffett's song *Cheeseburger in Paradise* that made Cabbage Key famous, but what we remember most was eating under a ceiling dripping with over \$70,000 in dollar bills — a tradition begun by sailors and continued by tourists. The highlight of the day, however, was watching dolphins frolicking and leaping in the ship's wake — much better than a visit to any aquarium.

Having departed the islands, we made our way through Fort Myers, past the historic Edison & Ford Winter Estates, to Manatee Park. Early on cool mornings, manatees are known to gather here, in the warm discharge water from a power plant. Sure enough, we found over



Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

50 of the giant marine mammals slowly coming up for air, then sinking. It was an amazing sight.

Back on the Tamiami, we headed south to Naples, then turned east onto Immokalee Road. After a short drive into the countryside, we reached the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. This 5,600-hectare preserve, maintained by the National Audubon Society, contains the largest remaining virgin bald cypress forest in North America.

According to executive director Ed Carlson, wildlife sightings in the preserve are affected not only by the time of year, but also by the time of day. “Mid-morning during the winter months is actually a great time to catch the action,” he explained to us, “because alligators and turtles wait for the warmth to bask in the sun, and even the water birds are more active, foraging for food.”

Talking with Carlson, we gained a true appreciation for the 3.6-kilometre boardwalk that runs through the swamp. As a college kid, he helped build the boardwalk during long days spent slogging through foot-sucking muck, carrying 45-kilogram pilings on his shoulders. They certainly did a great job, for even wheelchair-bound visitors can get close to nature on the level elevated boardwalk.



Dolphin (above), Woodstork (below).



It is a work of art meandering through pine flatwoods, open prairie and, finally, the bald cypress forest. Giant trees tower 45 metres above the swampy landscape. We were delighted to spot three-quarters of the wildlife listed in the guidebook — everything from a tiny green tree frog the size of a thumbnail to a cluster of baby alligators basking in the sun and an elusive wood stork. Volunteers with powerful spotting scopes help folk spot other elusive birds, too, including the pileated woodpecker and the shy barred owl. It is a nature lover's paradise.

During our overnight at the luxurious Inn on Fifth back in the heart of Old Naples, we learned about the local hotels' joint project to help protect nesting sea turtles along local beaches.

The next day, we headed south again on the Tamiami. Beyond the city, we were soon surrounded by a sea of grass. Turning south onto State Road 29, we headed for Everglades City. Along the route, bright yellow signs read “Panther Crossing,” an attempt to protect the endangered Florida panther, often struck in the almost total darkness of an Everglades night.

At the Ivey House, we met our guide for kayaking in the Everglades. We expected to find mosquitoes and murky water but were very wrong. Obviously winter is a great time to paddle this pristine area. In one pool, we spotted an osprey guarding its nest high in a snag, and farther on, a pair of eagles in a pine. Another pool seemed a popular alligator hangout, and we were pleased the little gator swimming slowly toward us was only a metre long.

Soon the water became shallow, and manoeuvring tight turns through two-metre-high sawgrass was a challenge. Finally, the river opened into the Big Cypress Swamp. Here, pond-apple trees had orchids in the crooks of their branches and cypress knees broke the glassy surface. The reflections on the water were surreal. We began to understand why photographer Clyde Butcher has spent his life photographing this area, and has his home/studio on the edge of the Everglades.

Southwest Florida is truly a fascinating part of North America, and the Tamiami Trail is the key to exploring it all easily. ■

Tamiami Trail Trivia

Back in 1928, when the Tamiami Trail was completed, a trip down the road itself was a bit on the wild side. Rest stations had been built every 16 kilometres along the route between Tampa and Miami so that travellers could tumble out for a cold drink, some food or a fill-up. The station managers also doubled as highway police. Once every hour, these colourful fellows, later known as the Southwest Mounted Police, were required to mount their motorcycles and patrol “The Trail.” At one time, they even wore pink uniforms.

Prolific inventor Thomas Edison and his friend Henry Ford wintered in Fort Myers around the turn of the 20th century. At that time, Ford wanted to buy the Big Cypress Swamp and give it to the state of Florida as a park, but his offer was refused. Developers moved in and by the early 1950s only one virgin stand of cypress was left in all of Southwest Florida. Fortunately, a group of benefactors rallied to buy this pristine area and it became the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary under the management of the National Audubon Society.

TRIP PLANNER

- Visit Florida visitflorida.com
- Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau fortmyers-sanibel.com
- Naples & Marco Island paradisecoast.com