

THE VOLUSIA CONSERVATION CORRIDOR

The Palmetto Curtain

by Clay Henderson

The Volusia Conservation Corridor is the wild heart of Volusia and Flagler counties. In its current form, the corridor is a mosaic of pine flatwoods, cypress domes, basin swamps, and agricultural lands which separates the growing Atlantic coastal area from the ever expanding suburbs stretching out from Orlando. But for many, the vision of the corridor contains more than green space. It is the hope that this ensemble of native landscapes will connect an important series of conservation areas, which could total over a million acres.

The first descriptions of these lands were not too flattering. Early Spanish and later English explorers generally referred to the impenetrable swamps as “terra incognita” or the “pine barrens.” In 1832, famed naturalist John James Audubon traversed the area as part of his expedition to Florida. He described the area as “perfectly flat, and, as far as we could survey it, presented the same wild and scraggly aspect.” When his horses bogged down crossing the branches of Haw Creek, he wrote in his journal, “it seemed as if we were approaching the end of the world.”

During the Pleistocene era, much of Florida was under water. For millions of years what we now call the corridor was an ancient seabed. As Florida’s ridges began to emerge from the sea, the table-top called the Talbot Terrace lingered beneath the primordial seas. With the last Ice Age, the Florida Peninsula fully emerged from the sea but the terrace retained features more wet than dry. What finally emerged was a very flat land with a high water table and an irregular mosaic of wetlands.



During the last two centuries, much of this land has been ditched, drained, and cutover, but it still retains much of its original wildness. Woven through these pinelands are hydric hammocks, creeks, basin swamps, and cypress domes, while along the edges are rare communities of interior scrub. In this region the flow of water sometimes feels counter intuitive. In the southern part of the corridor, waters from Lake

Ashby flow south through Deep Creek to the upper basin of the St. Johns River where they continue to meander north to the ocean. In the northern part of the corridor, waters from Tiger Bay and Haw Creek flow north toward Lake Diston and on again to the lower basin of the St. Johns River.

On a statewide scale, the corridor is an important linkage in Florida’s system of greenways. The southern part of the corridor connects to the St. Johns River and a series of important conservation areas to the south, which form the headwaters of this American Heritage River. To the north, the corridor links to a series of conservation areas including Heart Island Conservation Area, Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge, and Lake George State Forest, which span along the eastern shore of the St. Johns. On the opposite shore are wilderness areas of the vast Ocala National Forest. By design, the corridor is an important link connecting over a million acres of publicly managed conservation lands stretching from the Everglades to the Okefonokee Swamp.

The corridor is significant habitat for many rare species. The dominant mammal in this area is the Florida Black Bear, listed as a threatened species by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. According to studies, the territory contains an identifiable bear



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Sandhill Crane

population whose numbers have been increasing since hunting was banned over a decade ago. Other notable species include the Bald Eagle, Sandhill Crane, Woodstork, Red Cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow, American Alligator, Gopher Tortoise, Indigo Snake, and Florida Pine Snake. During the winter months, resident Florida Sandhill Cranes can be seen sharing the same open fields with hundreds of migratory cranes which have flown thousands of miles from western Canada. In the spring, the Swallow-Tail Kite can be seen performing aerial acrobatics along the forest edge, having flown to the area from deep in the Amazon.

The corridor contains a number of fire dependant communities, meaning that fire is an important part of the health and viability of the natural system. In 1998, wildfires swept through tens of thousands of acres of the corridor. It was an awesome sight to witness lightning strikes ignite the fiery nature of the pine flatwoods ecosystem. But fire is a vital part of the ecosystem allowing many plants the opportunity to reproduce. True to form, what emerged from these massive wildfires was one of the rarest plants in North America. Rugel's Pawpaw, a highly endangered

small flowering plant that only lives in the corridor, emerged from the ashes of this great fire, just as it had evolved to do.

The corridor has been the focus of conservation efforts for three decades. Florida's first major land acquisition program was the Environmental and Endangered Lands program which acquired over 10,000 acres in the corridor as a "potential water recharge area." This acquisition became the core of Tiger Bay State Forest, which was expanded to 23,000 acres under Preservation 2000. As groundwater supplies began to dwindle water managers recognized that the water resources under the corridor were an important part of the Volusia Sole Source Aquifer. The City of Port Orange acquired 13,000 acres in the corridor to protect its future water supplies.

What we now call the Volusia Conservation Corridor is a landscape level project developed under the Florida Forever program. Sponsored by the St. Johns River Water Management District and the Volusia Forever land acquisition program, the corridor originally encompassed 35,000 acres when approved in 1999. Today the corridor project extends over 80,000



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acres in Volusia and Flagler counties, designed to protect a natural connection between the upper St. Johns and Ocala ecoregion.

Progress has been made through innovative partnerships with private landowners. In 2002, Plum Creek Timber Company entered into a creative land swap, which protected the heart of Haw Creek. Since then conservation easements have been established over Plum Creek and substantial ranch land in the corridor's center. These conservation easements provide great "bang for the buck." Private owners, who have been good stewards of the land, remain in possession while the public gains by conserving the land in perpetuity. The most important aspect of these less-than-fee acquisitions is that all development rights are extinguished.

But there is a competing vision for the conservation corridor. From all sides, the relentless march of growth has the corridor in its grasp. Both Volusia and Flagler Counties have experienced significant growth in the last three decades with nearly half a million people residing there. In Volusia, the corridor separates two fast growing areas. To the east, the

coastal zone including Daytona Beach and New Smyrna Beach continue to grow. To the west, Deltona is now the largest city in Volusia County. Over the last few years, landowners in the corridor have sought to be annexed by Deltona as a prelude to development while the city and county fight over the limits of growth. While the state, water management district, and county have millions of dollars to spend for acquisition in this area, it has been tough to keep up with the market trend that often is pushing these lands toward development.

For many years, politicians on both sides of Volusia County referred to the vast interior as the "palmetto curtain" which separated east from west. For many, this important natural area is now a vision, which can ultimately unite both sides of the county.



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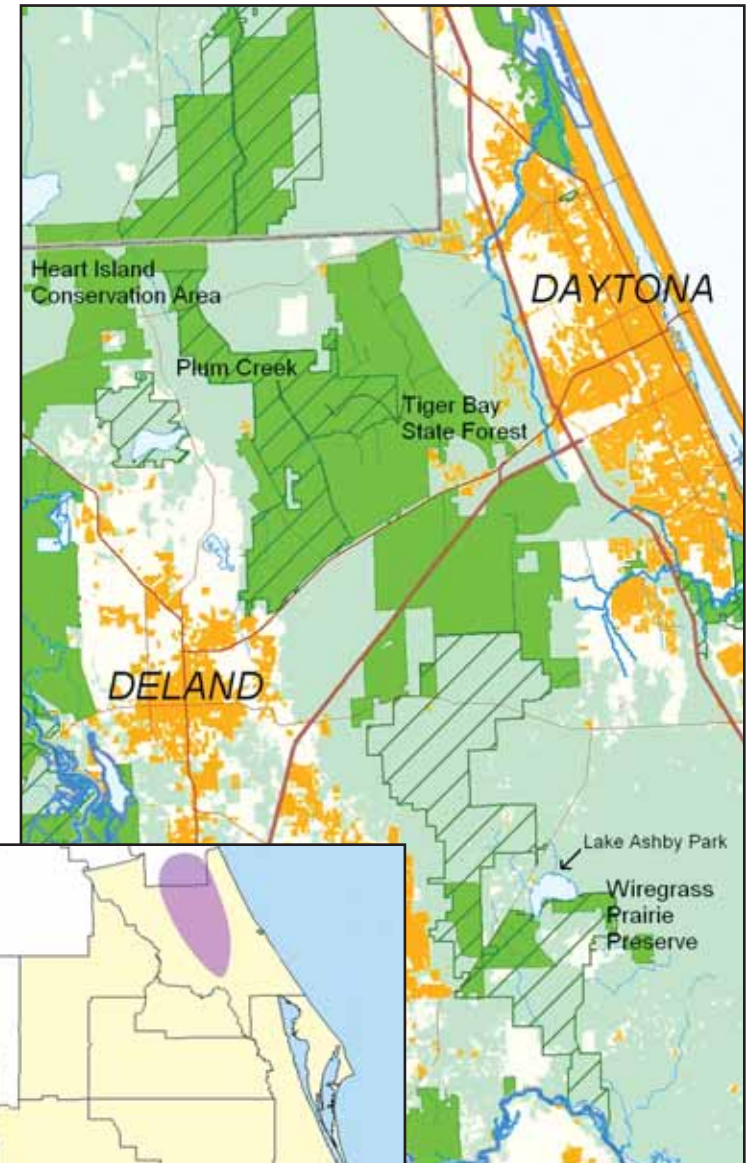


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Rugel's Pawpaw

EXPERIENCE THE VOLUSIA CONSERVATION CORRIDOR

- **Tiger Bay State Forest** is a 23,000-acre bay swamp ecosystem located between Daytona Beach and DeLand. It is prime habitat for a host of wildlife, from black bear to bald eagle. Activities to enjoy include hiking, biking, horseback riding, wildlife observation, photography, primitive camping, boating, swimming, fishing and picnicking. The forest also functions as a **Wildlife Management Area by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**. Hunting of whitetail deer, wild hogs, and small game is permitted during designated seasons. Information about this property can be found on the Florida Department of Forestry's web site www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/tiger_bay.html.
- Directly to the west of Tiger Bay State Forest is the 39,000-acre **Plum Creek** property. Although timbering is allowed on this privately-held tract, the property is now encumbered by a conservation easement which ensures its long-term protection. A multi-use trail running from US 92 to SR 40 is planned to provide recreational access.
- **Lake Ashby Park** is located on Boy Scout Camp Road off of SR 415. The whole family can enjoy the 64 acres Park which offers boat access, as well as hiking, horseback riding, camping, picnic areas and a playground for children. A lengthy boardwalk provides access to ancient cypress trees and wildlife observation points.



Clay Henderson is an environmental lawyer from Volusia County who has negotiated the purchase of over 250,000 acres of conservation lands. He was elected twice to the Volusia County Council, chaired the Florida Greenways Coordinating Council, and served on the Florida Constitution Revision Commission through which he sponsored a Conservation Amendment authorizing the Florida Forever program. Locally he has chaired successful campaigns to establish the Volusia Endangered Lands and Volusia Forever bond programs. Mr. Henderson served as President of Florida Audubon Society from 1995-2000.