

Gilpin County News

BLACK HAWK, CO

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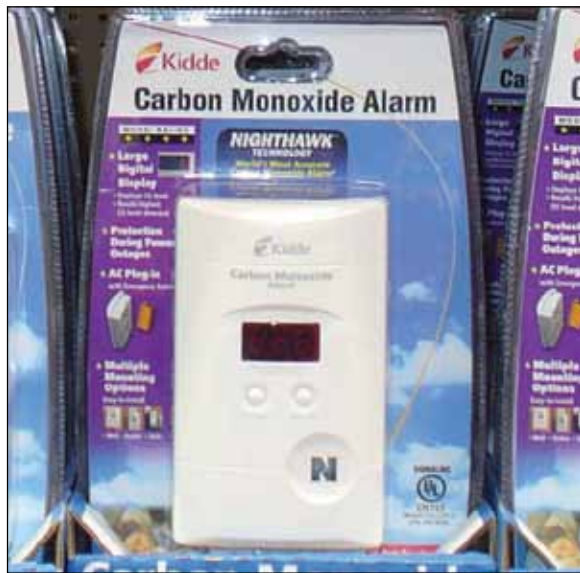
DAVE GIBSON

Taking a break from our winter wonderland to visit the tropical climates of Myakka River State Park in Florida and explore the thousands of acres of wildlife found there. **p8-9**



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Lady Panthers maul the DA Mustangs. **p11**



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Lady Eagles are playing wounded. **p10**

Myakka River State Park

Taking a break from winter wonderland

by Dave Gibson

While venturing to new locations is always exciting and educational, sometimes visiting a familiar site that you've explored repeatedly can be just as rewarding. Of the scores of times that I've been to Rocky Mountain National Park, I know that I will always see elk, but what else will I spy? When the snow flies and the temperatures dip to their lowest level, I find Florida to be a great wildlife viewing location and welcome respite from the cold. This is my fourth time to Myakka River State Park and I eagerly wonder what it has in store for me this time.

Nine miles east of Sarasota, at 37,000 acres, it is Florida's largest state park. Shortly after entry, we come to the Canopy Walkway. In Florida if you see a hill it is usually a landfill. Elevating yourself a dizzying 25 feet above the forest floor for a better view is a rare privilege. We decide to pass and instead move on to Powerline Road where the footpath follows electrical towers and wildlife watching promising. On a past



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Talapia, a pan fish reaching on and a half feet in length, sometimes commercially raised and found in your grocer's freezer, were introduced to control invasive vegetation.

visit, by the side of the road, about the water half-blanketed I saw baby alligators lolling in algae with their watchful

mother sunning nearby. This year the ditches are dry and no gators are to be found. I follow my rule of "Find the water and you'll find the animals." and we reverse our direction and head towards the lake.

Black vultures cover the towers and vacate their perches on each successive one as we near the lake. Fifteen hundred black vultures roost at Myakka in the wintertime and at times they fill the sky circling with nary a flap of their wings. One of their feathers makes a nice souvenir. In Upper Myakka Lake we find our quarry. A dozen or so American alligators float in front of us in the bay with a few slowly inching through the water. Walking along the shore, we come across a "gator path" connecting the bay with a small pond worn muddy by many an alligator belly. On each side of the path are the unmistakable claw prints of the gators. Three alligators bask by the bank as

we respectfully creep indirectly closer. The two larger alligators have seen enough and slip into the water. One alligator, perhaps seven or eight feet long, stays put and doesn't seem to be bothered by our presence. He is missing the tip of his tail and it isn't hard to guess which species of animal bit it off! At one point, I am able to sit down only ten feet away on the mudflat next to him.

One of the animals that I've never seen here but would like to is the wild pig or feral hog. Considered somewhat of a pest, they were introduced 500 years ago and like most other accidentally or intentionally introduced species in Florida, they like it here. The park has an agreement with a trapper who uses cages to harvest the pigs wherein he sells the product to prisons and other customers to make his living. He is fined if he doesn't meet his quota. The cages that we see



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This common cooter turtle suns himself on a half-submerged log, seemingly oblivious to the huge alligators hovering nearby.

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today are all empty. The Spanish moss draped oak-palm hammocks form arches over the seven mile paved road as we peruse for pigs in the shady forest. Sometimes an extra set of eyes can be a bonus as my trusty spotter Tina finds them three times to my zero. The feral hogs that we see are brown or black. Streams of piglets scurry through the dry underbrush to keep up with the adults. I use caution when trying to photograph them as I perceive the boars and sows to be mean customers capable of inflicting great bodily injury. While caution is warranted, my fears are unjustified as they are more wary of me than I of them and a good picture is hard to come by on this afternoon.

Further up the road, the Birdwalk juts into Upper Myakka Lake with its boardwalk, benches, and interpretive signs. Rafts of American white pelicans float just offshore. A sandhill crane coos by water's edge leading her chicks through the daily feeding routine. Turkey vultures, great blue herons, limpkins, anhingas, wood storks, red-shouldered hawks, ospreys, great egrets, and purple gallinules may also be seen here.

Another of my favorite places in the park is Clay Gully. On every occasion that I've been there, I've encountered the



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Baby alligators "buddy-up" for a nap on a warm log at the edge of the water.

biggest alligator that I've ever seen. This gator is twelve feet long if he is an inch and very well fed. He could take a horse if he had the opportunity and felt so inclined. One time I was standing in tall grass above the

gully contentedly photographing common cooters (a type of large turtle) for five minutes when I suddenly noticed this monster's motionless presence in the water only fifteen feet below me. We see him on

this visit also from the other side of the creek. Four cooters unconcernedly occupy the log next to his partially submerged bulk. A major part of this alligator's diet, as well as other alligators in the area, is made up of tilapia. Sometimes commercially-raised and found in your grocer's freezer, they were introduced to control invasive vegetation. A pan fish reaching one and a half feet in length, the behemoth in our midst would require several a week to sustain himself with maybe a shorebird thrown in once in a while. The tilapia nests on the river bottom are concave circular structures with their edges built up by the mud and sand. Looking like a volcano crater, they are three or four feet across and constantly patrolled and guarded by their occupants.

A good way to end your day in the park is at the Myakka Outpost. Near the boat ramp, you can find cold drinks, ice cream, and "gator stew." More dehydrated than I had realized, I opt for two large bottles of

water (which I down in a matter of seconds), with a "pickle on a stick" and "gator jerky." Canoe, kayak, and bicycle rentals are available along with T-shirts and rubber snakes. If you wish, you can take a tour of the lake in the world's largest airboat of seventy feet. As we depart, the biggest gathering of black vultures that I've ever witnessed crowd the sky above the outpost. As usual, this visit to a familiar destination provided some of the same sights and experiences as previous visits and some new ones. I was able to see my old friend the "monster gator" again. I saw wild pigs for the first time and sitting next to a wild alligator was certainly a thrill. On my next journey here I hope to catch a glimpse of the barred owl or wild turkey that I've not yet seen. In the unlikely event that I don't experience anything new on my potential fifth visit, I feel confident that just like the elk in Rocky Mountain National Park, the alligators will still be here.



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This black vulture is patiently waiting on dinner - hoping not to have to share with the thousands of his brothers roosting at Myakka in the wintertime.

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