

I left home at 3:59 a.m. and had the road to myself for miles. I enjoyed the audio system in my new car as I listened to a book on CD instead of a book on tape. I chose the Garden of Eden by Hemingway figuring I ought to read a book by him as I make my way towards Key West. With the early start I got to my room in Longwood, Florida about



noon. Thankfully I was able to check in and take a much needed short nap. Then I took off on my bike toward Wekiwa Springs State park. The five miles to get there were on not very nice roads but the park was worth enduring some traffic. I spent roughly 4 hours pedaling and walking in the various habitats in the 8,000 acre natural area. There were some paved roads leading to camping areas etc. but mostly it was off road trails. They were hard going but manageable most of the time. In some places it was a

shared trail with horses and, given the sand underneath, that made for some tough going. I enjoyed the quiet and solitude after spending eight hours on the road. I didn't see a lot of wildlife but spied some raptors, a gopher tortoise, another turtle on a tree in a little lake, some frogs and a deer. The little pond called Sand Lake was quite a surprise just appearing in an otherwise very dry area.

I saw almost no one in that part of the park but the area around the main springs was more popular. Some people were swimming despite it being December and the sign that read "Wild animals including alligators may be encountered in the spring." A small group was earnestly filming a commercial on the little bridge. I skipped the bridge so as not to disturb them but made my way on the boardwalk that led through the tangled jungle that surrounded the spring.



As I pedaled back from the park I was able to ride on some sidewalks/bike lanes. They weren't marked but the ranger at the park said it was okay to ride on them.

Tuesday morning I decided to sleep in and wait for breakfast at 6. It was worth the wait and I was still able to sail through the Orlando area without hitting bad traffic. I received a great welcome from Ron and Ellen in Punta Gorda who graciously agreed to let me leave my car next doo.. We had a nice visit and I felt a big relief knowing my car was safe as I pedaled off planning 2 ½ weeks on the bike.



I felt energized by the rousing send-off from Ron and Elen and pedaled happily down the highway. I had to stop for sunscreen the sun promised to be strong and as the temperature reached 80. Tamiami Trail better known as Rt. 41 was 4-lanes and not particularly

scenic. Nevertheless, traffic was modest for such a road, thanks to I-75 running nearby, and there was a paved shoulder all the way. The flat terrain helped me get used to the weight of the bike with my camping gear, books, computer and clothes.

I stopped once to eat a bagel and drink some water. Behind the gate where I rested was an abandoned corral where cattle had once been rounded up for market. A rotting picnic table told what a busy spot this once was. I passed several large areas filled with cattle. At one point I saw an excavator cleaning out ditches. As it dug whatever was in the ditch and put it in a waiting truck I never imagined it would result in the best nature sighting of the day. As I approached all manner of herons, egrets and wood storks flew away. My bike had startled them when the speeding cars and big equipment hadn't. In fact they were clearly drawn to the newly exposed mud and not too proud to let the highway department help them out.

The unexpected (good unexpected that is) often provides the best part of a bike ride. Today this happened when I came upon Charlotte Flatwoods Environmental Park. It is



described as: *“487 acres of mature pine flatwoods, hydric pine flatwoods, depressional marsh wetlands, dry prairie and permanent freshwater ponds. A variety of birds are abundant including several species of wading birds, great horned owls and bald eagles.”* For me it was a respite from the roar of motor vehicles and the limited scenery along the road. Once inside I found soft but passable trails, open to a bike, that took me back to an unexpected marsh area. I saw lots of

bald eagles though they must have been young as they lacked the characteristic white head. After an hour of pedaling, walking, listening, picture taking and looking through

the binoculars I left the park and continued south. I had a really cool chicken pita sandwich at a small pizza place and then was able to check-in about three for a shower and nap. Refreshed I took off to find the 4-mile Cove Ecological Park. This is supposedly primarily a water park for kayaks and the like. However, it is purported to have a boardwalk. I followed the directions from the web and found only a gate firmly posted against entry. I wonder if maybe the boardwalk was damaged by a hurricane. Anyway I



enjoyed the 18-mile ride and on the way passed a couple of kids holding signs telling motorists about the \$5 pizza at Papa John's and a block later another urging you to buy the \$4.99 pizza at Little Caesar's. That must have planted an idea in my head because by the time I got back to my motel I wanted pizza for dinner and, I only wanted to pay \$5. I used the web to locate the closest Papa John's

and Little Caesar's and found the former only a few blocks away. I pedaled there and saw the cheapest thing on the menu was \$12.99. I boldly asked if they had a \$5 pizza and was told yes. In the end I paid an extra \$1.40 to have chicken on it. I was able to strap it to the back of my bike and carry it home for dinner. Since I have a refrigerator I'll have the leftover for breakfast.