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Archbold Biological Station: A national natural landmark in our own backyard

By MELISSA MAIN Correspondent Jun 8, 2015



Kevin Main/News-Sun Gopher tortoises are a listed species that can be found at Archbold Biological Station.

VENUS — Scientists and biology students from around the nation, including prestigious universities such as Harvard and Cornell, gather to study at Archbold Biological Station. Yet inquisitive minds from Highlands County are just as welcome to come learn about Central Florida's native plant and animal species just a brief

drive from home.

What is so critically important about the work at Archbold, and what makes it so fascinating to study? According to Archbold Biological Station, the scrub ecosystem found along our Lake Wales Ridge and especially abundant at Archbold is “one of global importance and under threat. It needs to be conserved since it contains some of the rarest listed species in North America.”

Archbold’s mission is to understand, interpret, and conserve the earth’s natural diversity, with a special focus along the Lake Wales Ridge and Central Florida area.

This mission is accomplished by conducting research and managing the land, particularly through the use of prescribed fire, which is necessary to preserve the scrub ecosystem.

Despite the scholarly focus, Archbold is a fun-filled, educational opportunity for people of all ages. When you visit, wear comfortable shoes and sunscreen for the hike along the self-guided trails that are open during daylight hours.

As you enter Archbold’s tree-lined driveway, proceed slowly to allow endangered gopher tortoises an opportunity to cross. At the intersection, turn right and park in the parking lot in front of the Learning Center. Take a moment to explore the 78 different species of native Florida plants that surround the Learning Center, providing a natural and ecologically-friendly landscaping which requires no irrigation and is better suited to the climate.

To the left of the entrance, there is a rack of pamphlets. Grab a trail guide, which will serve as a handy reference. Sign in and make a donation before exploring the center, a LEED platinum green building. Immediately upon entering the building, you will see a diorama of a Florida black bear and a gopher tortoise.

Before embarking on your hike, grab a drink from the vending machine or water fountain and stop at the restrooms, which have water conservation features that save thousands of gallons of water each year.

If you exit the building on the prairie porch, you'll notice a series of decorated tables. Each table displays a different native habitat, including sandhill, pine flatwood, seasonal ponds, oak scrub, rosemary bald and leaf litter. All six habitats can be found in Highlands County, and a quick study of these tables will enable you to identify more plants and animals as you hike along the trails.

Signs dot the trails providing education about native plants and animals, as well as the history of Archbold. The Discovery Loop is only a few hundred yards and is designed for visitors who want a brief introduction to native plants and animals without an extensive hike. The Explorer's Loop is approximately a half mile long and has sugar sand, which makes walking along portions of the trail similar to walking on the beach.

The Scrub Lookout loop provides slightly higher elevation and a better view of the habitat. Directly across from the Scrub Lookout, you'll find the educational weather station and retention pond. Unique in its beauty and function, the retention pond performs the same functions as a seasonal pond. It is an excellent example of how to create an attractive retention pond that also provides habitat for native species.

A walk across the parking lot will take you to a grassy median lined with descriptive signs explaining the history of Archbold Biological Station. Follow this History Trail and examine Archbold's past as you move towards the Richard Archbold Research Center. At the main office, ask to watch a 20-minute video, "The Lake Wales Ridge: Islands in Time" featuring Glen Woolfenden. After the conclusion of your video, browse the T-shirts, caps, and books.

To beat the heat, come in the morning and hike the trails. For a group tour (10-25 people), call Dustin Angell, educational director, at 863-465-2571. Tours are \$50 for the entire group, but self-guided tours are free. However, donations of \$5 per adult and \$3 per child are recommended.

Beat the summer boredom and examine a national landmark in your own backyard, located at 123 Main Drive in Venus, seven miles south of Lake Placid. Watch for the entrance sign, because it's easy to miss.

Explore Florida scrub, one of America's most endangered ecosystems, and experience the thrill of learning and adventure that has captured the minds of leading researchers and biology students from around the nation.