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The Wild Divide: Connecting to keep Florida wild

Archbold Biological Station

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This map of the Florida Wildlife Corridor illustrates the vision for connecting Florida's conservation lands and the many opportunities that still exist to work with private and public landowners to help protect wildlife movement through Florida. COURTESY PHOTO

The Lake Wales Ridge is a ribbon of ancient sand dunes forming a backbone down peninsular Florida. Rare scrub habitat found along the Ridge is home to many rare and endangered species

and is also home to most people in Highlands County.

Archbold scientists work to preserve the rare scrub habitat and the unique biodiversity found on the Ridge. This research contributes to our understanding of how rare species operate and thrive within the unique ecosystems found on the Ridge. Archbold also works on the importance of connecting conservation lands and waters via 'wildlife corridors' to better protect Florida's larger animals roaming across Florida in search of mates and habitat.

In 2019, to bring attention to the rare species found in the unique habitats of the Lake Wales Ridge, and to amplify awareness for wildlife corridors, three Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition trekkers traveled along the Lake Wales Ridge. The trekkers, conservation photographer Carlton Ward, Jr., seventh-generation Floridian and Archbold Board Member Mallory Lykes Dimmitt and Archbold research scientist Joe Guthrie, made their way through the landscape tapestry of the Ridge on horseback, foot, and paddleboard. This 'Ranch to Ridge' Expedition was a 7-day trek from Highlands Hammock State Park to the Tiger Creek Preserve in Polk County. Their 60-mile path wove through a diverse array of lands; from private ranches and residential neighborhoods to public lands, highlighting how the habitat connections sustain the wildlife and wildlands.

The 18-minute film about this expedition, *The Wild Divide*, was just released to the public on Feb. 14 across social media platforms. The film showcases Florida's search for solutions to connect, protect and restore our vital wildlife corridor and the animals that call it home. Guthrie, expedition trekker and Archbold Predator-Prey Research Scientist stated, "Beginning in Highlands Hammock State Park we headed west from the Ridge, then turned north to traverse a network private ranches and public lands on horseback. As we moved north, we gradually turned east to find a crossing point along U.S. 27 south of Frostproof, where we began traveling on foot. East of U.S. 27 we trekked through a network of state and federal lands as well as a private conservation bank before turning north again, and we ended up on paddleboards at The Nature Conservancy's Tiger Creek Preserve on the Ridge near Lake Wales."

When scientists and staff from Archbold met with the expedition team, they emphasized how threatened species need the connectivity wildlife corridors can provide. At a state-owned conservation area near Sebring, the expeditioners and film crews met with Archbold's Avian Ecology Program Director Dr. Reed Bowman and Research Assistant Rebecca Windsor as they banded threatened Florida Scrub-Jays. The scientists explained their research and how they monitor and analyze the jay populations continually, helping inform conservation decisions and protect the critical habitats upon which the jays rely.

Archbold's Plant Ecology Research Assistant Stephanie Koontz talked with the expedition team at The Nature Conservancy's Saddle Blanket Scrub Preserve north of Avon Park, showing them the threatened plant, the Avon Park Harebell (*Crotalaria avonensis*). Although the footage was not included in the final film, she explained how this rare, plant, a yellow-flowered, deep-rooted pea, occurs at just three Florida scrub sites, all in Highlands and Polk counties.

The Florida Wildlife Corridor organization Executive Director Jason Lauritsen explains, "The weave in the landscape tapestry is fine and complex, and it requires the discipline of science to expose, understand, measure, and prioritize the essential relationships at work in our ecosystem. For the non-scientist, this is often daunting. However, it is important to understand why a corridor is worth protecting at all."

The Florida Wildlife Corridor organization hopes "The Wild Divide," will serve to illustrate why Florida's wildlife corridors urgently need this protection.

You can view The Wild Divide on Archbold Biological Station's Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/ArchboldBiologicalStation> or on the Florida Wildlife Corridor's

YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/YF7aSgNfO0o>.