POINTS OF INTEREST AT BLUEFIELD RANCH NATURAL AREA

1) Burrowing Owl

The area in front of you contains preferred habitat for burrowing owls. This pint-sized owl prefers to live in open areas with sandy soils, spending much of its time at the burrow apron or on a nearby post. When disturbed, these owls bob their heads while emitting a clucking call.

The flight of these owls has been described as undulated and erratic "as if flying an invisible obstacle course." The ability to hover gives these insectivores an advantage when hunting for prey. Frogs, lizards, snakes, birds, and rodents supplement their diet when necessary. Unlike any other owl, burrowing owls males are larger than females. Furthermore, these owls are active both night and day, contrary to typical owl habit. These owls were plentiful in this area in the past, but now scarcely seen here. Listed as a "species of special concern", we hope to bring these unique owls back to Bluefield.

2) Observation Tower

The observation tower overlooks a large wetland commonly used by Herons, egrets, sandhill crane and wood stork. Many of these wading birds were hunted nearly to extinction in the early 1900's to obtain their breeding plumage feathers for hat decorations. A single auction in London in 1902, sold 1,608 packages of herons' plumes. These sales "meant 192,960 herons killed at their nests, and from two to three times that number of young or eggs destroyed." There was no question that plume trading had become a very lucrative business. "In 1903…the price for plumes offered to hunters was $32 per ounce, which makes the plumes worth about twice their weight in gold." (Later they were to bring $80!) The millinery trade employed 83,000 people (1 of every 1,000 Americans) in 1900. The collection of feathers was finally banned throughout the U.S. in 1913.

3) Christmas Scrub

This scrub has been known as "Christmas Tree" Scrub for many, many years. For generations, local residents as far away as Okeechobee cut the young Sand Pines for use as Christmas trees. In recent years Fir, Spruce or Scotch Pines are used as Christmas Trees.

4) Seminole Camp

A Seminole Indian camp was located in this vicinity. They stayed in the scrub in the summer months, away from the flooded swamps and mosquitoes, and moved down to the Cypress Creek swamp during the winter. Life was simple. They lived off the land, hunting, fishing, growing gardens and raising families. The Native Americans were "evicted" from the site in the 1940's shortly after they were accused of taking a calf from the rancher.

5) Bald Eagle

In the distance is a Bald Eagle nest. The nest can be 6-10 feet in width, 20 feet deep, and weigh up to 2 tons. Adult birds have a white tail and head, and may grow to 3 feet in height with a wing span of 8 feet.

Many of Florida's eagles are migratory, returning to their nesting trees in late September or early October. Courtship can include spectacular aerial displays of soaring and diving. The birds grasp each others feet and cartwheel towards the ground, tumbling over and over. The birds fall for hundreds of feet, separating and flying off just in time to avoid crashing to the ground.

Usually 2 eggs are laid in November to January. The young hatch in 5-6 weeks, and eaglets leave the nest at 10-12 weeks. By April, those eagles that migrate, begin to move north for the summer, traveling several thousand miles each year. Although they prefer fish, eagles will eat many kinds of live prey, including cattle egrets, small herons and other water birds, turtles, snakes and small mammals. Eagles also eat carrion such as stranded fish in marshes or carcasses of large animals. Eagle populations began to decline in the late 1800's from egg collecting, shooting, trapping and loss of habitat. DDT, a pesticide identified as causing damage to egg shell thickness, was banned in 1972.

6) Military Trail

During the Second Seminole War in 1835-1842, a series of forts were constructed throughout Florida. Fort Van Swearingen, located about ½ mile northwest of here, was an important fort that linked Ft. Jupiter in the east to Ft. Drum, Ft. Basinger, and Ft. Brooke (Tampa) to the west. The fort was in operation from (1838-1857?) A series of trails linked the forts. These trails transported men, equipment and supplies between forts. A portion of the military trail crossed at this location.

7) Gator Hole

Alligator mating season starts in the first part of April. Nests are constructed of mud and plant debris in mounds 2 to 3 feet tall, usually about 10-15 feet from water. An average of 42 eggs are laid in the nest. Temperature of the incubating nest determines whether male and female alligators are created. Eggs that incubate between 90 and 93 degrees become males, while those incubating between 82 and 86 degrees become females. From 87 degrees and 89 degrees, the ratio of males to females is about equal. Baby gators hatch from mid-August through September. Deep water of the pond provides adequate food such as insects, frogs and fish. Hatchling gators usually stick together for the first year or two in small groups called "pods". This alligator "hole" is an ideal location to watch the lifecycles of the Alligators throughout the year.

8) Logging

The ranch was logged of its virgin trees in the late 1920's and early 1930's. A narrow-gauge railroad about 3 feet wide, transported logs to a sawmill located in Sherman, approximately 7 miles to the west. The logs were commonly between 6 and 8 feet in diameter, and 50 feet in height. This elevated area may have been a crossing for the railroad over the creek.

9) Stills

During the Prohibition era, alcohol was banned throughout the country. Illegal stills were constructed in many areas of the backwoods by bootleggers, for personal consumption as well as providing an income to support their families. Most stills were located near an adequate water supply. Corn meal, sugar and yeast were carried in on foot from several routes so that a single trail wouldn't lead "revenuers" to the still. Several stills were constructed on the site, remnants of which still re-

Bluefield Natural Area is a 3,285 acre site located on the eastern slope of the Orlando Ridge, a relic sand ridge originating near Orlando and ending in Martin County.

This area contains a mosaic of natural habitats including: scrub (507 acres), scrubby flatwoods (279 acres), bay-gall and prairie hammock (525 acres), mesic and wet flatwoods (328 acres), wet prairie (594 acres), dry prairie (265 acres) and depression marsh (129 acres). This variety of natural habitats supports a diverse population of wildlife and plant species, including 13 animals and 5 plants on the threatened and endangered species lists.

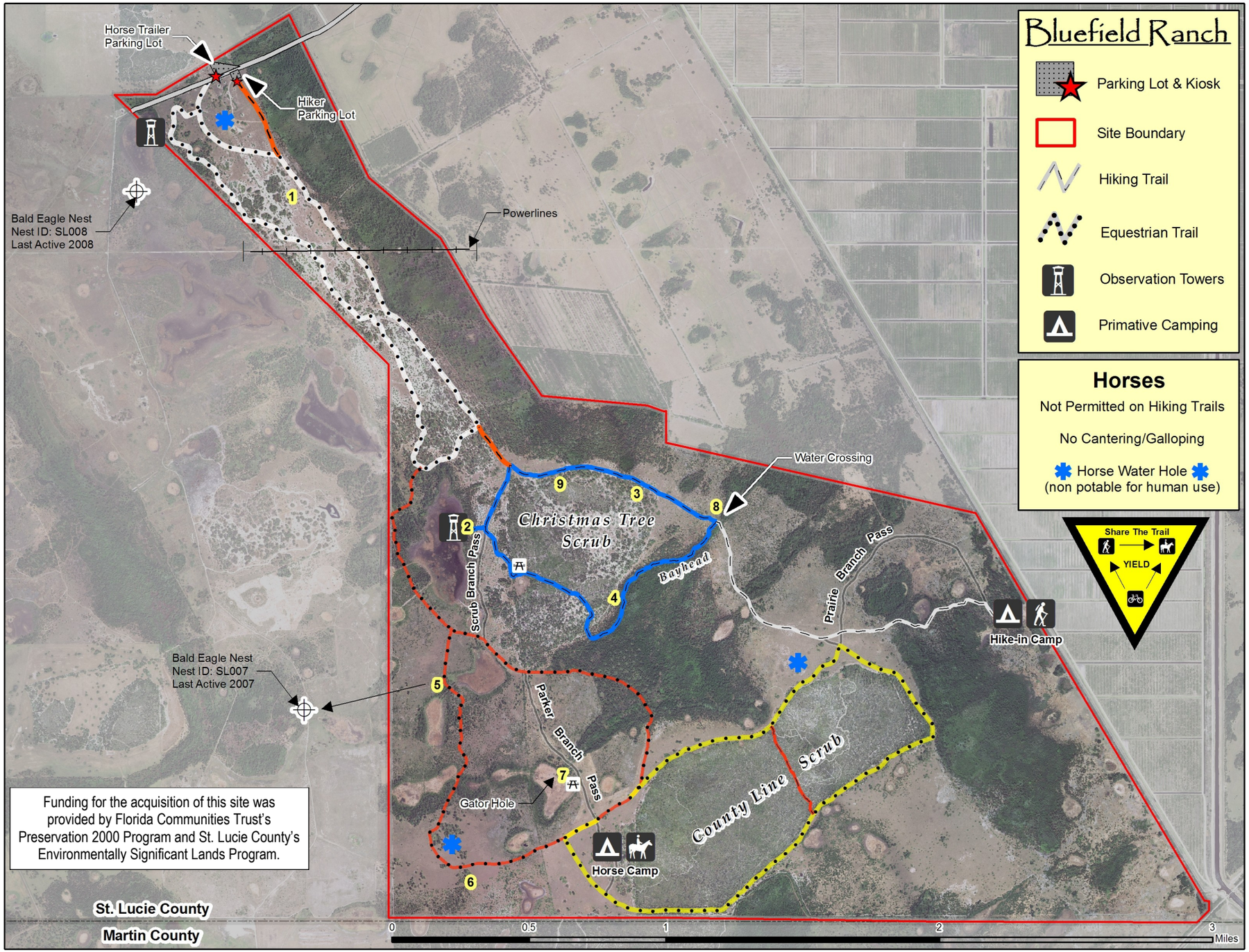
Recreation opportunities include a wildlife blind, observation tower, primitive camping and 20 miles of hiking and horse trails. Bluefield is located at the southern end of Bluefield Rd., 18 miles west of Ft Pierce off of SR70.

Guidelines and Safety Information:

- Be cautious of uneven trail surfaces.
- Please remain on the trails.
- Carry adequate drinking water.
- In case of lightning, seek a low area away from trees, fence lines and tall objects.
- In case of emergency, call 911.
- While hiking the trail you may encounter animals indigenous to this area. Please observe from a safe distance.
- Leave all plant life intact.
- Please leave site cleaner than you found it. "Pack it in, pack it out."
- Use at own risk.
- No hunting or firearms permitted onsite.

Primitive Camping

Bluefield has several primitive campsites now available. We offer 5 hike-in sites and 5 equestrian ride-in sites. Campsites are estimated to be **4 miles** from the parking area. Composting toilets are available at both camping areas, **however** water, food, and other necessities must be brought in. For more Information call 772-462-2525



Bluefield Ranch Natural Area

St. Lucie County
Environmental Resources Department
2300 Virginia Avenue
Ft. Pierce, FL 34982

772-462-2525

http://www.stlucieco.gov/erd/environmental_lands.htm

Site Open: Sunrise to Sunset