

## POINTS OF INTEREST AT BLUEFIELD RANCH NATURAL AREA

# Bluefield Ranch



# Natural Area



St. Lucie County  
Environmental  
Resources Department



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### 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) 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 to 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 eaglets 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 1/2 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. Hatching 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 life cycles 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. 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 remain.



This site was purchased with funds from Florida Communities Trust's Preservation 2000 Program and St. Lucie County's Environmentally Significant Lands (ESL) Program.



## About Bluefield



The 3,285 acre site is 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), baygall 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.

## CAMPING

PRIMITIVE CAMPING WILL BE AVAILABLE IN THE FUTURE. CAMPING WILL INCLUDE FIVE HIKE-IN SITES, FIVE HORSEBACK RIDE-IN SITES, AND ONE GROUP CAMP SITES FOR LARGE GROUPS. COMPOSTING TOILETS WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR CAMPER USE. WATER, FOOD, AND OTHER NECESSITIES MUST BE BROUGHT IN.



## Safety Tips

Visitors use this site at their own risk:

Carry an adequate amount of drinking water.

There is no potable water on-site. In case of lightning, seek a low area away from trees, fence lines and tall objects.

In case of emergency, call 911

A series of trails cover the site, and may be accessed directly from the parking lot.

While hiking the trails, you may encounter an alligator, feral hog, or poisonous snake. These animals may be dangerous.



Please observe all wildlife from a distance.

Public hours are dawn to dusk.

To maintain the site's pristine character, remain on the trails.

Please leave plants and animals for others to enjoy.



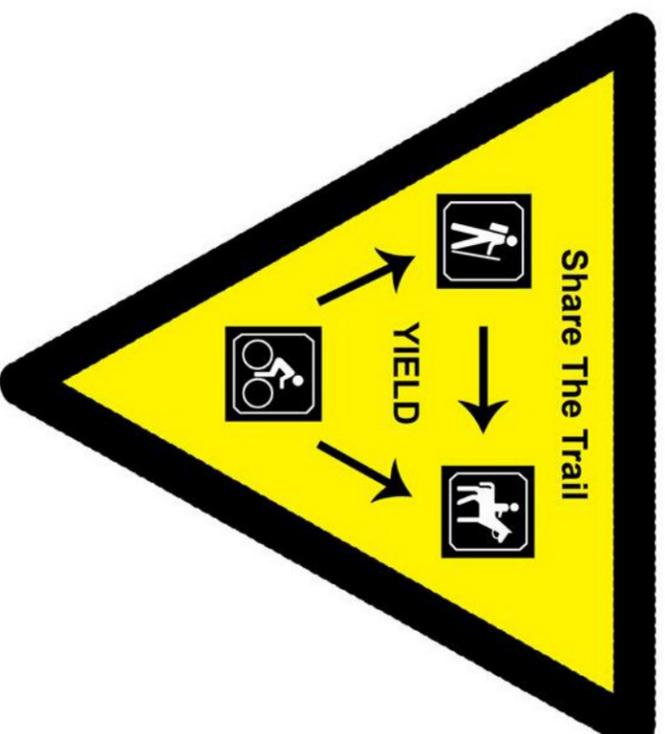
Bluefield is home to a variety of wildlife including Bald Eagle, Deer, Turkey, Wood Stork, Sandhill Crane, Quail, and several species of snakes, including the Rattlesnake.



Early morning and late evening are the best times to observe wildlife.

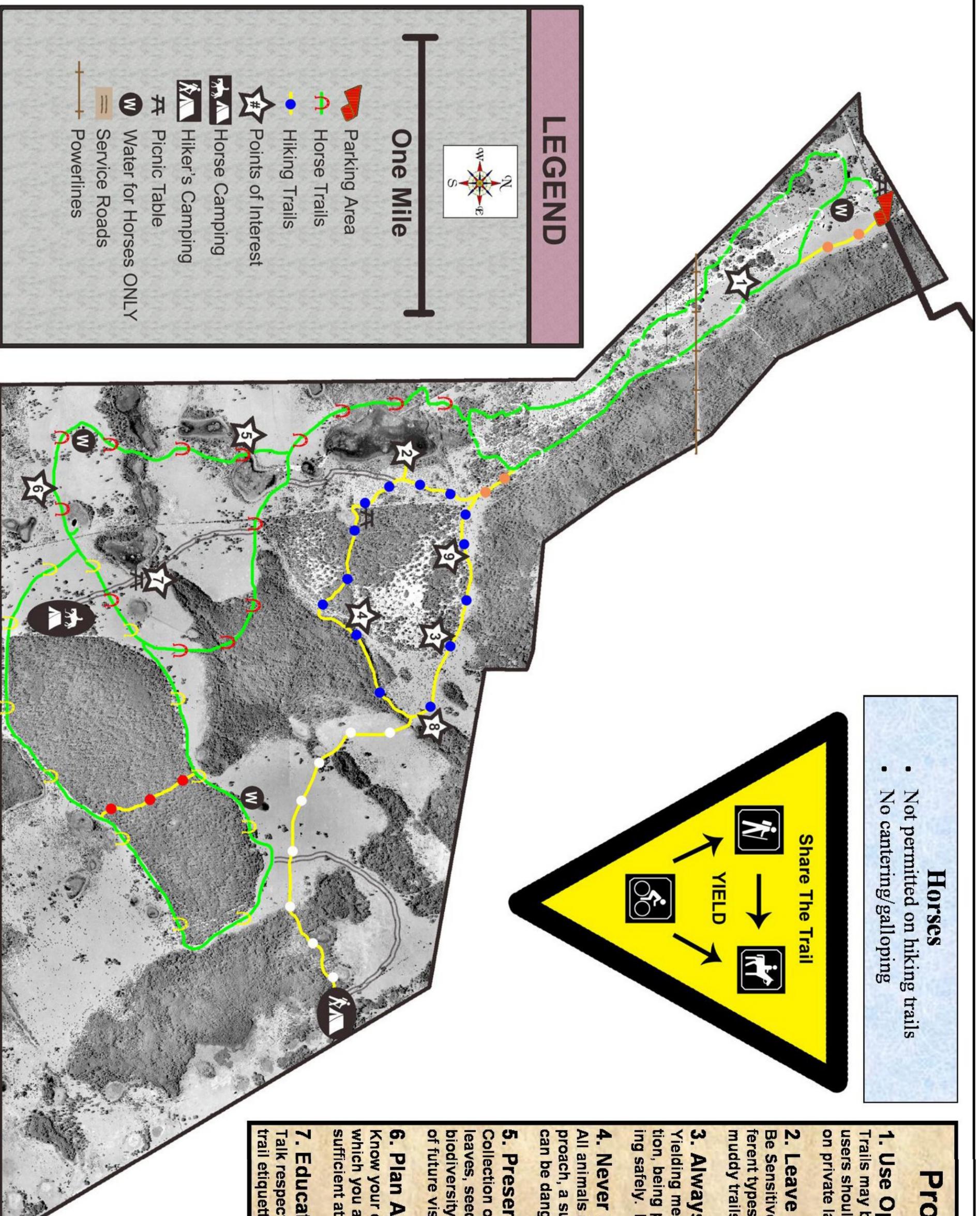


- Horses**
- Not permitted on hiking trails
  - No cantering/galloping



## Proper Trail Etiquette

- 1. Use Open Trails Only**  
Trails may be closed for a variety of reasons. Trail users should respect closures and avoid trespassing on private land.
- 2. Leave No Trace**  
Be sensitive to the dirt beneath you. Recognize different types of soils and trail conditions. Wet and muddy trails are more vulnerable to damage.
- 3. Always Yield Trail**  
Yielding means to slow down, establish communication, being prepared to stop if necessary, then passing safely. Bikes yield to horses and hikers.
- 4. Never Scare Animals**  
All animals are startled by an unannounced approach, a sudden movement or a loud noise. This can be dangerous for you, others and the animals.
- 5. Preserve Native Flora**  
Collection of plants or their parts, including flowers, leaves, seeds, etc., is not permitted. Doing so affects biodiversity of the ecosystem and spoils enjoyment of future visitors to the site.
- 6. Plan Ahead**  
Know your equipment, your ability, and the area in which you are riding; prepare accordingly. Be self-sufficient at all times.
- 7. Educate Others**  
Talk respectfully with other trail users about proper trail etiquette, especially new users.



## LEGEND

- One Mile
- Parking Area
  - Horse Trails
  - Hiking Trails
  - Points of Interest
  - Horse Camping
  - Hiker's Camping
  - Picnic Table
  - Water for Horses ONLY
  - Service Roads
  - Powerlines