

Ridge Rangers



to the rescue

FWC FILES

Ridge Rangers remove trash at Flamingo Villas tract of Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area.

By Geoffrey Brown

Who or what are Ridge Ranger volunteers?

They are part of an award-winning volunteer program coordinated by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) in partnership with nine other agencies or organizations with a common goal of preserving uphill habitats, such as Florida scrub, on an area known as the Lake Wales Ridge.

A snapshot of progress

Last year, volunteers spent more than 3,000 hours working on more than 22 land management

areas, on projects as varied as monitoring apple snails in Lake Istokpoga; removing bamboo stands from Archbold Biological Station; restoring wetlands by planting more than 700 native grasses and trees; assisting at a fishing derby at the Avon Park Air Force Range; cleaning miles of hiking trails; providing general land stewardship and more.

National recognition

The 12-year-old program, managed by volunteer coordinator Lynne Flannery since January 2005, received national recognition in July 2007. Take Pride in

What has 164 feet, picks up trash, removes old fencing, cleans trails, manages for invasive nonnatives like natal grass and feral hogs, and comes equipped with tools and energy to attack these and a variety of other sometimes superhuman tasks?

82 Ridge Ranger volunteers.



Ridge Rangers remove dianella lily at Highlands Hammock State Park.

America[®], a national partnership program aimed at increasing volunteer service on America's public lands, awarded the Ridge Rangers the National Winner honor in the state event/program category.

It is the goal of Take Pride to empower volunteers from every corner of America to maintain and enhance our natural, cultural and historical sites. Take Pride encourages citizen stewardship through a public awareness campaign and an interactive Web site that highlights volunteer opportunities at natural and cultural sites across the United States. Visit www.takepride.gov/index.html for more information.

The Ridge Rangers earned this award based on the goals of the project, its scope and accomplishments, its impact and benefits to the area and natural resources, and its partnership efforts in the community. Flannery accepted the award during a ceremony at the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C. on July 19.

The Lake Wales Ridge

The Lake Wales Ridge is an ancient ridge along the spine of Florida, stretching more than 100 miles from Venus in High-

lands County up to Southeast Lake County. The ridge is composed of what were once ancient islands created more than a million years ago when most of Florida was still submerged and sea levels licked at their shores. These were some of the first terrestrial habitats created during those times, and through conservation efforts, still exist today.

Approximately 15 miles wide, the Ridge includes 517,303 acres of upland and associated habitats, including the highest or second-highest point in peninsular Florida. Of that total, 58,591 are managed conservation lands containing some of the rarest plants and animals in the world.

Federal and state listed species on the ridge include: Florida scrub-jays, Florida black bear, gopher frogs, southeastern American kestrel, Florida sandhill cranes, sand skinks, gopher tortoises, the eastern indigo snake and about 19 plants.

The ridge and its inhabitants are not immune to development challenges that plague the rest of Florida. For example, decades ago, developers bought more than 3,000 acres and laid the groundwork for what was to be a development for thousands of homes in an area on the ridge known as Carter Creek, or

Sebring Highlands to locals. The development barely got off the ground. FWC and The Nature Conservancy have worked hard to purchase up to 75 percent of the parcels to return them to native upland habitat. What remained was a giant waffle of roads, fragmenting many acres of land. This challenges land managers who need prescribed burns to preserve the scrub habitat the way nature managed it for centuries.

Volunteer coordination

Flannery's task as volunteer coordinator is to work with land managers from participating agency partners and to coordinate volunteer workdays on ridge properties throughout the year. She diligently sends out a newsletter once a quarter, detailing volunteer opportunities, highlighting a collaborating land manager, profiling a resident species, and of course, putting a volunteer in the spotlight.

Volunteers respond by checking items on the list of activities with which they



Lynn Flannery and Hazel Bryan work and laugh at Historic Bok Sanctuary.

would like to assist. Receiving the newsletter is a perk for volunteers and helps them keep abreast of happenings on the ridge. Flannery also holds an annual recognition event to celebrate the volunteers, as well as fun quarterly activities to give them opportunities to mix and socialize while engaging in a local educational or recreational activity.

Although individual volunteer opportunities by partnering agencies come up, most volunteer activities involve groups and take place on Saturdays throughout the year. Many volunteers are retirees who enjoy staying active and being around like-minded folks who like being outside and believe in taking action to protect and conserve the habitat around the ridge. Some volunteers are snow-birds while others are year-round residents.

Volunteer highlights

The Take Pride in America award is not the only recognition Ridge Rangers have received for their incredible work. In 2006, Ridge Ranger Tom Palmer was recognized by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. The nationwide program annually honors 26 outstanding older volunteers for contributions to their communities. Palmer was honored at a ceremony in Washington, D.C. with a Metlife Foundation 2006 Older Volunteers Enrich America Award in the Community Champion Category for his work as a land steward at Lake Blue Scrub, an 80-acre land management area managed by the FWC.

Palmer started volunteering for the Ridge Rangers when The Nature Conservancy first launched the program in 1995. He has worked hundreds of hours at Lake Blue Scrub, where he volunteers on a regular basis, monitoring wildlife and plants, removing nonnatives,



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maintaining fence and fire lanes and other tasks.

“I volunteer because the work needs to be done,” he said. “We need to preserve wild places, and you can’t be passive all the time. Being involved as a Ridge Ranger gives me a new appreciation of the challenges that land managers face in managing public lands.”

Flannery recruited Teresa Lutz, originally from Dayton, Ohio, to volunteer for a workday in Polk County while Lutz was showing jewelry at a pioneer festival two years ago. Lutz has been a steward at Hickory Lake Scrub in Frostproof ever since, working mainly there and other nearby areas. She has worked from 10 to 15 different sites so far. She, in

turn, recruited her husband to help pick up trash and haul away discarded furniture. She said she enjoys volunteering for a variety of reasons. It provides social contact since she normally works alone at home; it provides exercise and a better understanding of local natural areas that normally are not open to the public. She also enjoys the occasional wildlife sighting, such as a venomous coral snake and gopher tortoise she recently saw at The Nature Conservancy’s Tiger Creek Preserve.

Lutz developed a sociological insight while on trash detail. She noticed the more she returned to pick up trash, the more it seemed that others took more care in keeping the same area clean. She felt her actions changed the behavior of people she has never seen or met, giving her more hope than anything else she had previously done.

“That’s powerful work, and that is why I’m a Ridge Ranger,” she said with pride. **FW**

Ridge Ranger partners

The following agencies and organizations collaborate with the FWC on Ridge Ranger volunteer projects:

- Archbold Biological Station
- Avon Park Air Force Range/ Department of Defense
- Florida Division of Forestry
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida State Parks
- Historic Bok Sanctuary
- Polk County Environmental Lands Program
- The Nature Conservancy
- Southwest Florida Water Management District
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Interested in learning more about the Ridge Ranger Volunteer Program?

Contact Lynne Flannery at 863-699-3742 or through the Ridge Ranger Web site: MyFWC.com/ridgerangers. For other FWC volunteer opportunities, go to MyFWC.com/volunteer.