

***Finding the Wild in Florida's Wilderness -
An Off-Road Cycle Across South Florida***

by Pieter Van Dien, Naples, Florida

I had read with interest suggestions of a bike path next to Tamiami Trail (US 41) between Naples and Miami but was disappointed to learn of mounting opposition and stalled progress. It occurred to me, however, that it might be possible to cross the southern part of the state relatively traffic-free by using existing double track trails, gravel roads and levees across county, state and national parks. Could there really be enough wilderness in the third most populated state in the US to string together 150 or so continuous off-road miles? I aimed to find out.

After weeks of reviewing Google satellite maps and making several scouting rides, I had sketched out a rough track across the state. I started my trip on the east side and rode west to take advantage of a forecasted east wind. My starting point was the Southern Glades Trail, part of the South Dade Greenway, which runs along the C-111 canal terminating just off US 1 a bit north of Key Largo. After some confusion due to construction and a covert ride through an open "Official Use Only" gate, I made it to the start of the Southern Glades Trail and was off on what would be a three-day ride across Florida.

I knew I would have to cross the C-111 canal approximately 7 miles from the start of Southern Glades to get from the east side to the west side. Thankfully, there was no construction at the pedestrian bridge I had scouted weeks earlier and, after a tight squeeze through a pedestrian gate with my loaded bike, I crossed the canal. Another 7 miles of riding on rough gravel and broken pavement brought me to Ingraham Highway leading into Everglades National Park and the Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center. My prior scouting trip to the area had paid dividends as I knew that continuing north across the road would lead to a blocked canal crossing. Instead, I turned left on Ingraham Highway for the first paved section of the trip for approximately 1 mile before turning right on the well-groomed Frog Pond Trail.

After riding about a mile north on the Frog Pond Trail, I came to a three-way intersection. Again, thankful for having made a prior trip to the area, I knew to continue straight on the smaller (and less obvious) of the three tracks. Traveling north for another 1.5 miles brought me to a second intersection. By turning east, yes *backtracking* - but only for a mile, I arrived at the Everglades Trail, essentially the northern extension of the Southern Glades Trail but now on the correct side of the blocked canal crossing. From there I enjoyed a wide and smooth gravel boulevard for 14 miles. The relief of my hands and backside did not last, however, as after crossing SW 168th Street the Everglades Trail devolves into chunky gravel over broken pavement for another 3 miles and the end of the official greenway at SW 136th Street.

Despite the end of the official trail, the path continues north of 136th and Google Maps at least continues to label it as the "Everglades Trail". Unlike other gated access points thus far, though, the gate to the north lacks a pedestrian opening. Signage on the gate says no motorized vehicles but nothing is stated about pedestrians or bicycles. Taking that as permission, I hefted my laden bike up and over the gate and continued on my way.

This portion of the trail was a mixture of large stones fused with broken pavement and topped off with loose gravel and was by far the roughest track of the day but also the most beautiful. As the farms dropped away, the view from atop the levee was not of a river of grass, but an endless sea of grass stretching as far west as the eye can see and rippled by the east winds.

As US 41 came into focus, I was not entirely reluctant to leave this rough track despite the beautiful view. I crossed Tamiami Trail to the levee access road just a short way to the west. I would describe the riding conditions on the levee path north of US 41 as “medium” gravel and the path is generally smooth. Another 11 miles brought me to the ValueJet 592 Memorial and my end point for my first day, having covered just about 55 miles. After some directional confusion, my wife located me and we enjoyed a nice overnight in Doral, just a 20-minute drive to the east.

The next morning, I set off from the ValueJet Memorial and continued west. The levee had ended so the obvious way forward would be to ride the paved shoulder of US 41. Satellite maps, however, had revealed a faint double track between US 41 and the canal. This wisp of a track disappeared entirely at times leaving no choice but to ride on stiff grass that sucked up every pedal stroke and brought speeds down into the single digits. This would prove to be the slowest and most tiring portion of the entire journey. A quick stop at the Miccosukee gas station on US 41 for fluid replenishment was prudent as that turned out to be the last available stop for the day.

The tire sucking grass continued for nearly 8 miles before solidifying into a solid double track. Another couple of miles brought me to the start of Loop Road. Running south of US 41, Loop Road cuts off a large bend in Tamiami Trail. The east 7 miles are paved while the rest is well-groomed gravel. I am not going to add the pavement on Loop Road to my pavement total as there are no cross roads and only sparse traffic (my ride, my rules). I found the graveled portion to be in good condition with minimum wash-boarding making for a fast ride over 24 total miles. My best gator sightings were on the east end of Loop Road suggesting Loop would be a less crowded alternative to Shark Valley if you want to show out of state visitors the real Florida.

Loop Road terminates at Monroe Station, an off-road vehicle (ORV) parking area off US 41. From there, ORV trails run north into Big Cypress National Preserve. Maps of Big Cypress show double-track roads going north and west all the way to Turner Road and the outskirts of Ochopee, my destination for the night. From prior trips into Big Cypress, however, I knew that many tracks are flooded entirely or heavily rutted with deep pools of water. I reluctantly turned west on US 41 to start what would be by far the most terrifying portion of my trip.

It's not just the high-speed traffic along this stretch of road that is so disturbing, it is the combination of a narrow shoulder, frequent bridges with no shoulder and parked cars left by tourists looking for alligators. Further, while the shoulder was by no means wide when originally laid down, it has become even narrower from neglect with grass growing over the underlying pavement in many places. I turned on my rear flasher and rode this section as fast as possible. Most drivers were courteous and moved over; others seemed to come even closer, whether intentionally or not, I do not know.

Fortunately, I made the 11 miles to my stop for the day unscathed. The Official Skunk Ape Headquarters may not seem like an obvious stopping point for a multi-day ride across Florida, but the neighboring Trail Lakes Campground certainly does. Boasting the only hot showers in the area, this campground provides both tent sites and cabin rentals. The friendly staff were helpful, and I was quickly checked-in to my small cabin which I had reserved to avoid having to carry camping supplies. I also learned a bit about the Skunk Ape and was assured sightings had occurred but not recently. Although no food is available other than small sundry items in the gift shop, Joanie's Blue Crab Café is only 1 mile further west on 41 and offers an excellent lunch menu. I was not lucky enough to see a Skunk Ape during my stay, but I did spend a comfortable evening in my cabin under a sky full of stars.

I set out early the next morning and pedaled an easy mile back along a thankfully quiet US 41 to Turner River Road. After a quick check for gators along the boardwalk at the HP Williams Roadside Park, I headed north on Turner and then crossed west, south and west again on Wagon Wheel Road all the way to State Road 29. While certainly adding miles by going north then south, this route avoids a good stretch of US 41. Unfortunately, on this trip both Turner and Wagon Wheel were heavily wash-boarded, extremely so in some areas, making for rough going.

Emerging on State Road 29, I headed south towards Copeland and the entrance to Fakahatchee Strand Preserve, a Florida state park. I logged 1.5 miles on 29 which was quiet that morning. Taking a right on Janes Scenic Drive I pedaled another mile to the park entrance. After paying the modest entrance fee, I continued northwest on Jane's Scenic, a well-maintained gravel road. While I saw little wildlife, I found the surface to be excellent and a relief from the harsh corduroy of Turner & Wagon Wheel. Eleven miles passed quickly, and I arrived at Picayune State Forest.

Picayune is a failed planned development — one of the “swampland in Florida” scams — that was eventually purchased by the state. The forest offers a mix of gravel roads, sandy double-track and some potential for single-track riding although flooding and fires change conditions almost yearly. The roads are generally rough, much rougher than Jane's Scenic, with softball sized gravel, broken pavement, large craters, sand pits and seasonally flooded roadways.

Entering the forest on the far east side of Stewart (also called 100th Avenue), there is no pay station, so you are on your honor to pay the small user fee on the way out. This area is often flooded but the lack of any significant precipitation over the preceding weeks left only large puddles that were easily avoided. After riding west for 6 miles and traversing several deep sand traps, I arrived at Miller Boulevard and took a right to continue north. Miller is still mostly paved but large craters have formed over the years that have been filled in with varying amounts of sand and gravel. Although progress north was quick, I had to keep a sharp eye out to avoid putting the front wheel in a hole and going over the bars.

Three miles or so on Miller brought me to the east end of Sabal Palm (also labeled 78th Avenue) and the homestretch. I turned left and headed west towards Naples. For the most part, Sabal Palm rides well and would classify as a typical gravel road except for a horseshoe shaped detour heavily rutted with large softball sized rocks and loose sand. At the terminus of the horseshoe, Sabal Palm continues west for another uneventful mile to the Sabal Palm hiking trailhead which would be a natural start or end point for this trip (don't forget to pay the “iron ranger” in the parking area). Stopping the odometer at the Sabal Palm trail parking lot, I logged a total of 145 miles over three days.

Reviewing my notes, I calculate 15.7 miles of road riding to cross the entire state of Florida. We'll call that 11% of the journey. Finding a passable route through Big Cypress would eliminate almost all those miles. So, in the end I had found a way to cross Florida mostly traffic-free, a strong testament to our county, state and Federal park systems. I hope you will try exploring a bit of the wild Florida on your bicycle, I know you will enjoy it.

About the Bike

Picking a bike for this journey was difficult given the varying terrain, load carrying requirements and potential for headwinds. I settled on a hardtail (meaning front suspension only) mountain bike but I knew the straight handlebars would never do. Yes, I put drop bars (road bars) on my mountain bike.

Why such blasphemy? Comfort and aerodynamics. If you have ever sat on a mountain bike for hours on end you may have found it somewhat uncomfortable on the derriere. A road bike, with its lower hand positions, puts more weight on the arms and shoulders and takes some weight off the seat. The multiple hand positions offered also combat cramping and numbness. Further, a rider can get low on the drops ducking under a headwind.

With a short stem my mountain bike adapted to road bars just fine and took a load even better with some 25 pounds of gear on the back seeming to disappear when underway. Tubeless cross-country mountain bike tires on 29-inch rims rolled fast and never flatted. In fact, over the entire trip I had not one mechanical issue rendering the five pounds of pump, spares and tools total dead weight but still essential for a backcountry excursion. I did note that cell phone reception was available over just about the entire route although getting a car in for pickup would be impossible in some areas. If you attempt this route, be sure to bring a reasonably sized first aid kit and reserves of water and nutrition with you each day.