

Looking for Signs on the Florida Trail

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Seed Tick Beach

Seven days past the winter solstice, under a jay-blue sky, the tide of 2020 is turning. Maybe we'll get control of this pandemic. Maybe we'll see our grown children and our baby grandchild again, after nearly a year apart. Maybe the new administration will turn the tone of our country for the better.

At the moment, though, I'm most interested in taking a break from all my hopes and worries and let the land rise up through my boots.

We begin, my husband Jeff and I, at a trailhead named Purify Bay. For decades, this 5-mile hike was a frequent destination for our family and friends, until one epic run-in with seed ticks. But it's been a normal north Florida winter, what used to pass for normal, with a couple of frosts, so we hoped the ticks would be in check. To be doubly safe, we stuffed the cuffs of our pants into long socks and sprayed repellent from boot laces to thighs.

The Apalachee Chapter of the FTA has maintained a 127-mile stretch of the Florida Trail from the Aucilla River west to the Apalachicola since 1982. For decades, we've hiked various of its segments along the Sopchoppy River, and across Bradwell Bay. The Cathedral of Palms is always a favorite, which leads the walker to gem-blue Shepherd Spring. Other times we are drawn east, to the Aucilla Sinks and or the Pinhook River.

The trail to Seed Tick Beach skirts the surfless hem of Apalachee Bay. Marshes obscure the precise meeting place of land and water. This edge is where I most love to be. The trail meanders, often within sight of a Refuge road, offering a choice between primitive path and single track road. We choose the winding path, a grand hike, passing under live and water oaks, and loblolly and longleaf pines raised up six inches above the surface of the forest on massive boles. Cones and ochre needles of pine crunch underfoot.

Roots like gator backs sprawl across the path, which is also strewn with tiny stars of sweetgum leaves and mittens of water oak.

The landscape breaks out into gallberry and saw palmetto, rooms and corridors of every kind of coastal hammock and forest. Quiet quiet quiet, but for a rhythmic insect purr, off in the woods. My pants swish through wiregrass clumps, drifts of maidencane and stiff backed palm fronds. In warmer weather, this is where the ticks live, and I think of them waving tiny legs from low-to-the-ground grasses, ready to hitch a meal from any warm blooded mammal moving along the path.

We cross three bridges over tiny creeks, each only a couple of feet wide. Uncounted, unnamed numbers of these streamlets snake from the Red Hills to the coastal plain; they are just about to merge with their destiny--the Gulf of Mexico.

Just before we break out into a big Gulf view ourselves, I glimpse our children, and our niece and nephews—or the memory of them—joyous, at the turn of the trail, running ahead on the narrow path, and my heart lurches with longing. It is only the two of us today.

We find that the Seed Tick Beach sign has been replaced with the much more inviting “Marsh Point Trail.” Overhead, a pair of eagles, silent and circling, whitetails disappearing into the sun glare. A day that started in the 40s has gained another ten degrees of warmth. A light breeze and a lighter dusting of gnats. Perfect.

The sandy beach is where I want to be, so I improvise a path through the black needle rush, holding my arms high above the sharp tipped stems, aiming for the vast unsloped sand flats and salt barrens ahead. You might expect to hear the clapping of rails in the marsh, but not today. Three yellow-legs and two great egrets scatter as I push through the reedy juncus. I have my eye on the place where the marsh gives way to bare sand and a sprinkling of close-cropped glasswort.

This is a salt barren. Very few people visit them, and never in the summer when the no-see-ums and the sun glare would make you most unwelcome. Full and new moon tides overflow these flats bimonthly, and as

the water evaporates, salt accumulates and crystallizes, suppressing nearly all plant life. This set of circumstances is the reason for a set of Confederate salt work ruins we know are near.

We spot a peculiar landscape feature rising above the level of the land that doesn't feel natural to the flats. We angle on a narrow path tramped straight and flat by small mammals, most likely raccoons and bobcats, perhaps a few deer, to the waist-high mound crowned by yucca, prickly pear, and yaupon holly shrubs.

We climb the rocky slope of the mound and push through its thorny vegetable guardians into the empty center of the ring, about 20 to 30 feet in diameter. No wonder our kids loved coming out here so much. The ruined salt work lends itself to imaginative play. A raised dais or stage? An enclosed place for frolic, with only the overhead sun to see? Cabbage palm fronds to wave as flags or swords?

But there is nothing left of the original purpose of this construct, except for puzzle pieces of iron and half or quartered brick that crunch under my boots. During the Civil War, area residents boiled down water from this saltiest of bays in enormous iron kettles and cauldrons to replace the salt blockaded from reaching the Confederate states during the War. The heavy flakes of iron and rounded bits of brick I pick up from the surface of the mound are the only remnants of the hundreds of crude furnaces and thousands of bushels of salt destroyed by Federal forces along our north Florida coastline.

As we turned to retrace our steps to the trailhead, I thought about how this landscape has absorbed the evidence of the people who used it for their purposes. Salt, evaporated from these barrens. Pitch, rosin and turpentine, and then every bit of timber from the once prodigious pine forests. Shingle, posts, and barrel staves from cypress, cedar and longleaf pines. What have we given in return?

Off Spring Creek

To explore the offshore islands we could see beyond the saltworks at Seed Tick Beach, and others like them, we must travel by kayak. The Spring Creek boat ramp is our put in today. Our plan is to catch a rising tide and a north-northwest wind to an easy take out at Shell Point. A tiny mileage, a Sunday afternoon taste to remind us of the offshore travel routes that local people have always used, and to see how the islets are faring as sea level rises. We choose our outings in Apalachee Bay according to the wind, whether they will help or hinder us. Jeff would have preferred a longer paddle due south to Bottoms Road or Levy Bay but the weather conditions didn't favor that plan. This wind, this tide, will practically float us to Shell Point, once a rustic coastal village, now flush with million dollar housing options.

A mishmash of trailers, old wooden houses and shacks, and a growing sprinkle of expensive elevated second homes surround the boat ramp at Spring Creek. I'm sad to see that Leo Lovell's Spring Creek restaurant is shuttered, a victim of the Covid pandemic and toughening economic conditions. I ate there often with naturalist friends when I first moved to Tallahassee in the 1980s. Hushpuppies, baked potatoes, fried shrimp, coconut and chocolate cream pie—irresistible after a long day in the field. Today, we'll make do with roasted peanuts in a plastic jar, and a container of black olive hummus.

We lower our boats into the creek and the day takes us. The bay is scrawled with ribs, teeth, vertebrate, coiled spines, serrated ribs and shoals—oyster reefs of every shape and description. I watch several fishing boats and a couple of men pulling crab traps. A handful of oystercatchers pick and pipe among the elevated shell; ospreys, hooded mergansers and cormorants dive for smaller fry. For the earliest peoples, these oyster beds and bars offered year round food. Everywhere a river or even a sizable creek meet saltwater, the goodness of estuary was born.

I'm eager to explore the small islands beyond the bars. Our kayaks slip a mile across the clear, tannic-tinted bay, and then bump over the reefs which shelve into firm white sand. I lace up my sneakers before I climb out of my boat.

Close up, you can see that this place is not the tropical oasis it once was, shaped and smoothed long ago by a sweet-tempered Gulf. The pines and the cedars, and most of the cabbage palms that formed the island's spine are naked now, dead and stripped of their green. Still holding the sand in place are clumps of yaupon and saltbush. You can see how storms are shoveling sand over the edging marsh. Things aren't right here, not stable, and not how it used to be. These are islands destined to drown. We see this everywhere on our coast now, on St. Vincent Island, along the perimeter of St. Joe Bay, and at the mouths of Goose and Shepherd's creeks and the Auculla River.

I turn back and look at the coastal forests that fringe this bay, the woodlands that have held this edge for more than ten thousand years. But now the land, which perches on limerock and seems to rise from the needles of salt marsh—now the vertical landscape is returning to coastal shelf. Our world is out of balance. The coastline is stepping back to a new stand we aren't planning for. Where will the Wilson's plovers congregate, post-breeding? Where will the oystercatchers nest? They are harbingers of our own destiny, this I know.

Byrd Hammock

On another January day, I strike east from the check station on Wakulla Beach Road, again on the Florida Trail. Raindrops tip tap on the vegetation and the hood of my jacket. Gray sky, no wind and the trail through dense palm hammock is wet, with exposed lintels of lime rock and again, the snaking roots.

I chose this path because I've learned that only a couple hundred yards from this trail lies the Byrd Hammock archeological site—a rare double village/burial mound complex dating between AD 1 and AD 850. The tenure of the original Floridians on this ground dates back more than twelve thousand years. These native peoples belonged to a host of aboriginal groups—the Apalachicoli, the Chisca, the Sawokli, the Chatot, the Amacan, the Chine, and the Pacara—who were in turn descended from prehistoric unnamed (to us) ancestors. Except for handfuls of Indians who fled the state, tribes indigenous to the Panhandle of Florida were exterminated by European warfare and disease.

I'm walking alone, knowing I'm near an ancient settlement, and also that this ground has been well trod since the Gulf retreated to the continental shelf. Paths and trails of every size and description once crossed Creek territory and kept their towns and settlements connected to one another and the outside world. Some of these were ancient foot paths originally used by large animals, later adopted by native peoples, wrote Angela Pulley Hudson in her essential 2010 text *Creek Paths and Federal Roads*.

I attend to my body as I move over and through the land, wondering if it could be possible to experience the trail as an indigenous woman who lived here might have. I give my senses priority over the thinking part of my brain.

In an earlier time, an earlier woman may have felt the same shiver of the body, core to skin on a damp and chilly January afternoon. Absorbed the same blessed silence, although in a world with far more birdsong and numbers of birds. The lift of the foot, the bend of the knee, the strength of hip and thigh and calf tested over a storm-downed pine or magnolia; we'd both know that bipedal motion.

But she knew a continuum of natural to supernatural in this landscape that I do not. Her forest was alive with stories, cosmology, and language that I can never know.

Nevertheless, I watch for signs. And I don't mean the blazes leading me along the Florida Trail, hunter-orange rectangles spray-painted at eye level on the tall bodies of palms and pines. Volunteers maintain these trail markers so that you can't get lost. They even provide for the high water conditions on a day like today, painting light blue blazes to offer a path around spots that hold water in periods of high rainfall.

The forest offers its own signage on the trunks of the trees: shelf fungi, patches of green moss, burn scars and white lichen. If I followed the forest's way making, it would have me slow down and wander, never a bad thing.

Deeper into the woods, the trail muddies and puddles. There's a bare gum swamp on my right, pocketed with stands of sawgrass. A pair of wheedling wood ducks, spooked into the air by my presence, confirm that this is swamp by their presence. There's another wetland on the left. The path,

skirting between the two bodies of water, asks me to jump, hummock to hummock to hummock, if my feet are to remain dry. Fingers of fresh water reach toward one another, wanting to connect and become one, the true way of the world.

Wild birds thrive on these edges. They seek food and safety in beautiful mixed guilds, each kind specializing in the part of the place they have been designed for, at the unimaginably long ago beginning of bird time on the planet. I squat with my back against one of the biggest pines, a comforting giant. I don't hear the voice of the long ago woman, but I do take in the present time chinks and whinnies and call notes of the birds. Some are wintering here: robins and phoebes and goldfinches. Some have returned to breed: like pine warblers, with many more to come. The year rounders, the Carolina chickadees, tufted titmouse, brown-headed nuthatches, blackbirds and grackles, all the woodpeckers. The sky is so monochrome, I can't see the birds well in the tops of the trees, but suddenly a black-and-white warbler, so perfectly feathered, lands on the pine tree across the trail and with brightest of eyes, studies me. My heart leaps with gratitude for the tiny bird's aliveness.

I don't know if that winter bird was the sign I was looking for, but it did lead me to one. Just a bit further along the trail, a perfect circle of feathers. I kneel in amazement. Body, beak and feet left, nothing but a host of feathers, a mandala wedged into the leafy ground. And what feathers! Each one is either black or white, some are patterned, and all, ever so small. Because of the diminutive size of the feathers, and the presence of stiff tail feathers meant for propping against the trunk of a tree, I know that I am looking at the dismembered life of our smallest woodpecker, the downy.

I can look at this halo of feathers from so many angles, ask so many questions. How did the woodpecker die? Did a woodland hawk snatch this perfect being from its life and use this clear path as its platter? Or, is there a branch overhead where a predator might have perched to dine?

“This world,” says my teacher Deena Metzger, “doesn't wish to be seen merely as wounded. Never forget to look for the beauty in the loss.”

I think of how my mind goes more often to fragmentation and loss (the climate, the children grown and gone, the lost islands and edge of our coast,

this single lost downy). The trails I've walked and paddled this January are asking me to apprentice myself not only to fragmentation and loss, but to the ongoing reciprocities of the Earth, and the potential to reclaim our profound relationships to the world in which we are set.