

BIKE FLORIDA: Spring Break à Veló

You'll come for the sunshine and
come back for the people



Story and photos by Susan Weaver

It's Sunday, the last day of March and the first day of Bike Florida. With the mercury in the 80s and a glorious tailwind, I follow my cue sheet and other Bike Floridians, breezing past bumper-to-bumper shore traffic on the Clearwater Causeway. Its graceful arch spans vistas of greenish blue gulf waters crisscrossed in white by the wakes of pleasure boats. After training outdoors in Pennsylvania over the winter, how sweet this is!

Under blue skies and billowing clouds we pedal through spiky shadows of palm trees, past resort condos, and over another bridge. At Sand Key Park, sun lovers splash in the Gulf of Mexico as giant kites dance above them.

Back at the town of Clearwater's Ross Norton Park, Bike Florida headquarters has the familiar buzz of a big ride's opening day. Some of the 680 cyclists are still returning from afternoon rides. Folks in bright jerseys chat in line at the shower truck. Others relax beside tents that have sprouted on the lawn around the park's recreation center and along the shore of a lake.

In Bubba's Pamper Zone, where I'll be camping, rows of blue tents line the park's ball field. Traveling alone, I lean my bike against the fence and head for the shade of a tarp, lured by camp chairs and coolers filled with soft drinks. I plunk myself down to guzzle an orange soda. In this friendly atmosphere I'm soon chatting with other Pampered Pedalers. One points out a man, just beyond the shade of our oasis, with a large bird on his shoulder.

I've seen dogs on event rides but never a bird, so I investigate. The man, I learn, is Jim Wheeler, a recumbent cyclist and retiree from Sun City Center, Florida. The bird is Harry Gray, and she (yes, she) is a gray parrot who so loved her first bike ride on Jim's shoulder that she kept shouting "Whee!" Jim admits she's been his "incentive to ride ever since." That was 15,000 miles ago. Along with Jim's wife, they've also done cross-state rides in Georgia, Minnesota,

and Wisconsin. Jim says Harry likes all the attention she gets in the evening.

Harry's circle of friends is growing. I yield my spot and head to the showers.

Low Comedy and High Drama

Over a great breakfast buffet, Monday morning's scuttlebutt is the sprinkler incident. "I learned green grass means danger," quips one of the unlucky ones camped on the lawn in front of the rec center. "In the middle of the night I thought I was in a typhoon. The whole tent was shaking. I peered out — the sprinklers had come on!"

It pays to pack your sense of humor for a big ride. As the *Gainesville Sun's* Ron Cunningham later puts it in his Bike Florida blog, "What's a multi-day biking event without a little low comedy and a bit of high drama?"

The high drama will come later. For now, we set off on the day's out-and-back ride, heading north on the Pinellas Trail. The Pinellas, an urban-suburban rail-trail that stretches 34 miles, is one of a half-dozen paved trails in 2008's six-day Bike Florida. For the first time the event has more trail miles than connecting road miles. The 280-mile itinerary is designed to promote awareness of Florida's developing network of off-road trails, which is increasingly important, notes ride director Linda Crider, because "it's getting harder to find quiet, low-volume country roads as Florida continues to develop."

Today we're pedaling the Pinellas to its northern terminus at Tarpon Springs with a side trip to Honeymoon Island. In Clearwater, the Pinellas is stop and go with many at-grade crossings. But it's clearly an important connection between communities, a popular trail (more than a million users annually), and a friendly place to be. Most dog walkers, joggers, in-line skaters, and other cyclists I encounter call hello and smile. Drivers often yield right-of-way, even when not required. Because we did not have a mass start, Bike Florida riders are spread out enough that we don't clog the path.

Soon I near Dunedin, a town that has obviously embraced the trail. First clue: the Time Out Café with a trailside service window and a rental fleet of bicycles flanking the building. Up the trail, the Boxcar — a real one — sells coffee, pastries, and sandwiches to go and boasts the downtown's only post office. At the intersection with Main Street, arching over the trail like an old-time train signal bent sideways in a hurricane, a striking trail marker reads "Dunedin." An attractive retail district extends up the street. A few blocks beyond is the Gulf of Mexico.

Marooned on Honeymoon Island

I could linger, but it's time to roll on up the trail and head east over the Dunedin Causeway to Honeymoon Island. This barrier island is now a state park and nature preserve, but in the early 1940s it was a vacation paradise for newlyweds with thatch-roofed bungalows. There was no causeway then; couples were dropped off by boat for their two-week stay.

After lunch and a visit to the park nature center, I cruise over to Bike Florida's rest stop in the picnic area. There I learn, to my surprise, that we're stuck on the island — and it's no honeymoon. Threatening suicide, a man in a pickup truck holding a handgun to his head is in a standoff with police at the causeway. A SWAT team in bulletproof vests has arrived by boat. Traffic is shut down in both directions.

Kim Smith, one of the ride's staff, is in cell-phone contact with a sheriff on the scene and with Bike Florida headquarters, so I figure we're in good hands. Compared to a hot car on the causeway, the shaded picnic pavilion seems a great place to be. I chat with several cyclists back from an optional ferry ride to neighboring Caladesi Island, also a preserve. On his digital camera one shows me an eastern diamondback rattler he saw crossing a sidewalk there. "Six feet long," he says. As he tells more people, I joke, it will get longer and longer.

I want to walk Honeymoon Island's Osprey Trail and apparently have plenty of



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time. So I set off on a sandy path through a flatwoods habitat of slash pine, fanlike palmettos, southern red cedar draped in Spanish moss, and scrubby Florida privet. Soon I spy a small, yellow-spotted lizard, clinging to a tree trunk. It puffs its neck repeatedly into a reddish bulge — no doubt scary or sexy in the lizard world. Near the tops of barren pine snags I see massive osprey nests. On one an adult perches, and then flies off, revealing two young.

It's late afternoon when I return to the pavilion. About 30 cyclists have gathered, and Kim tells us the standoff continues. At 5:45, she says, we'll relocate to the nature center, where we may stay the night. Altogether, about 60 Bike Florida riders and several of the ride staff have been caught on the island, along with who knows how many visitors in cars.

Cyclists who stop by tell us it's been a hectic afternoon at the center, full of families with young kids. The staff has been trying to entertain them — and keep the bathrooms stocked with toilet paper.

We nibble on the rest-stop snacks: apple and orange slices, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, pretzels, animal crackers. "One peanut butter medium rare, coming up," calls rest-stop volunteer Ernie Howe with a flourish of his knife.

One thing I do not hear is a lot of grouching about the inconvenience of the causeway incident. Instead we take advantage of the opportunity to get to know each other.

I meet three women with gray in their hair and cross-country bike tours to their credit. One of them, Emily Kimball, says she discovered cycle touring at 53 with Adventure Cycling and it changed her life. She began saving — "I saved \$20,000 by not eating out, not buying new clothes, and taking in boarders" — quit her job at 60, and at 62 pedaled across the country fully loaded with four others. At 76, she is a motivational speaker on "creative aging and following your passion."

At 6:45 Kim hears the road has opened, and we cheer. But the cars on the road in front of us don't move, and we wait.

At 7:18 she learns that the man is still in his pickup with a gun. Police are planning to put armored cars in position to block any bullets so we can cycle by. We must be ready

when the word comes, so we line up with our bikes. I feel uneasy. We wait again.

Maybe a half-hour later Kim tells us the man has surrendered unharmed. We are relieved for him and for ourselves. It's been a long day.

There's not enough daylight left to bicycle the 12.5 miles back to camp. But trusty Kim is on her cell phone with Bike Florida, and (bravo!) they're rustling up some buses from the transit authority. Bubba ("We're not a tent service, we're a pampering service") is on his way in his pickup for me and three other Pampered Pedalers.

Team Dead Last

At breakfast, where talk is all about who got stuck on the island, I'm drawn like a hummingbird to a bright red jersey with yellow lettering on the back that says "Bringing Up the Rear." The front, I see as I introduce myself to the wearer and his wife, reads "Team Dead Last." It turns out that Peter and Susan are from Rhode Island and Peter blames the jersey on "my sister and her friends, who are fast riders, but they spend a lot of time at rest stops talking to everyone and start out last again."

I love it. What with stopping to take photographs and to indulge my curiosity and not being really fast, I'm somewhat of a caboose myself, a *lanterne rouge*. I should have a jersey like that, I think, as I mount up.

Today our ride heads north toward Friday's final destination, Fanning Springs on the Suwannee River, inland from the Gulf Coast. We'll spend Day Three's 37 miles traveling away from the highly developed Clearwater-St. Pete area.

Cycling the Pinellas again, I watch for the Suncoast Primate Sanctuary that I've heard is on the trail. Sure enough, under some pines I spy people peering through a chain-link fence. Beyond are the large, outdoor chimp enclosures of this "retirement home" for apes that might otherwise be put down. A building behind them has indoor quarters, "but they really like to be outside," says a volunteer who greets the chimps by name as she delivers breakfast.

We leave the trail at Tarpon Springs. The second half of today's route with its busy, unshaded suburban roads and commercial development makes me appreciate tonight's campsite all the more. Bounded by two



Prime real estate. Bike Florida's tent city — with lake view! — at Ross Norton Park.

ivers, Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park preserves 12,570 acres of "old Florida's" lush vegetation. Bubba's crew has pitched our tents in a grove of live oaks, inflated our cushy air mattresses, and delivered luggage to the site. We have time for an

interpretive walk with the park naturalist, during which a pair of mating red-shouldered hawks fly loop-de-loops above a tree. Another delicious dinner will be alfresco in a pavilion in the woods. Afterward wildlife photographer John Moran will speak and

show slides. Life is good.
Won Over by the Withlacoochee
 There's a good reason that some riders skip breakfast and hit the trail early — especially on 70-mile Day Four (with a century option). It's the second day in a row when temperatures will peak in the nineties, hot for early April.

I'm worried about the heat but curious to try the Suncoast Parkway Trail, a coup for trail advocates because both trail and highway were developed by the turnpike authority, a real transportation alternative built in a cost-effective way. The trail runs alongside the parkway, although it's set back far enough for safety.

We're traveling 31 miles of it, and after the first rest stop I start to cook on the unshaded asphalt trail. In the heat a series of rollers that would normally be inconsequential adds to the challenge. I drink, drink, drink and am not the only one feeling it. Other riders have stretched out on sheltered picnic tables that offer shade

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2009 Bicycle Events

List compiled by Kerry Irons and Adventure Cyclist magazine staff.

ALABAMA: Alabama's Magnificent Bicycle Adventure May 23-30, www.alabike.org/ambas.html.

Denver Post Ride the Rockies June 14-19, 303-954-6700, www.ridetherockies.com.

KANSAS: Biking Across Kansas June 6-13, 316-283-7528, www.bak.org. **Border Raiders** June 20-27, www.borderraiders.com.

Shoreline Bicycle Tours Four events in May through Sept. by the League of Michigan Bicyclists, 888-642-4537, www.lmb.org.

NEW MEXICO: New Mexico Fiesta Oct. 5-12, 315-406-6213, www.inmotioevents.net.

ALASKA: Big Ride Alaska July 6-17, 800-586-4872

FLORIDA: Bike Florida March 29-April 4, 352-244-0062, www.bikeflorida.org.

KENTUCKY: Grand Autumn Bicycle Ride Across Kentucky Oct. 9-11, 502-330-8855, www.savethegrand.org/gabraky. **BubbaFest** Nov. 7-14, 321-759-3433, www.bubbafestbiketours.com.

WAM July 23-26, 800-622-9474, www.wishmich.org. **MINNESOTA:** Cycling Around Minnesota Aug. 19-22, www.mnsbac.org/bam.

NEW YORK: Amazing Adirondack Adventure July 26-Aug. 1, 315-406-6213, Also: **Finger Lakes Fall Frolic** Sept. 19-25. www.inmotionevents.net. **Bon Ton Roulet** July 26-Aug. 1, 315-253-5304, www.bontonroulet.com.

ARIZONA: Greater Arizona Bicycle Adventure Oct. 3-Oct. 11, www.bikegaba.org.

Florida Bicycle Safari April 18-23, 407-788-2453, www.floridafreewheelers.com.

Old Kentucky Home Tour Sept. 12-13, www.okht.org.

Habitat 500 July 12-18, 877-804-3466 x4, www.habitat500.org.

Cycling the Erie Canal July 12-19, 518-434-1583, www.ptny.org/canalour.

Southern Arizona Road Adventure March 14-20, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

GEORGIA: Bicycle Ride Across Georgia June 6-13, 770-498-5153, www.brag.org, **Spring Tune Up** April 17-19.

LOUISIANA: Cycle Zydeco April 16-19, 800-346-1958, www.cyclezydeco.com.

MS Tram July 26-31, 800-344-4867, www.mstram.com.

Fany Ride July 19-25, 518-461-7646, www.fanyride.com.

CALIFORNIA: Aids/LifeCycle May 31-June 6, 866-245-3424, www.aidslife-cycle.org.

IDAHO: Family Fun Idaho July 26-31, and **Idaho Relaxed** June 19-24, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

MAINE: Maine Bike Rally July 10-12, 207-623-4511, www.BikeMaine.org.

Red Ribbon Ride July 16-19, 612-822-2110, www.redribbonride.org.

Get Your Guts in Gear June 12-14, 718-875-2123, www.ibdride.org.

California Coast Classic Oct 3-10, 800-954-2873, www.californiacoastclassic.org.

Trek Across Maine June 19-21, 207-624-0302, www.lungme.org.

MASSACHUSETTS: Cycle Across Maryland July 24-26, 410-235-3678, www.onelesscar.org.

MISSOURI: Cycle Across Missouri June 7-12, 314-406-2359, www.moonlightramble.com.

Great Hudson Valley Pedal Aug. 11-16, 518-434-1583, www.ptny.org/hudsonour.

Emigrant Trails Bike Trek Sept. 4-6, 916-444-5900, www.sacbreathe.org/trek.

Tour de Lacs Sept. 19-20, 509-953-9831, www.roundandround.com.

MARYLAND: Cycle Across Maryland July 24-26, 410-235-3678, www.onelesscar.org.

MONTANA: Cycle Montana June 20-26, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

The New York Jewish Environmental Bike Ride Sept. 4-7, 212-644-2332, www.hazon.org.

HI-USA Christmas Bike Trip Dec. 26-31, 619-525-1531, www.sandiegohostels.org.

ILLINOIS: Grand Illinois Trail & Parks June 14-20, 309-788-1845, www.bikelib.org/gitap.

NEBRASKA: Bicycle Ride Across Nebraska June 7-13, 402-397-9785, www.bran-inc.org.

NORTH CAROLINA: Cycle North Carolina Sept. 26-Oct. 3, also **Spring Weekend** April 17-19, 919-361-1133, www.ncsports.org/nccyclemain.php.

NorCal Aids Challenge May 14-17, 916-340-5068, www.norcalaidschallenge.net.

Indiana BikeFest Aug. TBA, 800-245-3110, www.bicycleindiana.org.

NEVADA: OATBRAN Sept. 27-Oct. 3 530-957-0051, www.bikethewest.com.

Pedal for Medals June 24-28, 585-586-7400, www.pedal4medals.org.

California Winter Warmer Feb. 28-Mar 6, **Farm Fresh**, Sept. 19-26, **Wine Country Special** Sept. 27 - Oct. 4, **The Wild Coast** Aug. 30 - Sept. 12, and **Sierra Sampler** Sept. 8-15, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Chesapeake Bay Air Ride June 5-7, 800-642-1184, www.marylandlung.org.

C&O Canal/GAP Sept. 19-26, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

NORTH DAKOTA: CANDISC Aug. 1-8, 800-799-4242, www.ndparks.com/recreation/activities/candisc.htm.

Sierra to the Sea June 20-27, 408-446-2199, www.sierratothesea.org.

Illinois Great Rivers Ride Sept. 5-12, 877-477-7007 x 217, www.illinoisgreatriversride.com.

C&O Canal Oct. 11-16, 877-776-6572, www.bikeandthelike.com/cocanal.html.

OHIO: Across Ohio Bicycle Adventure July 25-Aug. 1, 614-447-1006, www.outdoorpursuits.org/xoba.

Solvang Spring Tour March 16-22, 818-889-2453, www.planetultra.com.

Bicycle Illinois July 11-18, 877-868-7455, www.bicycleillinois.com.

Pan Mass Challenge Aug. 1-2, 800-932-9253, www.pmc.org.

Great Ohio Bicycle Adventure June 20-27, 614-273-0811, www.goba.com.

COLORADO: Bicycle Tour of Colorado June 21-27, 303-985-1180, www.bicyclecolorado.com.

Indiana BikeFest Aug. TBA, 800-245-3110, www.bicycleindiana.org.

MICHIGAN: DALMAC Sept. 2/3-6, 517-882-3700, www.biketcba.org/DALMAC/dframe.html.

Pan Ohio Hope Ride July 30-Aug. 2, 888-227-6446, www.cancer.org/hoperide.

Colorado Rocky Mountain Bike Tour Aug. 2-8, 720-641-2130, www.crbmt.com.

RAINSTORM July 13-18, 812-333-8176, triri.org/storm.html

Michigan July 11-17 (shorter options), 517-485-6022, www.michigantrails.org/michigander.

Sierra Sampler Sept. 8-15, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Colorado Peace Ride Aug. 9-12, 720-308-9944 www.thepeaceride.com/index.html.

Touring Ride In Rural Indiana June 21-27, 812-333-8176, www.triri.org, also **September Escapade** Sept. 13-18.

NEVADA: OATBRAN Sept. 27-Oct. 3 530-957-0051, www.bikethewest.com.

NEW HAMPSHIRE: Seacoast Bike Tour May 16-17, 603-669-2411, www.breathenh.org.

High Country Relaxed Aug. 5-10, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

OKLAHOMA: Oklahoma Freewheel June 7-13, 918-835-1699, www.okfreewheel.com.

TENNESSEE: BRAT Sept, 931-686-2453, http://state.tn.us/environment/parks/BRAT.

VIRGINIA: Bike Virginia June 19-25, 757-229-0507, www.bikevirginia.org.

Harvest Fest Ride to the Island Sept. 14-19, and **Theatre & Arts Tour** Aug. 13-16, 800-675-2295, www.midwestscenic.com.

National Bicycle Tour Director's Association Major bike events: www.nbtada.com.

OREGON: Cycle Oregon Sept. 12-19, also **Cycle Oregon Weekend Ride** July 17-19, 800-292-5367, www.cycleoregon.com.

TEXAS: Easter Hill Country Bike Tour, April 10-12, 210-289-8905, http://ehctsawheelmen.com. **Texas Hill Country**, April 4-10, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Tour de Chesapeake May 15-17, 757-229-0507, www.bikechesapeake.org.

WYOMING: Tour de Wyoming July 11-17, 307-742-5840, www.cyclewyo.org.

Red River International Bike Tour June 15-19, 701-780-9424, www.rribt.com.

Oregon Bicycle Ride XXIII Aug. 9-15, 800-413-8432, www.oregonbicycleride.org.

UTAH: Color CountryTour May 9-17; Sept. 19-26; Oct. 3-10, and **Arches & Canyonlands** April 12-18, Oct. 11-17, 714-267-4591, www.cyclingescapes.com.

Blue Ridge Bliss, May 3-9, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Wheelin' the Winds, May 16-Aug. 5, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Tour de Rouge (Houston to New Orleans) May 3-8, www.tourdurouge.org.

Coast & Coverd Bridges Aug. 16-22, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Bike Ride Across Scenic Utah May 16-31, and **GRUB Fest** Sept. 4-7, 877-264-7876, www.bike2bike.org.

WASHINGTON: Cycle Washington July 11-18, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

NATIONAL & REGIONAL: **USA: America By Bicycle** Various cross-country and regional bike events, 888-797-7057, www.abbike.com.

INTERNATIONAL: **AUSTRALIA:** Great Escapade March 28-April 5, +61 03 8636 8888, www.bv.com.au/great-rides. Also: **Great Ocean Road** Nov. 28-Dec. 6.

PENNSYLVANIA: Greenway Sojourn July 22-26, 717-238-1717, www.railstotrails.org/whatwedo/events/Sojourn/index.html.

Legacy Annual Great Bike Ride Across Utah Sept. 10-19 (Sept. 10-12; 13-19 options), 801-654-1144, www.lagbrau.com.

Washington Bicycle Ride III July 26-31, 800-413-8432, www.oregonbicycleride.org.

Big Ride Across America June 22-Aug. 8, 800-732-9339, www.cleanairadventures.org/big_ride_across_america.

Cycle Queensland early Sept., +61 7-3844-1144, www.bq.org.au/cq.

Scamp 'n' Rascal Cycling Adventures many events in 2009, 610-317-9611, www.scampnrascal.com.

Moab Skinny Tire Festival March 14-16, 435-259-2698, www.skinnytireevents.com.

Get Your Guts in Gear Aug. 7-9, 718-875-2123, www.ibdride.org.

Big Ride Pacific Coast Sept., 800-732-9339, www.cleanairadventures.org/big_ride_pacific_coast.

CANADA: Cycling For Children Events throughout 2008, 866-311-6874, www.ccare.ca/biketour.php.

PUERTO RICO: Vuelta de los Nueve Faros (Lighthouse Cycling Tour) Feb. 5-8, 787-477-8121, www.vueltaadelosnuevefaros.com.

Red Rock Ramble May 30-June 5, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

RedSpoke July 15-20, www.redspoke.org.

Lake Champlain Bikeways July 5-9; Aug. 23-27, 518-584-3102, www.newenglandadventure.com.

Lighthouse Nova Scotia early Aug., 315-406-6213, www.inmotionevents.net.

SOUTH DAKOTA: Black Hills Loop June 7-13, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Red Rock Ramble May 30-June 5, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Trek Tri Island Sept. 18-21, 206-441-5100, www.cleanairadventures.org/trek_tri_island.

Cycle America Various Cross-country and regional bike events, 800-245-3263, www.cycleamerica.com.

Montreal Bike Fest late May, 800-567-8356, www.velo.qc.ca. Also: **Tour la Nuit, Metropolitaine**, and **Tour de l'île**.

Mickelson Trail Trek Sept, 605-584-3896, www.sdgfp.info/parks/regions/northernhills/mickelsontrail/TrailTrek/TrekInfo.htm.

VERMONT: Cycle Vermont, Aug. 16-22, 800-755-2453, www.adventurecycling.org/tours.

Wisconsin Aids Ride Aug. 6-9, 800-486-6276, www.actride.org.

Midwest Scenic Tri-State Ride June 15-19, 800-675-2295, www.midwestscenic.com.

ISRAEL: Arava Institute Hazon Israel Ride April 28-May 5; Nov. 3-10, 212-644-2332, www.hazon.org.

Tour de Kota June, 605-331-2200, www.argusleaderbiketour.com.

Vermont Rout-About Tour, Aug. 9-13, 518-584-3102, www.newenglandadventure.com.

GRABAAWR June 21-28, **Bike Northwoods Tour** July 11-17, **SAGBRAW** Aug. 1-7, 608-843-8412, www.grabaaawr.com.

MS Bike Tours National Multiple Sclerosis Society fundraising rides around the country, www.nmss.org.

LATE ENTRY: Park-2-Park Montana Sept. 7-11; www.park2parkmontana.org.



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along the trail. I slog along. If it were 10 degrees cooler, I would be lovin' it. As it is, I'm thankful for conversation with other cyclists to keep me going.

Once off the trail and out of the blazing sun, I revive. We travel the road through dappled shade, over low hills, and past horse farms and small towns, an interesting and varied ride. Bike Florida staffer Dave Millman describes it: "Some towns are still just as they were in the 1950s, with motels and little shops and worn-out main streets. With tobacco sheds ... looking as if the wind will take them down at any moment. Mobile homes sit right next to downtowns and modern buildings."

Arguably saving the best until last, the day ends with 15 miles on the Withlacoochee State Trail. Beyond trees bearded with Spanish moss, we see horse and ranch country, forested stretches, and homes settled on wooded acreage. A bike shop beside the trail, much of its rolling stock outside, lures our riders.

At a crossroad a sign announces Floral City (population 5,000). I hang a left, swing past a shop with baskets and handcrafted things on the sidewalk and a funky antiques store across the street. Around the corner there's a bagel eatery and a cheerful produce stand with grapefruits 10 for a dollar.

Back on the trail, several lakes suggest cool respite as I near Inverness, where we'll camp at the middle school. The Withlacoochee Trail has charmed me. I imagine Jim Wheeler riding his local section, as he described it, with Harry the parrot untethered on his shoulder. "Whee!" Gators

I have been watching rivers, lakes, marshes, and even watery ditches all week for these big-mouthed bad boys, but nary an alligator have I seen. At last, on Day Five, there in the brown waters of the Inglis Lock on the old Cross-Florida Barge Canal is a six-footer floating, waiting for a fish to come by. He's drawn a small crowd of Bike Florida riders asking questions.

"A while back we had nine alligators," says an official at the lock, "but we removed them. Now that one's come back."

The canal, he explains, was to run from the gulf to St. John's River near the east coast to save ships the long haul around

Florida's tip. Partway through construction, a huge outcry in the 1960s and 1970s over environmental issues halted the work. We're looking at part of the nine-mile section that was built.

We have worked for this moment of gator gazing. After a cooling breeze for this morning's ride and the best pulled pork barbecue sandwich I've ever eaten (thank you, Bike Florida), we struggled over a trail across the Inglis Dam Recreation Area. Marked "lime rock" on our cue sheets, it turned out to be a mile of sand, unridable for the majority with skinny-tire bikes. Almost blind to the lovely woods around us, we pushed and dragged our bicycles, recumbent riders bent double if they lacked high-rise bars. After a quarter-mile, I found purchase on the grassy sides of the trail and — a rare advantage on my hybrid — managed to pedal the rest of the mile.

We've gotten a close look, it turns out, at a piece of the Cross-Florida Greenway, the reincarnation of land originally set

Bike Florida: 2009

Bike Florida 2009, a loop ride in the panhandle (Madison–Monticello–Madison) is March 29–April 4. www.bikeflorida.org, 352-244-0062.

Bubba's Pampered Pedalers: For an extra fee, Bubba provides a tent and an air mattress with setup, plus clean towels, snacks, cold ones in the Pamper Zone, and more to make life easier on Bike Florida and other rides. www.bubbaspamperedpedalers.com, 321-759-3433.

aside for the canal. Trail visionaries anticipate that a trail or road system through the greenway will link with trails we've been traveling — the Pinellas, Suncoast Parkway, Withlacoochee, and others — creating a 600-mile Central Florida Loop that will attract cyclists who want a one- or two-week adventure. It may be 10 or 20

years before the gaps are filled. Bike Florida organizers hope this tour's economic impact will speed the process.

For now, we continue on our 60-mile day. We pass Black Angus cattle in fenced pastures on the Queen B Ranch, miles of pines in the Goethe State Forest, and smaller rural spreads on back roads. Taking the measure of this place, we begin to know it.

Friday, as we pedal toward the close of Bike Florida, six days worth of memories fill my head — places I've seen, people I've met. But the spirit of it all is well represented by Bill Baird from Alabama, who said one morning over breakfast: "At home people think riding a week across the state is a wild and crazy thing to do. 'What if you have a flat?' they ask. 'The problem,' I tell them, 'isn't to change the tire. It's telling 680 people you're okay.'" **AC**

Susan Weaver has met fantastic folks while covering "big rides" in five states and two Canadian provinces for Adventure Cyclist.

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