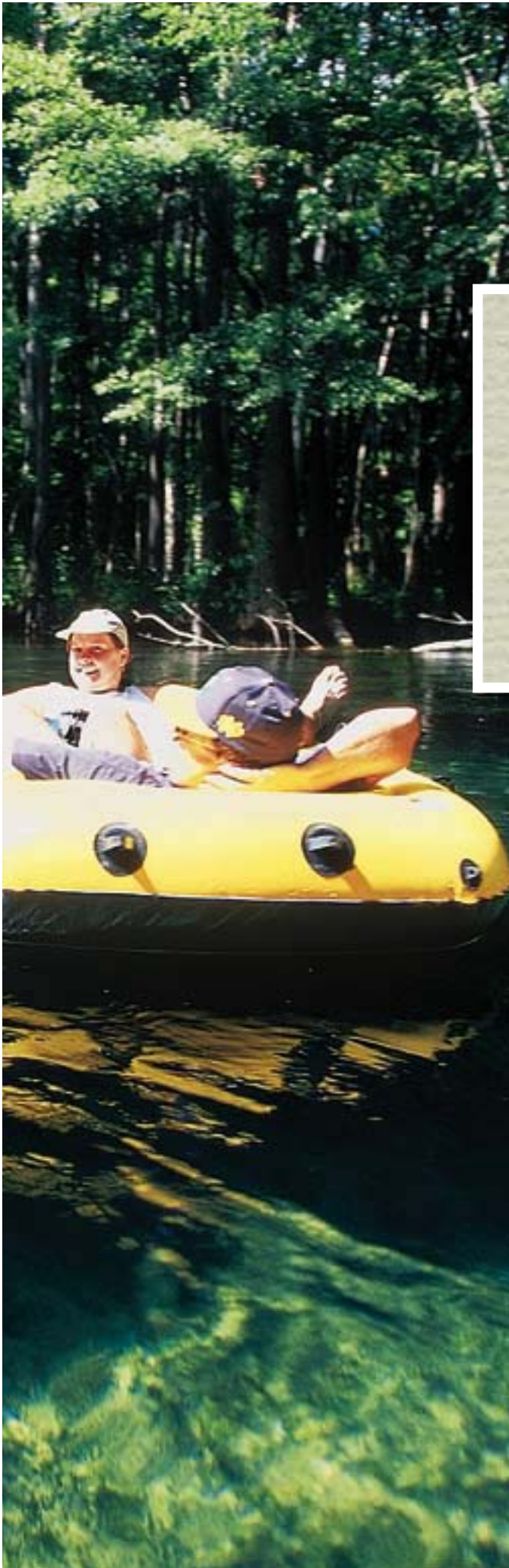


A photograph of a person wearing a purple cap and a yellow life vest floating in a yellow inflatable tube on a river. The river is surrounded by a dense forest of tall trees. Another person is visible in the water to the left, and another tube is partially visible to the right. The water is clear and reflects the surrounding greenery.

TEST TUBING

A NEWBIE TRIES OUT
NORTH FLORIDA NATURE

BY JAYNE MORASKI



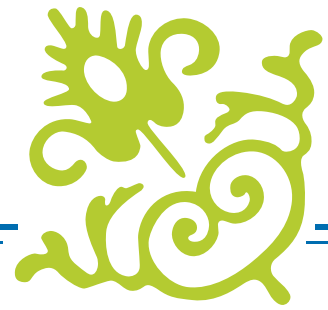
AS I SETTLED INTO MY NEW HOME IN GAINESVILLE, SOMEWHAT NERVOUS ABOUT THE TREK DOWN SOUTH FROM MY MID-WESTERN FAMILIAR, I RAN INTO ONE ON MY FRIENDLY NEW NEIGHBORS AS SHE TOOK A CASUAL EVENING STROLL AROUND MY CUL-DE-SAC.

“You’re from Iowa” she said, as she read my license plate. “You should really try tubing the Ichetucknee before you get too caught up in your new job.” Tubing the Ichetucknee ... I wasn’t sure I could pronounce that let alone what at all that meant, so I asked. She explained a time-honored summer tradition of lazily floating down the pristine little Ichetucknee River and basking in the contrast of the hot sun and the cool waters. So one August morning my hubby and I packed a picnic lunch and set out for a day of fun.

When we got there it all seemed too simple ... just show up and rent a tube from a roadside stand. Then stick the tube in the water and float. Just float. No cell phones, no digital interaction screens, no learning to maneuver my water craft. Just float and soak it all in.

And to my pleasant surprise, there was more to the two hour trip than the art of truly relaxing. I discovered there were great little towns full of fun dining and their own natural adventures all along the way. When we stopped in to grab a snack at Floyd’s Diner in High Springs, our hostess greeted us with a bevy of information. She said this area is full of beautiful springs. She was right. Turns out the area referred to as The Original Florida has no less than 26 State Parks, including: Manatee Springs State Park; Ichetucknee Springs State Park; O’Leno State Park/River Rise Preserve; Suwannee River State Park; Peacock Springs State Recreation Area; Ochlocknee River State Park; Econfina River State Park; Wakulla Springs State Park and Lodge; and Big Shoals State Park.

The current is swift enough on the Suwannee and Santa Fe Rivers to allow you to canoe or kayak with practically no effort at all, but slow enough to let you truly enjoy nature along the journey. The rivers are clean, as apparent from the abundant



turtles you will see along the shorelines. You can take canoe rides at almost any length that suits your fancy. Short, hour long canoe rides at O'Leno State Park are great for those with smaller children with smaller attention spans, or for slightly more advanced paddlers you can make a weekend out of the trip by camping and exploring along the Suwannee's new Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, a 170-mile ecotourism corridor that connects natural areas, preserves, state parks and other natural environments into one seamless experience. The trailhead for the Wilderness Trail is at the Nature and Heri-

are flitting everywhere and the colors are astonishing. And I come home to my husband with grand ideas on how to change our new backyard into a butterfly garden. Out of fear of losing all his free time and countless dollars on my crazy landscaping schemes, he buys me a season pass and tells me just to visit the Rainforest whenever I want to see a butterfly.

FOR THE BIRDS

OK I've never been bird watching before I must admit, but I got excited as I learned about the extreme biodiversity rep-

YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE ... WEST INDIAN MANATEES, ALLIGATORS, WADING BIRDS, BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS, TURTLES, DIVING SHOREBIRDS AND DUCKS, AND EVEN WHITE-TAILED DEER.

tage Tourism Center in White Springs.

I decided to go home and further check out that welcome package we got. Turns out within a two hour drive is some of the most pristine wilderness left in Florida, and some places set aside to celebrate and preserve that wilderness. For starters there are two wonderful botanical gardens – Kanapaha Botanical Garden in Gainesville and Maclay State Gardens in Tallahassee. These two places host several events yearly to give you a chance to “Get back to nature.” Then there are the superb hiking and biking trails (see www.originalflorida.com for more information).

Also in Gainesville, the University of Florida has opened a most delightful Butterfly Rainforest featuring hundreds of butterflies actually living in a subtropical and tropical habitat complete with waterfalls. This one is close by, so I decide to try it out immediately.

I have to tell you I have become a butterfly junkie! I love catching some time to just enjoy this place on a sunny day. I feel like I am in some sort of fairyland removed from the worries of the modern world. The butterflies

resented in this area. The Suwannee River Valley has 12 prime locations for bird watching, divided into four different HUBS. At each HUB, you'll be able to explore two or more specifically identified sites for the best bird watching in Florida. Whether you choose a single hub, or all four, great ornithological experiences are in store. Vast marshlands are the nesting home to hundreds of bird species, from osprey and bald eagles, shore birds, gulls, pelicans, ducks and geese.

I decide to try this out too. Well sort of. I think I can kill two birds with one stone (sorry for the pun) and hubby and I head to Taylor County's Steinhatchee Landing Resort. This place is wonderful, and there are boats to rent and guides throughout the area and nearby towns. We decide to try out the art of scalloping, and hope to do some bird watching along the way. Wise old pelicans stare nonchalantly at us along the banks of the river. I learn about cormorants or “snake birds,” and egrets and osprey and eagles. We glimpse a bald eagle and feel a small thrill of victory – our first successful spotting. The guide told us of a nest as we approached. It was huge and we were not disappointed.

Along the way our guide also tells us about the Lower Suwannee River National Wildlife Refuge. It's here that you can expect to see some of the wildlife you would traditionally assume to see in Florida; West Indian Manatees, alligators, wading birds, bottlenose dolphins, turtles, diving shorebirds and ducks, and even white-tailed deer.



Hidden Treasures

On the Gulf of Mexico, Taylor County has the longest shoreline of any county in Florida. Populated with a few scattered coastal communities, most of the coast of Taylor County is state owned and preserved in a pristine state. Divers will thrill to the beauty of underwater scenery and abundant fish populations and fisherman will encounter some of the best fishing in Florida.

We take our slow pontoon boat out along the Steinhatchee River channel and head toward the Gulf of Mexico. Our new friends on the boat assure me that even a child can learn to snorkel and gather scallops. As I gulp and sputter along for the first few minutes, I think they are playing a cruel joke on me. I have to stand up (yes you can stand) to get my bearings. As I stand looking out over the Gulf I am amazed at the clear waters and that I am two miles out but still able to stand comfortably. But I finally get the hang of it and almost choke again as I begin to laugh at how fun this is and how I feel like a kid again.

The streams feeding into the Gulf provide everything from fresh water to salt water fishing, and an estuary experience in between. A Florida fishing license is required, and is quite easy to get online. The scallop shells are beautiful and it is so much fun searching for the right sandbar to find your prize. We leave with full bellies, a little sunburn, and a sense of relaxation better than any fancy spa treatment.

When you are ready for your "Real Florida" outdoor adventure in Original Florida, there are myriad outfitters in the area to provide not only equipment for your adventure, but also transportation to and from the area. Everything you need; horses, bicycles, canoes, kayaks, tubes, scuba diving gear, fishing equipment, boats and more, are available for rent.

Now my head starts to swim. All these beautiful natural places to explore. Maybe I will fit in here after all. I only have one week left until I start my new job. But I know when it all gets too much, I can always escape the hectic schedule of modern life by taking a day to float lazily, slowly, and gloriously down the Ichetucknee.

WANT TO TRY A FEW MORE OF THESE ADVENTURES EASY ENOUGH FOR A NEWBIE?

- Tube, canoe or kayak; or learn to snorkel, or scuba dive at Ginnie Springs Outdoor Resort in High Springs. 7300 NE Ginnie Springs Road, High Springs, Florida (386) 454-7188.
- Swim in the crystal blue waters of Madison Blue Springs in Lee, Florida. 8300 N.E. State Road 6 (Just north of I-10 in northern Florida), Lee, Florida (850) 971-4424. ■



MANATEES

Manatees can be found in shallow, slow-moving rivers, estuaries, saltwater bays, canals and coastal areas. Manatees are a migratory species. Manatee sightings have occurred in all of the rivers of the Original Florida. We encourage you to look, but don't touch manatees. The West Indian manatee is an endangered species and is protected by state and federal law. Please avoid harassing or disturbing manatees. Harassment is defined as any activity which alters the animal's natural behavior. By altering the manatee's natural behavior, you may create the likelihood of danger that is bad for the animal and against the law.

- Don't feed manatees or give them water. If manatees become accustomed to being around people, they can alter their behavior in the wild, perhaps causing them to lose their natural fear of boats and humans, and this may make them more susceptible to harm. Passive observation is the best way to interact with manatees and all wildlife.
- Do not pursue or chase a manatee while you are swimming, snorkeling, diving or operating a boat.
- Never poke, prod or stab a manatee with your hands, feet or any object.
- If a manatee avoids you, you should avoid it.
- Don't isolate or single out an individual manatee from its group, and don't separate a cow and her calf.
- Don't attempt to snag, hook, hold, grab, pinch or ride a manatee.

SFCC TEACHING ZOO

Tucked into the Sante Fe Community College campus is the Teaching Zoo. One of two accredited zookeeper schools, the Teaching Zoo is free and open to the public. Each visit to the Zoo is a guided tour of the habitats of a diverse collection of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians. Call the Teaching Zoo at (352) 395-5601 for more information.