

HIKING IN FLORIDA RAIN CRIMPS CAMERAS, BUT SHOWS NATURE'S WORKINGS

- *By Carlton Ward Jr., special to the Tampa Bay Times*

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Photograph by Carlton Ward Jr., carltonward.com

In parts of the Panhandle, water percolates downward through sandy soils until it reaches a clay layer, then seeps sideways, eventually discharging where clay and sand come together — typically near a stream's edge ("seepage slopes") and sometimes at the "head" of "steephead" ravines. Steephead ravines are constantly evolving, eroding from the bottom, with overlying sands collapsing into the system, as the "head" continuously moves slowly, in the direction opposite the water flow. Over millennia, more typical overland water flows have caused Panhandle creeks such as Econfinia Creek to cut through elevated topography to also create steep ravines. This small waterfall is the point at which a steephead ravine creek discharges into Econfinia by the Florida National Scenic Trail.

Editor's note: The three members of the second Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition are filing weekly dispatches of their 1,000-mile, 10-week journey to highlight the value of keeping an open pathway through the state for wildlife. Here is the story of the eighth week.

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After a big week paddling down the Apalachicola to the Gulf of Mexico, our route resumed overland and westward along the Florida National Scenic Trail, through a landscape of pine forests, timberlands and impressive topography of steepheads and ravines.

Backpacking beside Econfinia Creek, it was clear we had entered a different Florida — a continental geology unlike anything I had experienced in the peninsula. Vertical rocky escarpments, riffles, rapids and clear-flowing water feeling like North Carolina. The creeks were flowing crystal clear.

Rainfall has become a theme of our unsupported backpacking nights. Eight hours hiking through walls of water helped kill two of my cameras and penetrate all of my clothing. Near dusk and still several miles from our next camp, lightning strobed a cypress-filled pond to the right of the trail. In blue light, it was a wild and powerful scene I really wanted to capture. But with none of my cameras working, I had to move on with only the image in my mind.

Warm and dry now as I write, I appreciate the weather nature has been serving us, making sure we remember the corridor is all about water — the element that connects everything from upland sandhills to creeks, swamps, rivers, marshes and bays — reminding us that even a patch of woods far from the coast is directly connected to the gulf. The next day, we met with Tyler Macmillian from the Northwest Florida Water Management District to tour their conservation lands and the first-magnitude Gainer springshed, which feeds an additional 1,400 million gallons of water a day to

Econfina Creek — the sole source of the freshwater for Panama City and Bay County. The lands of the Northwest Florida Water Management District provided more lessons in how uplands and downstream water supplies are intricately connected, and how restoring old farm fields and planted pine plantations to historic longleaf pine savannas is providing better habitat for wildlife and improving the quality and quantity of water for the region. Restoration is hard work and not always pretty. At one point we ascended out of a heavily forested ravine into a destroyed landscape with not a single tree left standing. Orange survey flags in the gray ground marked the trail across a rubble field of broken branches.

But this devastation was actually the first step of renewal. Sand pines previously planted in dense rows for the paper industry had been clear-cut for longleaf pines will be planted in their place. Fire will be returned to the land and what was a low diversity mono crop will be gradually be restored to one of the most biologically rich habitats on Earth.

We learned of other areas, where absence of fire in historic longleaf pine seepage slopes has allowed the proliferation of a bushy tree called titi. Once the titi was removed and fire resumed, nearly 100 species of plants had reclaimed the ground in just four years, restoring the wildlife habitat and also the flow of water to nearby creeks. Managers discovered that titi had been wicking up all of the surface water into the air and after its removal, water returned its historic journey seeping through the groundcover flowing and downstream.

The water management properties showed the progression of different stages of restoration, from the clear-cuts to recently planted longleaf candelabras reaching skyward to more mature trees wisely spaced with rich grassy groundcover below. These lands are secure conservation stepping-stones for the corridor moving west of the Apalachicola River.

But the broader landscape has a less certain future. Nearby airport and road projects show that growth eminent in this part of the Panhandle. With 400,000 acres recently changing hands to the east and big new developments planned closer to the bays and beaches, it will take real vigilance and smart planning to keep the corridor connected here.

There is a lot at stake. The million plus acres of conservation lands around Apalachicola National Forest to the east need a long-term lifeline to conservation lands of similar scale we will soon traverse to our west. The work MC Davis and Matt Aresco are doing at Nokuse Plantation provides great hope that a habitat bridge can be restored and kept. Nokuse's 54,000 acres are the site of the largest private longleaf pine restoration in the world. More than eight million trees have been planted, mostly on old farm fields, to begin the 200-year process of re-wilding the land.

Davis and Aresco have also helped create three new wildlife underpasses under busy Highway 331 that divides Nokuse from the vast conservation lands of Eglin Air Force Base to the west (the gateway to more than a million acres contiguous to Alabama). This is the first wildlife crossing structure between public and private conservation lands in Florida and a display of incredible foresight is a model I hope the rest of our state will follow.

Follow their progress here in Perspective, at FloridaWildlifeCorridor.org, wusfnews.wusf.usf.edu/term/florida-wildlife-corridor-expedition and on social media: [Facebook.com/FloridaWildlifeCorridor](https://www.facebook.com/FloridaWildlifeCorridor); [Instagram: @FL_WildCorridor](https://www.instagram.com/FL_WildCorridor); [Twitter: @FL_WildCorridor](https://twitter.com/FL_WildCorridor). Follow Ward's photography at [Instagram.com/CarltonWard](https://www.instagram.com/CarltonWard) and [Facebook.com/CarltonWardPhotography](https://www.facebook.com/CarltonWardPhotography).