

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a swampy landscape. In the upper half, there are large, dark trees with Spanish moss hanging from their branches. The scene is misty, and light rays are visible breaking through the haze. The lower half of the image shows the water of the swamp, which is dark and reflects the light from above, creating a shimmering effect.

Salvaging
the
Real

FLORIDA

Lost and Found in the State of Dreams

Bill Belleville

we did not know what we wanted from the land . . . we were entering, a land for which we had no description, without knowing what kind of place it was, nor by what people it was inhabited, nor in which part of it we were. . . .

Conquistador Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, upon landing in Florida in 1528 and promptly getting lost for eight years.

I am inclined to believe that it can never be thickly peopled & certainly not so until the vast quantity of vegetable matter shall be cleared away.

Master Edward C. Anderson, U.S. Navy, Florida Territory in 1844

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!

Headline in a central Florida newspaper after the opening of Walt Disney World near Orlando in October 1971



Introduction

This collection of narrative essays is about natural places and what draws me to them. Although I've always been fascinated by the details of the landscape and how it plays out around us, it's less about nature as a rigid science than nature as a salve—a place where you might discover something about the place or about yourself, and then come away better for having done so. It's identifying the disparate pieces of our natural



Archival photo of Rock Springs near Apopka, Florida. With Wekiwa Springs, this is one of two major springs that feed the Wekiva River. There are another thirty or so of varying sizes that all contribute in some way to its flow. In this way, it is a typical Florida spring-fed river.

world and then trying to piece them together so we might better know the wholeness of it all. Since I've intentionally spent most of my life in Florida, nearly all of these pieces take place here—even though they sometimes encircle the larger world of memory just beyond.

Sometimes wild animals and plants play big, sometimes those people with wildness in their hearts. In many cases, there's a "secret" I'm hunting for somewhere. Often, it's revealed in a search or a quest—whether for a tiny snail, a ship under the sea, a spring, or some mythical place I imagine or that has been imagined by others. So, as you will see, this is also about having fun outdoors, maybe even having a bit of an adventure, just as the great Florida naturalist Archie Carr once promised we could all do, if we really wanted.

I've been careful to use the term "essays" to describe these pieces since they are much closer to that genre than they are to journalistic "articles." Certainly, they are told from the author's point of view, and in the best of worlds, they record personal observations and reflections. Essayist Aldous Huxley once defined the essay as an overlap between an article and a short story, calling it a "literary device for saying almost everything about anything," and I figure that just about covers it. Although you'll find real information gleaned from "journalistic" research, you won't find the self-conscious attempt to be objective that so often distinguishes articles in periodicals. More often than not, the pieces here are little stories, nonfiction vignettes that attempt to capture a slice of life.

I like to think what links these individual stories is an expressed caring about what happens in nature, and sometimes, what happens to the people whose lives are swayed by the experience of it. I'm guessing this begins at the most essential level, right at the transect between our senses, our feelings, our most primal thoughts. La Florida—the original Land of Flowers to Spanish explorers—is surely not the wilderness it once was. But nearly one-third of its land and water is protected as parks, preserves, refuges, and conservation areas. Treks to some of these places on land—or to many of them on or under the water—can take us beyond the domestic and the known.

But discovery doesn't always require a backpack or scuba tanks, or even a wild place. Sometimes, a stroll under a canopy of trees into an

authentic small Florida town can give us new eyes; sometimes, the glint of the twilight on a backyard pond might do the same. That's when nature plays a secret chord, and we let loose of our intellect and allow our senses a go at it.

As Henry David Thoreau reported, the natural world can be the source of "vigor, inspiration and strength," and thus, can provide an antidote to the banality of civilization. To this end, the old transcendentalist used a superb term to characterize how he moved across the landscape. He called it *sauntering*, and explained it as a derivative of a word used to describe pilgrims in the Middle Ages who were traveling to la Sainte Terre, the Holy Land. Some travelers left behind jobs and asked for charity along the way. In doing so, he morphed into a sort of mystical hobo (a description Zen poet Gary Snyder would appreciate, surely.) The intrepid pilgrim became known as a *Sainte-Terrer*, which was later anglicized as "saunterer." Thoreau seemed to appreciate those who really had no homes to return to, as they were "at home everywhere" and this was the secret to successful sauntering. More to the point, they were unbound by materialism, and their spirits were thus unencumbered by the transience of human conceits. "Every walk is a sort of crusade," he wrote, "to go forth and reconquer this *Holy Land* from the hands of the Infidels."

Sauntering, then, becomes far more than a physical movement. It becomes a behavior that sets you squarely in the moment. In doing so, you retrieve the real Florida from those who would turn the Land of Flowers into one giant, giddy corporate amusement park, or a series of walled and gated communities wedged onto a fragile landscape that is simply not equipped to handle them.

In one essay, I yearn for the chance to "sink into gator time," and really, that yearning is far more earnest than not. To allow yourself to "sink" into a more atavistic state is simply an expression of appreciation for the long natural continuum that our wildlife—especially the ancient alligators—enjoyed, long before upright walking mammals arrived on the scene. It's not a feeling or condition one blunders onto while watching a kept gator leap out of the water to grab a dead chicken at a tourist attraction. Nor is it found in a theme park "wilderness" ride or in some godforsaken outlet mall, regardless of how many "green" things

are being peddled. Instead, “sinking” is an act that requires the timeless patience of a reptile to be so deep inside nature that you become blissfully unaware of all else. One sinks slowly into such sublime moments, following the trail the senses have left to show us the way.

In this way, I’ve expanded the idea of sauntering to include nearly any outdoor behavior that allows new ways of seeing natural places—each of which I hold dear as a “Holy Land.” Sometimes these essays devote energy to pondering an animal, a plant, or even an idea. In these cases, the movement is often one of reflection, of considering the possibilities. Sometimes it’s authentic places that are worth a deeper look. Most often, these are places that have been shaped by something essential in the landscape—a river, a spring, a tropical swash of ocean water, a vast, rolling sea of scrub.

As Roderick Nash pointed out in the classic *Wilderness and the American Mind*, the benefits of sustaining such natural places are as necessary for ecological reasons as they are for the human soul. As for the morality of protecting nature, Nash explains that it predates the twentieth-century concerns of ethicists Aldo Leopold and Robert “Bob” Marshall—even the spirituality of the Transcendentalists and the Romanticists. It extends, in fact, all the way to the ancient Greek concept of cherishing “a great chain of being.” Certainly, thoughtful leaders of religious congregations in the twenty-first century are revisiting their own doctrines to more fully consider earth stewardship on a finite planet with rapidly diminishing resources.

Our best educators are now learning the value of using nature as a giant classroom with no walls or windows. And, despite the obtuse political clamor to teach to a standardized test, elemental lessons remain tucked away in Florida’s natural world—lessons that simply aren’t negotiable. Or, as Henry David Thoreau once wrote: “When a traveler asked Wordsworth’s servant to show him her master’s study, she answered, ‘Here is his library, but his study is out of doors . . .’”

But there’s a sense of urgency about all of this, too. In a postindustrial, cubicle-driven world that emphasizes safety above all else, the need to seek meaning and enchantment in natural places is more essential than it’s ever been. Since we’ve emerged as living beings from the jungles of the world, we suffer when isolated from it, as E. O. Wilson explains in

The Biophilia Hypothesis. The need to connect “subconsciously with the rest of life,” says Wilson, is so deep that it’s rooted in our biology. This deep affinity between humans and nature isn’t limited to plants and trees; it also includes wildlife, the topography, and the weather.

Author Richard Louv in *Last Child in the Woods* draws a tighter bead on this notion by considering how newly developing children are also affected. Indeed, it is most often impressionistic children—robbed of the capacity to free-roam outdoors as children did a half century ago—who may even be afflicted with what Louv calls “nature deprivation disorder.”

Despite the abundance of public land in Florida, intense sprawl-like development on private land continues at a rate that is predicted to “build out” the state in another half century or so. The recession of 2009–10 slowed this, allowing time to reconsider true sustainable development, but the future of natural Florida still hangs in the balance. If corrections aren’t made, even protected and publicly owned land will suffer since it is either downhill or—thanks to our porous underground aquifer—downstream from everything that is topographically above it. So our sense of urgency is not just to tend to our immediate human need to “connect,” but also to ensure enough healthy land and water exist to continue to sustain our human population.

Despite woefully outdated ideas that embrace squandering as a mark of American individualism, more realistic ways of living are finally being considered. When there were only two million people living in Florida, one could catch, cook, and eat a herd of gopher tortoises without worrying about the consequences. Now, the population of humans has boomed almost beyond belief, and that of the tortoise has diminished so that the species is threatened with extinction. If there is a monkey wrench that jeopardizes the intricate mechanism of thoughtful sustainability, it is a prideful refusal to use new and realistic information to dissolve paradigms that no longer work. In the same way, a new migrant to Florida isn’t a bad thing—unless that migrant refuses to learn and honor the natural rules that bind our physical world together.

I so enjoy folks who unabashedly profess their caring for our wild places, especially those with courage in their hearts. As the great nature writer Ed Abbey once wrote: “Sentiment without action is the ruination

of the soul." I deeply respect those who get off their butts and take a stand without worrying about how it affects their job security, their perceived social standing, or their public image. The pervasive corporate mentality can breed a dangerous sort of toadiness in human nature that will sooner or later dissolve all that is righteous and fair. Corporations are good at giving us places to hide, whether they're in the business of constructing computers or manufacturing newspapers. Imposing a "distance" between you and reality only delays the reality, insulates it for a moment, a year, a lifetime. It's the difference between trusting the wisdom of the senses, or succumbing to the compromising lock-step of socialization. I've worked hard to resist those compromises, not always with great success and with less finesse than I'd like to admit.

Despite my advocacy, I try to avoid becoming part of what poet and novelist Jim Harrison once described as the "burgeoning legion of eco-ninnies." The political correctness of it all can sometimes be a bit much. In too many cases, the quest to be politically correct is really a high profile act to "seem" or "appear" to be so. When that happens, the core message is often lost and the illusion of ethics takes its place.

Although this collection may be considered to be within the genre of "nature writing," it's certainly intended to appeal to anyone who has a steadfast curiosity for the world around us. In the same way, folks who enjoy categorizing things might also describe a few of these tales as "adventure travel," but it's certainly not the sort that's staged to evoke danger. Like a comfortable pair of hiking boots, a durable and lightweight paddle, or a reliable scuba regulator, the menagerie of behaviors reported here are simply tools to lead us to hidden places. And, when all's said and done, I seem far more vulnerable to danger and treachery back in our so-called civilized world than I do when immersed inside some wild geography.

I live at the edge of the historic district in the old riverboat town of Sanford, a place that came to be by its strategic location on an aquatic highway that led travelers into the heart of Florida. I've made my living as a nonfiction writer for a while now. Early on, I was enthralled with what was being called "new journalism," which was essentially using fiction techniques to tell a nonfiction story. Since this was not conventional reportage, writers could be part of the story, and not simply a

disembodied persona. As a result, I tried to get as close to the core of a subject as I could.

Eventually, it struck me that the stories that made me feel good as a person were the ones in which I immersed myself in natural places. E. O. Wilson, of course, could have told me this right off the bat. Since I also grew up out in the country, surrounded by wildness, I also felt at home in such places as an adult. Once that notion settled in, I made the decision to learn as much as I could about Florida and its singular natural systems. As an itinerate writer, I traveled extensively overseas to rainforests and coral reefs and blue holes to report stories on assignment. But Florida was my home, and I felt a strong obligation to learn as much as I could about what made its natural heart beat as it does.

Not surprisingly, I also began to see trends in other tropical countries that reflected many of our issues here on the peninsula. Essential resources, like potable fresh water, were coming under siege nearly everywhere. And wetlands, which kept rivers, lakes, and lagoons clean and functioning, were disappearing at an alarming rate. Florida is not unlike an island in this way: Since it's mostly surrounded by water, it's easier to identify its natural gifts, as well as the threats to those gifts. And, as other writers have noted, Florida is also a sort of bellwether state, a place where people experiment with trends and concepts, picking and choosing from the ones that seem to work. Today, three out of four Floridians were not born in Florida. Certainly, it's easier to tinker around when newcomers arrive with little understanding of the unique theater that surrounds them.

I've done my own special brand of tinkering, although it's mostly been to figure out how stuff works. If mucking through wild places fascinated me, so too did the chance to actually go under the water whenever I could. In fact, the word "salvage" in the title has more than one meaning. On one level, it refers to a few essays in which the work of "salvers" is chronicled. But more importantly, it implies the larger definition of that word: Retrieving, recovering, or preserving something valuable from potential loss. This "something valuable" is Florida herself, and at this point in her existence, she surely needs all the help she can get to rescue her soul from irretrievable loss.

I admire the spiritual naturalist William “Billy” Bartram a lot and relish the symmetry between what he saw in La Florida in the eighteenth century and what can be identified in the landscape now. What I find particularly enchanting are our magical springs, our misunderstood and vital swamps, and our ever-blooming wildflowers—the tiny, seasonal icons that perhaps identify us as the “Land of Flowers” as much as anything. Bartram blazed the trail for early naturalists who would journey to Florida because the peninsula was warm and wet, and its plants and animals largely unknown. It was—and in many ways still is—a hotspot of biological diversity.

Isolated by the remote wilderness of the New World’s South, Bartram did his best to fully communicate what he saw and felt to readers and naturalists thousands of miles away. This never fully occurred to me until Tom Hallock, a former colleague at USF when I was a Writer in Residence at its Florida Studies program there, explained the mechanics of this. He did so in a book that explores the unpublished letters to and from “Billy.” As Tom wisely observes, the incandescent spirit that transported Bartram’s sensibilities successfully over the Atlantic or back to the northern colonies is the same spirit that reaches us today—traveling not geographic distances, but across the great void of time. Bartram’s words and art were a grand invitation to the real Florida, and I’m thankful they remain so.



As recently as the end of World War II, Florida was the least densely settled state east of the Mississippi, and even then, most of that settlement was confined to its coasts. Although land promoters and chamber of commerce hypesters would not dare say so at the time, most of Florida was still a *frontier*. A frontier can be defined as the border where the “savage meets the civilized,” according to scholar Nash. When the U.S. Bureau of Census declared the Western frontier “closed” in 1890, renegades and dreamers continued to slip down into Florida because they knew its soggy wilderness would be open for a while to come.

I hope that some of these little stories in this collection illustrate that relic chunks of our landscape still remain as “frontiers” today, places where you can still go and have a legitimate experience of discovery,

perhaps even a revelation of sorts. I have been literally “lost” in this Florida at times, and I’ve always been gratified that there’s still enough room for that. Perhaps in becoming lost, I’ve also had the chance to re-discover myself—a chance to be “found.” And that has been enormously satisfying.

As for the specifics of my personal connection, it is this: I grew up on the then-rural Eastern Shore of Maryland, a smaller, more temperate version of the Florida peninsula. It was a flat terrain that, with all its tidal rivers and creeks, was nearly as wet. Before modern bridges changed the equation, population centers across the wide Chesapeake Bay to the west and the south were kept at arm’s length for a long time by the slow moving ferries that serviced the Shore. As a kid, I grew up with a mom and dad with enough kindness in their hearts to encourage me in all that I did. With my younger brother, we spent a lot of weekends fishing and crabbing together. We went to church together. When I played sports, they came to all of my games. During summer vacations on “The Shore,” I sometimes worked in farm fields loading watermelons, and by winter, spent some weekends culling oysters on a small open work boat on the Tangier Sound of the lower Chesapeake Bay. It was bitter cold, but I can still see the sunrises with the sails of the old Skipjacks slicing into the red horizon. Caring for nature didn’t begin as an intellectual experience. It came right out of my gut, because when you grow up in the country so much of what you do takes place outdoors. The “Shore,” as we knew it, seemed apart from the rest of the world. Florida appeared likewise to me when I first traveled here as a little boy, and later, moved here as a young man.

These stories don’t include logistics on getting anywhere, beyond an oblique reference to place names here and there. There are, thankfully, great guides—and excellent guide books—that will introduce you to the trails and the “blueways,” that will help you identify plants and wildlife, even specific habitats. Some of our earlier naturalists and explorers, such as Bartram, have left behind detailed accounts of their own treks here, and these chronicles function as historic charts that help us key in on certain plants, animals, even places. Sooner or later, though, if we take this nature-exploring business seriously, we learn to trust the most essential guides of all—our own sensibilities. I’m figuring the most any

of us can hope for is to have a chance to be surprised and refreshed by the natural world; setting up strict rules to do so is counterintuitive. If you go anywhere outside with an open heart, I believe this chance for discovery is unending. After all, any place is mythic if we really want it to be. And, the core geography of the human spirit—where the transcendent rush of the unexpected dwells—is a place unlikely to be found on any map.

In the subtitle, the phrase “State of Dreams” is a nifty steal of a title shard from Gary Mormino’s enlightening nonfiction book about the history of Florida, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*. And it’s also a nod to the dizzying comic history epic by Diane Roberts, *Dream State: Eight Generations of Swamp Lawyers, Conquistadors, Confederate Daughters, Banana Republicans, and other Florida Wildlife*. Both writers have an insightful knack for seeing beyond the obvious slogans and bringing us stories of Florida that are far more revealing than nonfiction chronicles traditionally have been. Both understand the many ways in which Florida has been imagined, shaped, and constantly reinvented—yet still it remains, inextricably, the Land of Flowers.

I hope you’ll consider this book as an invitation to saunter along with me, salvaging what is real in your own place, and getting lost and found in this state of dreams. If any of these stories leads you to a gratifying, even revelatory, experience in a dense hammock, a spring run, or on or under the water, you have my deepest congratulations. You will know for sure your saunter has been a righteous crusade, and you’ve scored one up on the Infidels by making it squarely to La Saint Terre.