

## THE IMPULSIVE TRAVELER

# Nose-to-snout with the locals in Gainesville, Fla.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Rule No. 1 when it comes to fleeing an alligator: Don't run in a straight line. I learned this while standing feet from a prehistoric-looking, kayak-size animal that had crawled up onto the bank of a canal to bask in the crisp January morning sun.

"If you have to run, run zigzag," warned Brack Barker, whom I had hired to show me around Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park in Gainesville, Fla. "They can run fast, but only straight ahead." We'd been walking along a grassy path, Barker slightly in front, and he'd turned around to warn me about a gator hidden in the grasses. I approached slowly and found an abnormally large-headed animal with bumpy skin and closed eyes.

Rule No 2: Don't forget your grade school science lessons, in which you probably learned that reptiles experience a sort of half-doze called thermoregulation. In plain English, that means they're not really asleep. So even though this creature was still as a log, I was aware of standing well beyond the suggested wildlife viewing distance and began thinking about zigzagging.

But I also couldn't dismiss the fact that I had come to the park for this very experience. I was traveling through the Southeast, and my friend Jason, a recent transplant from San Francisco, told me Paynes Prairie was filled with wildlife — not only the iconic gators, but also, surprisingly, bison, along with wild horses and cattle descended from those brought over centuries ago by Spaniards. Of course, Gainesville — midway between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, in north Florida — is perhaps best known for the University of Florida Gators. I don't generally make detours for mascots, but nose-to-snout encounters with wildlife? Sign me up.

Paynes Prairie is a 20,000-plus-acre park less than 10 miles from the UF campus and downtown Gainesville. The state's first preserve and a designated National Natural Landmark, the terrain was once home to the saber-toothed cat and, much later, the largest Spanish cattle ranch in Florida. Today, it sustains more than 20 distinct biological communities, including more than 270 species of birds. It has campsites and trails for hiking, horseback riding and cycling; because of its wide-open vistas, the park is also a great place to watch sunrises, sunsets and stars.

The evening before my tour with Barker, I drove into town, passing ranches, vegetable stands and dogs barking in the flatbeds of pickup trucks. Early the next morning, the air was chilly. I walked around the cabin where I'd stayed and noticed Spanish moss hanging not only from trees but also from telephone wires and street signs, making everything look like it needed a good dusting.

Barker met Jason and me in the parking lot outside Pearl's Country Store. A wiry man with a gray beard, Barker wore wire-rimmed glasses and a bandanna around his neck. We drove to Paynes Prairie, stopping along Highway 441 to look out to the land from an observation platform. Standing on the boardwalk, surrounded by cattail and pickerelweed, Barker explained that the park was formed by a number of sinkholes coming together to create the basin tens of thousands of years ago.

"You're standing in a giant sinkhole," he said. "This used to be underwater."

In the late 1800s, the eight-mile-wide prairie was a lake, with fish camps, steamboat charters and barges that transported citrus. Then, suddenly, the sink drained. Just like that. Within days, the prairie went dry — and could do so again anytime. For now, Paynes Prairie has smaller bodies of water that drain underground to recharge the aquifer, a giant reserve used for drinking water.

We drove to the northern side of the park, passing a turtle-crossing sign and some ancient live oaks. La Chua Trail is



PHOTOS BY JASON DEAREN

**An alligator rests on a bank at Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park in Gainesville, Fla., where park trails let visitors get a close-up view of the reptiles and hundreds of species of birds and, if they're lucky, catch a glimpse of bison or wild horses.**



**The Boulware Springs Waterworks building is one endpoint of the 16-mile Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail, which winds through Paynes Prairie.**

among the park's most popular because of wildlife sightings. As we followed the trail along the water, Barker pointed out birds: the anhinga, spreading its impressive wings to warm in the sun; the red-legged white ibis, picking around in the wet ground for snails and frogs; and the great black cormorant, jockeying an uncooperative fish into its beak.

We saw our first gators lined up along the water line, their short legs half submerged — as when humans drag beach chairs to sit in the sand right where the surf breaks. Through binoculars, I studied their graceless, cartoon-character bodies and rows of stubby teeth.

Barker, an anthropologist who used to work for the Florida Park Service and St. Augustine Alligator Farm, dropped gator tidbits — like the fact that males bellow during mating season to set their territory. The total inches between the alligator's eyes and snout equal the length of the body in feet, he explained, putting some of our specimens at well over eight feet.

A few times, we wouldn't see an alligator nestled in the grasses until we were nearly on top of it. One was only five feet

away, its eyes open and its feet moving in slow motion as though it were stretching after a nap.

We stopped under overcast skies and listened to the cacophony of squawks, squeaks, caws and chattering. Birds landed on the water like water-skiers, splashed and dove under for fish, flapped their wings, waded and frolicked. All the activity looked and sounded like that of kids swimming in a massive pool. Paynes

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Prairie was putting on quite a show.

"The coots are on the march," Barker said, pointing to countless small birds creating a commotion in the water. He identified the little blue heron, belted kingfisher and mockingbird. We even heard the trumpeting of the beloved sandhill crane. "It's a bird-watcher's dream today," he said.

Although we passed piles of horse manure and hoof prints, we saw no similar signs of bison. Like most visitors, I was surprised to learn that bison roam in a state better known for spring training and Mickey Mouse. But fossils show that they once grazed in north central Florida. Park officials decided to import 10 from Oklahoma in 1975, and — with no natural predators — the herd grew, inevitably causing problems such as escapees to the suburbs. So a few years ago, the park culled the herd, removing the males and creating yet more controversies. Today about 50 bison roam the prairie, but they remained elusive on our walk.

As we retraced our steps on the trail, we counted 33 alligators. Jason even spied one underwater. "You've got a good eye," I said, squinting to find the animal.

"I'm getting good gator-dar," he said, straight-faced.

Jason and I bid farewell to Barker, and we drove to Blue Highway, just outside the park, for lunch. On the radio, I tuned into an AM station that ran a 1950s-sounding promotional loop for Paynes Prairie. A scratchy voice proclaimed, "As wild as the Everglades, but easier to see and experience!"

Later, I walked on a few trails by myself and realized my sense of place had been completely upended. All day, I'd forgotten I was in Florida. The wide-open prairie made me think of the Great Plains, and the Spanish moss and pickups reminded me of the Deep South. Each instance of remembering my whereabouts was a burst of delight — the type of travel surprise I welcome.

As I walked on the pine-needle-and-sand trail, the sun began relaxing into the horizon, and the temperature dropped quickly. I headed back toward my car, mindfully zigzagging, just in case.

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If you go

### WHERE TO STAY Herlong Mansion

402 NE Cholokka Blvd., Micanopy  
352-466-3322  
[www.herlonginn.com](http://www.herlonginn.com)

A cracker-style pine farmhouse built in 1845, the mansion now has bright rooms with decks and claw-foot tubs. Rooms from \$119, including a full Southern breakfast.

### Twin Lakes Fish Camp

17105 S. County Rd. 325, Hawthorne  
352-466-3194  
[www.twinlakesfishcamp.com](http://www.twinlakesfishcamp.com)

Rustic four-person cabins, \$91 per night. Guests can check out canoes at no charge; pontoon rentals \$110 daily.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Southern Charm Kitchen

1714 SE Hawthorne Rd., Gainesville  
352-505-5553

[www.facebook.com/southerncharmkitchen](http://www.facebook.com/southerncharmkitchen)

Soul-food heaven. Pentecostal fried chicken, \$9.95; spicy corn waffle with Cajun shrimp, \$13.50; pickled watermelon tofu, \$11.95.

#### Blue Highway

204 NE U.S. Hwy. 441, Micanopy  
352-466-0062

[www.bluehighwaypizza.com](http://www.bluehighwaypizza.com)

Just outside Paynes Prairie. Salads, sandwiches and pizzas with local produce. Funghi pizza with portabello, shiitake, fancy white and oyster mushrooms on a thin crust, \$13.50.

#### The Yearling Restaurant

14531 E. County Rd. 325, Hawthorne  
352-466-3999

[www.yearlingrestaurant.net](http://www.yearlingrestaurant.net)

Old-Florida fare. Offerings include alligator, frog legs, quail, "cooter" (land turtle) and catfish, entrees \$13.95-\$31.95.

### WHAT TO DO

#### Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park

100 Savannah Blvd., Micanopy  
352-466-3397

[www.floridastateparks.org/park/Paynes-Prairie](http://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Paynes-Prairie)

The 50-foot observation tower reopens after repairs in March. Admission \$6 per vehicle, \$2 pedestrians and cyclists. Guided wildlife walk, \$2; half-day hike, \$5; overnight camping trip and hike, \$15.

#### Wild Florida Adventures

352-215-4396

[www.wild-florida.com](http://www.wild-florida.com)

Explore northern Florida and view wildlife by kayak or foot with guide Brack Barker. Half-day kayak tours, including manatee-viewing tours and sunset/moonrise tours, \$50. Paynes Prairie walking tours, \$10.

#### Florida Museum of Natural History

UF Cultural Plaza, SW 34th Street & Hull Road, Gainesville  
352-846-2000

[www.flmnh.ufl.edu](http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu)

Thousands of Florida specimens and artifacts, including a fossil plant garden and butterfly rain forest. Admission free; fees for some exhibits.

### INFORMATION

[www.visitgainesville.com](http://www.visitgainesville.com)