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Summer's bounty in the tropics



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Young cypress showing some green in early spring. A sleepy alligator finds the perfect swamp resting spot.

TWISTING THE CORKSCREW

A WALK THROUGH AUDUBON'S CORKSCREW SWAMP SANCTUARY

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KENNETH SETZER

Just a couple hours' drive from the Garden stand some of the nation's only old-growth cypress trees to have escaped logging, in the Audubon Society's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. As an Audubon sanctuary, Corkscrew naturally focuses on birds, but it also harbors diverse South Florida flora and some incredible and charismatic fauna, including exceedingly rare species like the Florida panther.

Though Corkscrew is just a few miles from Florida's west coast, near Naples and Fort Myers, you can access it by car from the east by driving along the Tamiami Trail. There are quicker routes, but Tamiami Trail brings you through the Everglades, Big Cypress National Preserve, Kirby Storter Roadside Park and Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. Each is worth a visit, as is the Skunk Ape Research Center—also along the way.

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One of the massive old-growth bald cypress trees (*Taxodium distichum*) at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

I realized Corkscrew would be biologically rich when I spotted a red shouldered hawk consuming its prey not 20 feet before me—and this was still outside the sanctuary. Inside the sanctuary’s visitor center, before entering the boardwalk, I stopped by the café to appreciate the gorgeous wood wall map of North America. Finally, I entered the sanctuary’s 2.25-mile boardwalk, which took me through pine flatwood, wet prairie, marsh and the largest old-growth bald cypresses left in this country, some nearing 130 feet tall. Inside the swamp proper, things instantly felt different: quiet, still, and full of promise.


I began to walk slowly, thoughtfully and with purpose.

The late afternoon sun provided fantastic, raking, golden light to highlight and contrast strap ferns growing atop cypress knee “islands.” It’s easy to get caught up in very small details, like old man’s beard lichen and Christmas wreath lichen (*Cryptothecia rubrocincta*) making red and white shapes you can interpret like clouds. Then you look up, and the bald cypress trunks keep on going. They support the usual Spanish moss and other *Tillandsia* epiphytes; the latter were flowering with showy flame-red and orange spikes that really stood out from the sea of gray-green.

Cypress trees are deciduous conifers, and drop their needle-like leaves in winter. These ancient-looking

towers indeed resembled trees jutting from miasmic, dinosaur-filled swamps depicted in prehistoric illustrations. Along with the pines and ferns, cypresses add to Corkscrew’s primitive feel. Twelve of the oldest and largest cypress trees are named. One is “Rhett Green,” named for an Audubon warden who risked his life protecting birds from poachers.

In addition to old-growth cypress, Corkscrew is home to the largest-known ghost orchid. The sanctuary’s signage and website indicate when it’s in bloom. It was not during my visit; I searched the towering cypress it calls home for a sign of at least the roots of this infamous epiphyte, but had no luck.

I admit to being slightly disappointed that visitors may not leave the boardwalk at the sanctuary, but even after a few hours, there was much left to see (I recommend at least a two-and-a-half-hour visit). More importantly, keeping visitors to the boardwalk ensures the sanctuary remains just that—a redoubt hosting the largest nesting colony of wood storks in the country, earthen mounds of the Calusa people, ancient trees and giant reptiles. A week after my visit, a video of an adult Florida panther running along the sanctuary’s boardwalk—right past amazed visitors—made the rounds of the internet. What a special place. Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary preserves the South Florida of centuries past. 



A young strap fern finds a home on a cypress knee.



Red shouldered hawk and its lunch.



Blue flag iris in bloom.