

A Year IN THE Life OF A Park

Story and Photos By Fran Palmeri

January JANUARY's a quiet time at Oscar Scherer State Park. Nature is resting. Subtle browns of grasses are bolstered by the greens of faithful pines and palms. A solitary aster greets you along the trail.

Bald eagles, owls, scrub jays and other birds are nesting. Eagles return year after year to huge nests. Look for one of these "tree houses" along the Yellow Trail. "Snowbirds" flood into the Park. Often, the campground is full as they "roost" for the night—or the week.

The weather is quixotic with cool mornings and summer-like afternoons, perfect for canoeing on South Creek. At dusk, listen for the chip notes of faithful cardinals or mewing of bobcat kittens along the Lester Finley Trail. Clear skies at sunset bring out deep azure blues and pinks as the light fades, while clouds produce pyrotechnic oranges and golds.

February In FEBRUARY, the "new green" trumpets spring before the calendar makes it official. Sky-blue lupine brightens up the scrub. Candles on the tips of branches announce new growth of slash and long leaf pines. Can't tell one from another? Long leaf pines have white candles; slash pines have brown.

While trees are dormant, the Park burns in the pine and scrubby oak flatwoods where fire is as essential as sun and rain. It thins the understory and promotes the growth of wildflowers and grasses, food for gopher tortoises and other creatures. Within days, new shoots appear, confirming the wisdom of mimicking Nature.

Eastern screech owls are nesting. Look for them in the snags along the trails. Midmonth, runners turn out before dawn for the annual Scrub Jay Five K race along wooded trails, a welcome change from pavement and asphalt. Plan to arrive while it's still dark. Bring binoculars to scan the sky directly overhead for a double star.

March Coral bean, true harbinger of spring, bursts forth in MARCH, attracting ruby-throated hummingbirds migrating north. Florida scrub jays lay eggs, three or four per nest. Near the Red Trail, great horned owl juveniles sit in the slash pines, prisoners until they can fledge and flee the scene.

Gulf fritillaries make the rounds of the butterfly gardens along the Finley Trail. Pale lavender Tampa Vervain blooms and the beautiful American Snowbell blossoms appear. Bright red and yellow blanket flower arrives and reseeds throughout spring and summer.



April In APRIL, after heavy rains, mullet may mass under the bridge on Finley Trail. River otters follow close behind. The pale lavender pine hyacinth blooms in the pine flatwoods. Prickly pear cactus puts out its delicate yellow flowers.

Young great horned owls are growing inches per day, shedding their fuzzy coats for feathers. At dusk, look and listen for the aerial display of the chuck will's widow on the Red Trail as he swoops and dives to attract a mate. Sand hill cranes stake out their territory for nesting. Scrub jays' eggs are hatching. The young birds are fed with insects such as caterpillars that feed on scrub lupine. Nature's food web at work.

At the end of the month, Earth Day brings thousands of people to celebrate their stewardship of this beautiful park.



May There's a lot to do in MAY. Get into the swim in Lake Osprey. Or try fishing in South Creek. Or in early morning drift down the creek in a canoe. Keep an eye out for the occasional alligator. Bring the kids to the playgrounds. Hike the Green or Yellow Trail and take in the tapestry of wildflowers in the scrub and pine flatwoods.

Young scrub jays are fledging as fire season and the rains begin. Young bald eagles also fledge at this time, their feathers a drab brown. They won't acquire the distinctive white head and tail of mature birds for four to five years.

June JUNE is dragonflies surfing up and down the trails, feeding on flying insects and each other. Tiny scrub oaks "planted" last fall by industrious scrub jays push their way up out of the sand, their leaves pale yellow and pink. Pale pink beautyberry is in bloom. High and low bush blueberries, Southern dewberry and sand blackberry put forth tempting fruit, edible for both man and beast.



Gopher tortoises mate this month. Females will lay one clutch of an average of 6 eggs in the white sandy entrance to their burrows. They watch over them carefully but most are lost to predators.

The white-hot sun is directly overhead. Come stand on your shadow around one p.m. Then seek refuge along shady South Creek Nature Trail where a bench awaits you. Or picnic under the live oaks by the Nature Center. Visit at sundown when creatures and colors emerge in the fading light. Lightning bugs, their tiny lights twinkling in the treetops, make the Park festive.

July All the world's a steamy greenhouse in JULY, the temperature matched only by the humidity. Along the trails, it's rabbits, rabbits, rabbits. The call of the bobwhite rings throughout the Park. In late morning, look up for aerial displays of vultures, eagles, ibis, wood storks, crows and hawks riding the thermals.

Summer downpours bring forth mushrooms, rainbows and a bumper crop of frogs and toads. Areas burned just six months ago are verdant with two to three feet of new growth. Purple butterfly pea vine blankets the saw palmetto.



August Clouds and pines are the theme in AUGUST. Thunderheads build to great heights in the east producing spectacular sunsets and moonrises. Red leaves and blue berries of Virginia creeper hint of the coming fall. Gopher tortoises munch on bright red gopher apples. Young scrub jays are out and about feeding themselves.

In the picnic areas, the "clean up crew" – raccoons—arrives at dusk to pick up the leftovers from picnics. The true stewards are faithful park rangers who bring beauty and order to the Park every day of the year.



September SEPTEMBER turns the scrubby flatwoods to gold. Lovebugs in huge numbers swarm over the goldenrod and frostweed. From time to time, hurricanes turn things topsy-turvy as clouds spiral counterclockwise over the landscape. Then, Mother Nature, scrubbed clean and gleaming, smiles again and scrub jays go back to burying scrubby oak acorns. By this time, the latest "crop" of jays looks like adults.

Animal tracks on sandy trails read like a "Who's Who" in the Park. Gopher tortoises, rabbits, white tailed deer, snakes and moles, armadillos, bobcats, and birds all leave their mark. Look for ancient snags, the heartwood of pines now sculpted into fantastic forms by years of wind and rain. They provide food (from the insects that live in them), and perches for many varieties of birds including osprey, eagles, and red bellied, pileated, and downy woodpeckers.

October OCTOBER's a cornucopia of wildflowers blossoming and seeding in a great frenzy before cooler weather sets in. Look for the yellow flowers of silk grasses, golden asters, clumps of pale pink muhly grass, purple blazing star, pink paint brush and blackeyed susans, tiny blue day-flowers. The deep purple berries of beautyberry attract many different species of wildlife. Along the Blue Trail, crimson pine lilies reign in a field of grasses. Grasses come into their own. Tan and gold seed heads gleam in the sun; the variations will tell you which is which.

Along the Yellow Trail butterflies—yellow sulfurs, swallowtails, zebra longwings—nectar on fall wildflowers. The scarlet-bodied wasp moth prefers frostweed along the Finley Trail. Scrub jays busily bury thousands of acorns each, keeping careful watch for predators and other jays.

In mid month, steam and heat are suddenly vanquished as the humidity and temperature drop.



November On cool foggy mornings in NOVEMBER, seek out spider webs beaded with the night's dew. Hurry! These fleeting gossamer creations disappear when the sun breaks through to whisk them away. By noon, gopher tortoises amble down sunny trails munching on grass. Snakes emerge, seeking heat from the white sand. The scrub is festive with red pokeberry, Virginia creeper and poison ivy.

Hoots of owls and shrieks of hawks laying claim to their territory are heard day and night. White-tailed deer enjoying cooler weather leap through the tall grasses. The buck shows off a full set of antlers. Monarchs migrate through the Park nectaring on firebush and other late bloomers.

Thanksgiving brings celebrants with turkey dinners to the Park. The wild kind is safely hidden away. Full moonrise over the scrub is unforgettable. Campers trek on moonlit trails through a silvery world.

December DECEMBER's heavy dews keep plants alive through a dry time. Lupine plump up their fuzzy leaves, priming for their coming debut when sky blue flowers complement sea green leaves. Early in the month, a rare frost may surprise you, marking the change from fall to winter. Forget the calendar. Deep into December, late asters insist on blooming along the Yellow Trail.

The early morning sun hangs low in the sky, its rays penetrating under the saw palmetto where a wood rat sits for a spell before turning in for the day. Waves of warblers (Palm and Pine are resident all year) and other migrants—green tree swallows, cedar waxwings, robins, eastern bluebirds, meadowlarks—ride through on the winds of a front. They'll feed and rest before getting underway again.

The sun brings 'Sunday' painters to the Park but departs early. In winter, Nature cheats us out of the warm evening hours of daylight but consoles us with glorious sunsets.

For more park information visit:
www.floridastateparks.org/oscarscherer

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