

Take A Hike

by Fran Palmeri

There's a new look to the trails at Oscar Scherer State Park. With colored arrows pointing the way, you don't have to worry about where you're going but can concentrate on taking in the beautiful scenery. Signs with detailed maps to guide hikers have been placed at the trailheads and at strategic places in the Park. A new "all trails" map, in full color includes explanations of each trail.

Oscar Scherer is not just about hiking. With fifteen miles of trails of various difficulties and lengths ranging from a half mile to five miles, you have an array of choices at the Park. Take a stroll down the shady path of the South Creek Nature Trail, walk the dog along the Lester Finley Trail, hike the full five miles of the Yellow Trail, or bike the hard-packed surface of the Green Trail.

Over the years at Oscar Scherer, maintenance and upgrades are needed to keep Park trails in optimum condition. Recognizing this, members of the Friends of Oscar Scherer Park Inc., the Citizens Support Organization for the Park, developed a plan to transform and update the trail system using volunteer labor coupled with the quantum advances in technology in mapping, graphic design, and signage.

Project planners enjoyed the enthusiastic endorsement and help from park personnel and a host of volunteers. Each aspect was submitted for approval to Oscar Scherer's Park Manager. In many cases, this necessitated clearance by Biologists and Education Specialists at the District level before work could get underway.

Regular users of the park also provided invaluable guidance and suggestions.

The project was broken down into tasks. Starting with the most needed, it proceeded in a logical fashion to minimize disruption and confusion for those hiking the trails during the year long project which was begun in February 2005. It will be completed by April 2006.

The first task was to use Global Positioning System (GPS) to record the geographical location of every feature on the trails. Volunteers outfitted with GPS backpacks walked every inch of the trails shooting signals to satellites which were bounced back and recorded as data describing the person's location and distance between data points.

The data was then downloaded into a geographic information system (GIS), a mapping system used to create maps that accurately displays the geographic location of features such as roads, buildings, waterways, and other natural and man-made reference points. Features specific to Oscar Scherer Park resulting from the GPS effort were combined to create detailed maps. Files from the GIS system were created in a format that provides the best detail for professional graphic artists and sign makers.

Vineyard Graphics, a Sarasota graphic arts company, utilized the files to create precise, attractive, easy to read maps. First, they designed an "all trails" map on an 11" x 22" page that folds into quarters, making it portable. One side displays the entire trail system with major features of each of the

six trails. The reverse side of the map contains a brief description of each trail, trail advisories, and information about the Friends of Oscar Scherer along with a title page. The map was printed in color. This map can be downloaded from the Oscar Scherer State Park Website.

H&H Signs of Venice, Florida took the same information and created all of the signs for the project. They designed three 4' x 6' map boards showing the overall trail system. Signs were con-



Map of Oscar Scherer hiking trails



Volunteers dig holes for new trail signs



Large display board orients visitors to park trails

constructed using POLY-ROUT®, an ideal material for areas that require long-lasting, durable signs because of exposure to the elements. Text and trail features were routed into the signs. A map insert was created for the three large signs and imbedded into the map board. This map was printed and sealed between two layers of lexan. No other plastic can match lexan's combination of light transmittance (clarity) and ability to withstand extreme conditions.

The map was inserted into the sign with security screws. These signs have a 20-year life expectancy even in the severe weather conditions found in Southwest Florida.

H & H Signs constructed trailhead signs of the same material which provide information and a map outline at the beginning of each trail, and new signs along Park roads provide directions to trails.

At the ranger station entrance to the Park, visitors are greeted by a large sign with a map of all the trails to help orient them. The All Trails Map is available at the ranger station as well. Two more of the signs are conveniently located at the South Creek Picnic Area and at the Nature Center to provide guidance for people planning an outing,

Each of Oscar Scherer's six trails has something unique to offer. The Lester

Finley is popular with first time visitors, dog walkers, and "regulars" in the Park. A half-mile leisurely walk follows scenic South Creek. The five mile long Yellow Trail passes through two of the original ecosystems in this part of Florida – the pine flatwoods and the scrubby flatwoods (the scrub). This is one of the longer trails where the new individual trail map is especially nice to have. Each trail has its own map and offers detailed descriptions of the ecosystems and wildlife along that particular trail.

A workgroup of volunteers spent weeks placing 4" x 4" posts in the ground and attaching colored arrows matching each trail name with weather- and tamper-proof screws. Incidentally, all arrows are made of POLY-ROUT®, the same material used to construct the signs.

Some of the trails were redesigned to give hikers choices of shorter and longer routes. For example, on the Yellow Trail you now can choose to hike two, three and a half, or the full five miles with each route clearly marked. The South Creek Nature Trail was extended 100 yards to make it more convenient for users to locate the trailhead.

Smoothing the way for hikers has always been a top consideration of this project. Planners noted that two of the bridges on the Yellow Trail showed

signs of wear and were too narrow for small service vehicles such as ATVs or utility vehicles which do maintenance such as brush removal and mowing. As a result, both bridges were replaced with steel based supports and new decking including safety handrails.

The Friends of Oscar Scherer used its own funds for this project. Other CSOs may wish to solicit grants from their community or the state. Developing a grant request package may somewhat restrict the usage of the funds and necessitate a longer lead-time, but it is a very viable longer source of funding for costly projects like this. Florida State Park personnel can provide assistance.

Clearly the need to refurbish the trails at Oscar Scherer was there. The end result is a state-of-the-art trail system that is on the leading edge of available technology. Now, when hiking the trails at Oscar Scherer, you pass with ease through a variety of beautiful landscapes. Don't be one of those who hurry by. Pause often to take it all in.

This project was led by Bob Sendrey and Russ Delaney of the Friends of Oscar Scherer Park. For more information contact them through Oscar Scherer State Park at 941-483-5956.

All photos by Fran Palmeri.



A volunteer attaches directional arrow for hikers