

## Bell Creek Nature Preserve

### General Description

Size: 597 acres. This site started out as a small, 60 acre patch of scrub habitat, purchased by the Hillsborough County ELAP Program in 1990. The land around it appeared to be destined for residential development. Fortunately, a weak housing market in the early 1990's led to the preservation of two more parcels, adding both size and habitat diversity to the preserve. The County was able to reduce the overall cost of the project by partnering with the School District. As a result, a degraded section of one of the large parcels was subdivided and purchased by the School District for construction of Marion Rodgers Middle School. Other portions of the preserve with open pasture were designated as surplus land to be used for future recreational facilities such as soccer and Little League fields, but opposition from adjacent residents convinced the County to change the intended use from recreation to habitat restoration and preservation. The site is named after Bell Creek, a significant tributary of the Alafia River, that runs along the east boundary of the preserve, and provides a wetland corridor connection to other protected areas to the south.

### Location and Access

The preserve is located in the heart of Riverview, with access points for foot traffic on the south side of Boyette Road just east of McMullen Road, on the east side of McMullen Road 1/2 mile south of Boyette Road, and at trail connection points in the Boyette Springs and Shadow Run neighborhoods, for local residents. The only access point with parking available is the one on McMullen Road, which is also the location of the Hillsborough County Conservation Services Office. The site is open every day during daylight hours only.

### Environmental Significance

As noted above, the original 60 acre parcel contains rare scrub habitat, and it supports one of the largest known populations of the endangered Florida golden aster (*Chrysopsis floridana*), as well as other rare plant species and a population of gopher tortoises. The additional parcels added later also include significant amounts of sand pine scrub and oak scrub, as well as pine flatwoods, freshwater marsh, hardwood hammock, open grassland, and a wetland creek corridor that connects with the larger habitat corridor along Bell Creek. The largest wetland on the preserve, known as Jerry's Marsh, forms the headwaters of Rice Creek, a separate Alafia River tributary that flows to the west and northwest after leaving the site. Although the preserve is surrounded by residential development, it supports a healthy and diverse population of native wildlife, including Florida sandhill crane and Sherman's fox squirrel. The preserve's location in close proximity to residential development presents special challenges to management staff. Most of the site's uplands require periodic prescribed fire to maintain habitat quality and reduce the potential for a destructive wildfire. Homeowners sometimes object to this practice due to a lack of understanding. Fortunately, most residents support protection and management of the resource, and are willing to provide volunteer support to assist with the effort.

### Recreational Opportunities

The preserve features a 5 mile hiking trail that leads through all sections of the preserve and can be accessed at five separate points. A trail brochure is available from Hillsborough County. A small lake can be fished from shore. Native plant lovers and birdwatchers will enjoy this diverse natural resource.

### Volunteer Opportunities

There are many volunteer opportunities available at this site, facilitated by the presence of the County's land management headquarters. Everything from trail maintenance to habitat restoration, exotic control, habitat monitoring, and office support is welcome.

### Contact Information

Hillsborough County Parks, Recreation and Conservation Department, Conservation Services Office, 10940 McMullen Road, Riverview, FL 33569. (813) 672-7876.

