



Golden Aster Scrub Preserve

General Description

Size: 1,236 acres. This preserve was purchased by Hillsborough County (ELAPP) in 1995, and ownership was conveyed to the State under the CARL Program. This enabled the County to recover 50% of the purchase price, and use the funds to acquire additional preserve lands elsewhere. The County manages the site through a lease agreement. The preserve is located adjacent to I-75 and Big Bend Road, virtually guaranteeing its loss to development had it not been purchased for preservation. The site is linked by a creek corridor to coastal habitat to the west in the area known as The Kitchen, and additional purchases may provide an eventual land link as well.

Location and Access

Although the site is located at the northwest corner of the intersection of I-75 and Big Bend Road, the only access point is in the northeast corner of the site, at the south end of East Bay Road. From I-75 take exit 250, Gibsonton Drive, go west a short distance to East Bay Road, then south on East Bay Road for 2 miles to the dead end. Park on the road shoulder and enter through a gap in the fence on the west, between two metal gates. Improved access facilities will be installed in the near future. The site is open every day to foot traffic, day use only.

Environmental Significance

This site is extremely important due to its overall size and the type of habitat protected. As its name indicates, it contains a large area of scrub, approximately 400 acres, and the scrub supports a large population of the endangered Florida golden aster (*Chrysopsis floridana*). An even more notable inhabitant of the site is the Florida scrub jay, which occurs in at least two family groups on the preserve, each with a distinct home territory. This species depends on scrub habitat, maintained at a low height by occasional fire, for survival. There are very few of these birds left anywhere in the Tampa Bay region. The rest of the site is characterized by the unusually high quality and variety of its habitat. Extensive pine flatwoods are dotted with isolated freshwater wetlands of varying size, some of which are used as nesting sites by Florida sandhill cranes. Oak hammock, scrubby flatwoods, a locally rare bay head swamp, and two man-made lakes add to the overall diversity of the site. In addition to providing habitat for native plants and wildlife, large areas of protected natural habitat provide many direct benefits to the surrounding community. The heavily vegetated land surface holds rain water and releases it gradually, reducing downstream flooding from storm-water runoff. Evapotranspiration improves air quality and moderates temperature extremes. Active habitat management is essential to maintain the resources found on this site. Without intervention, the site will decline from a number of factors, including fire suppression, invasive exotic species, and illegal human activities such as off-road vehicles, trash dumping, and poaching.

Recreational Opportunities

A marked hiking trail, over 5 miles in length, has been developed, following existing woods roads. A trail brochure with a map is available from the County. Hikers may fish from shore in either of two man-made lakes. This site is an excellent place for native plant identification, bird watching, and other nature oriented pursuits.

Volunteer Opportunities

The exceptional quality and diversity of the preserve indicates the potential to support an unusually large variety of plants and animals. Amateur naturalists are needed to help the County document as many species as possible. This site has also had past problems with illegal off-road vehicle use, so any signs of this activity should be reported. The site is patrolled by live-on security personnel, but violations still occur. Trail maintenance is also needed, and missing or vandalized markers should be reported.

Contact Information

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