

COMMENTARY

What if a golf course were returned to nature?



This is what happened at Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve

What would happen if a golf course were allowed to return to the wild? That's what the Lemon Bay Conservancy wanted to know.



PHOTO BY EVA FURNER
Visitors to the Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve can see a host of birds, including the rose-breasted grosbeak.

In 2010, the organization purchased an 18-hole golf course (80 acres) that had been abandoned four years earlier. The course, which was owned by the Wildflower Country Club near Placida, was active from 1974 until it was abandoned in 2006.

It is known today as the Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve.

Returning to the wild is like stepping back in time and not knowing the year you landed. In 1951, it was grazing for cattle. In the early 20th century, the site was once pine flatlands before being timbered.

By the time the Lemon Bay Conservancy took an interest in the property, it had a four-year head start in the back-to-nature process. But it turned out that returning to its *au naturel* state did need human help.

During those four years, invasive trees like Brazilian pepper, carrotwood, and melaleuca were taking over; they simply out-performed Florida's native plants. Removing them was an impossible task for volunteers alone.

That's when the Conservancy embarked on a multi-phase plan. First, the invasive trees were removed with heavy equipment.

The second phase involved reengineering the manmade ponds. The golf course designers had created six ponds with steep sides interconnected with underground pipes that dumped excess stormwater into Lemon Creek.

It was necessary to re-slope the sides of those ponds to replicate natural ponds in order to create wetlands between them to accommodate diverse native plants. The largest pond, which was tidal with a higher salt content, was expanded from four to fourteen acres by excavating one of the golf course fairways.

The excavated material was moved to a

nearby location in the Preserve. The resulting hill is now one of the highest elevations in Charlotte County at 20 feet, being gradually surpassed by the Charlotte County Landfill.

Another phase was to replenish the varying habitats (ponds, wetlands, and uplands) with appropriate native plantings. Volunteers contributed 9,000 hours for planting the 70,000 native trees, shrubs, wildflowers, and grasses to attain the objective of improving water quality and restoring wildlife habitats.

These were not small tasks, nor were they inexpensive.

The Lemon Bay Conservancy raised approximately \$900,000 to purchase the tract and monitor and manage its construction. In addition, the Southwest Florida Water Management District and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration provided additional funds that by 2021 totaled \$1,317,000.

While these funds were critical to Wildflower as a preserve, the key to the Wildflower Preserve's continued success was and is its indomitable volunteers.

When humans attempt to mimic the natural world, they do not always get it right. Nature has the final say in its evolving wild state.

The Lemon Bay Conservancy realized that this would be a learning process. If it didn't get the succession quite right, it would learn from the failures.

Education is about living your learning, and that is what the Lemon Bay Conservancy is doing. Lemon Bay Wildflower Preserve is open daily to members.

Frequent walks, led by naturalists, are available to the public. You can learn what went right and what didn't as you walk Wildflower.

Or you may learn why a slash pine prefers an elevation one foot higher than a live oak or why dead trees are considered important to the Preserve. The answers are before you and revealed by the leaders.

More DALTON | B2



PHOTO BY EVA FURNER
Nets are used to capture young tarpon, many of which will be tagged with an internal transponder.

PHOTO COURTESY LEMON BAY CONSERVANCY
Newly formed wetlands are prevalent between ponds at the former golf course now known as Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve.



PHOTO BY CORKY DALTON

The highest point in Charlotte County is a manmade hill at the Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve.



PHOTO BY EVA FURNER

Volunteers help clear Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve after Hurricane Ian.



PHOTO BY FRED BRENTWISER

This was once a water trap at a golf course. It has been slowly allowed to return to nature — with help.



PHOTO BY EVA FURNER

White pelicans, great egrets and roseate spoonbills can be found at the Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve.

Dalton/ from B1

If you are a birder, it is an exciting place to visit. You can walk with an experienced birder to identify migrating and local birds or climb one of the highest hills in Charlotte County to look down into the Preserve to view birds in different habitats.

You might be lucky enough to observe the red-winged blackbirds among the marshes. I was one of the lucky ones.

An interesting feature at the Preserve is a bird-observation area. A barrier of natural materials separates the observer from the bird feeding stations. The barrier contains holes to get a close-up shot — with a camera, that is — of the birds as they dine.

Lemon Lake is adjacent to Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve. When the water level drops, the fish population is more concentrated and many birds are attracted for a few weeks.

It's not often that you will see great egrets, roseate spoonbills and migrating white pelicans feasting on the Lake's offerings.

Tarpon is one of Florida's largest game fish. The tarpon can grow to 8 feet in length and weigh as much as 270 pounds. Just a few inches long, the young tarpon, born in the Gulf, move into the tidal habitats like those in Wildflower where they spend their juvenile years before venturing into the eat-or-be-eaten world.

Tarpon have a swim bladder (lung-like) that enables them to breathe raw air above the water's surface, as well as gills to take in dissolved oxygen from the water. This unique ability enables the young tarpon to survive where other fish cannot in the low-oxygen Wildflower waters.

For a while, young tarpon were caught, studied, and released by Mote Marine. Nets were used to capture the tarpon and then placed in coolers filled with creek water.

Each tarpon was measured and weighed



Here is how Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve looked in 2023.

and DNA sampled, had an internal transponder (RFID) placed in the abdominal cavity, and finally released. When a juvenile left Lemon Creek to begin its adult life in the Gulf, Caribbean and Atlantic, the RFID antenna at the mouth of Lemon Creek captured the departure date.

Since adult tarpon are a major catch-and-release game fish, when caught, the transponder code can be read, providing an estimate of emigration range and the tarpon's growth rate.

I was lucky enough to see this process in action years ago. This Florida Fish and Wildlife Service has plans to resume this

program to track the tarpon throughout Lemon Bay and Charlotte Harbor.

If you've been in Florida for a few years, you've seen the disappearance of wild Florida. Lemon Bay Conservancy has, in its own small way, permitted us to observe this transformation in reverse.

Join the Lemon Bay Conservancy or visit Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve. Learn about Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve and the Conservancy's efforts to improve water quality throughout the Lemon Bay watershed at: lemonbayconservancy.org.

You will find a list of periodic walks open to the public, volunteer

opportunities, and other ongoing projects. Most of the walks are scheduled during cooler weather.

A special thanks to Eva Furner, LBC Volunteer Project Leader, who has been part of the Wildflower project since the beginning.

Wildflower Preserve Trail Map-base map from Google Earth
Wildflower Golf Course 2004-Charlotte County GIS

Wildflower before development in 1960-University of Florida Digital Library

Corky Dalton, the author of Nature's Notebook, can be reached at naturesnotebook101@gmail.com.

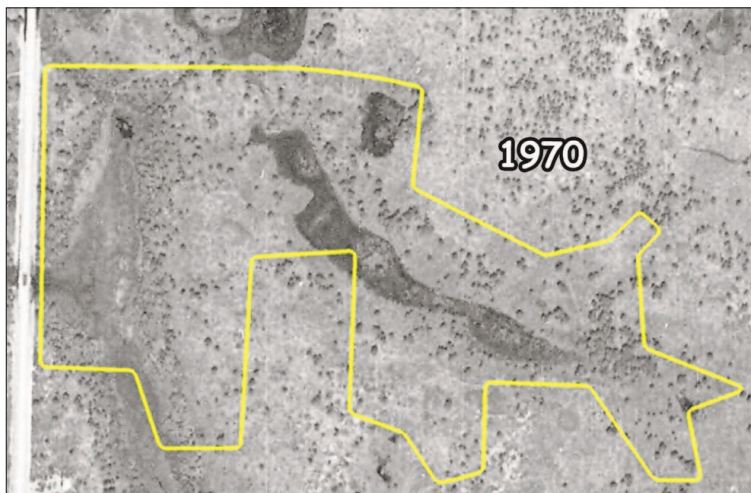


PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA DIGITAL LIBRARY

Here is what Lemon Creek Wildflower Preserve looked like in 1970 before it was developed as a golf course.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Here is how the Wildflower Golf Course looked in 2004.