

January 29 2023

TO: File

FROM: Chris Oliver, Myakka Wild and Scenic River Biologist
District 4 Administration

SUBJECT: Myakka Wild and Scenic River (MWSR) Survey

The river inspection for the month of January took place on 19th and 23rd.

Upper River

On the 23rd of January, the section of the MWSR from the Myakka River State Park (MRSP) pavilion area to the Venice Myakka River Park (VMRP) on Laurel Road was surveyed by Chris Oliver accompanied by Zahir Ringgold and Ben Woods. The inspection by kayak began at 8:15 am and ended at 3:40 pm. The weather was generally good with some winds. Temperatures ranged from about 64 °F and a max temperature of 81 °F.

Wildlife observations¹ of interest included:

- 75 alligators were observed during this survey,
 - 23 of the above were located at Deep Hole.
- Other observations during the survey included:
 - 1 green water snake,
 - 1 brown water snake,
 - 41 peninsula cooter,
 - 5 bald eagle,
 - 2 osprey,
 - 11 red-shouldered hawk, and
 - numerous other animals.

The online USGS Myakka River Gage (02298830) above S.R.72 states the level as 4.66 feet with a flow measuring about 180 cfs and the actual post read was 12.65 feet. The water level at Downs' Dam measured 4.34 feet from online USGS 0229888 data and actual post measured 4.34 feet.

River Blockages and Portages: No portages were required. Several river areas below Deep Hole are collecting mats of water-hyacinth and may slowly become aquatic blockages to navigation.

Activities observed along the river during this inspection: Few activities were directly observed during this survey. Three hikers were seen leaving the Deep Hole (DH) area as we arrived at the area. Two Florida Park Service volunteer monitors were present at DH and were talking near the south rim with another individual. There was some evidence of camping south of MRSP, but no other activities

were observed.

Additional Notes: As discussed in prior reports the FPS staff has coordinated work efforts with FWC to improve the floodplain marsh within MRSP by reducing non-native grasses. In early October the first major effort against non-native grass in the floodplain south of S.R. 72 occurred with an aerial herbicide treatment of some of the worst non-native grass monoculture areas. The dense paragrass within the treatment area had browned by the November Survey and on December 7th staff from MRSP conducted a prescribed fire treatment of the lower section of this area treated by helicopter in October.

In the sections that were burned nearly all paragrass material above ground was removed by the fire. With the wall of paragrass removed, it is now quite easy to view the Lower Myakka Lake well in advance of arriving at the river outlet to the lake. With the January rains this treated and burned area is now seeing an emergence of new seedlings. Most of them appear to be native broadleaf species. Numerous species of birds were seen foraging in this area previously of little value. One American kestrel, several tri-colored herons and limpkins were seen hunting there. Fourteen kill deer were also noted on the now open mud-flat that was formerly occupied by thick grass.

Regarding observations at Deep Hole (DH), as we gained visibility of the area, we noticed three hikers exiting the area and another three people near the south rim. Several of the larger alligators present were out of the water in the northern areas which offer some shelter from winds. We counted only twenty-three alligators, of which now only 10 alligators were fully out of the water. Another 5 alligators were partially out with 8 alligators fully in the water. During the count we noticed that two of the individuals at the south rim area were park volunteers. MRSP has been sending staff and volunteers down, when possible, to assist in managing park visitors at this site and attempting to reduce the level of impact/stress on alligators aggregating at DH. These observations occurred about 10:40 am.

Downs' Dam remains a navigation hazard at many water levels. We passed Downs' Dam through the eastern washout area with no difficulty at this water level.

Since the last survey, erosion at the southern overlook at the Venetian Golf and River Club increased and activities related to the wooden platform may have caused bank failure since the last inspection.

As usual minor evidence of unpermitted camping appeared south of MRSP. One site on the Carlton Reserve just south of the Venetian Overlook Area clearly had been used since the last survey. We queued into the site after seeing minor erosion of the bank, some trash and then the fire-pit area.

See photos with descriptions.

Lower River

On the 19th of January, the section of the MWSR from above Border Road to the County line was surveyed by Chris Oliver. The inspection by Boston Whaler from Marina Park began at 8:45 am and ended at 2:30 pm. The weather was mixed with some winds and periods of light rain. Temperatures ranged from a low of about 62 °F to a high of 69 °F. Tidal conditions were very low.

Observations¹ of interest on the lower river:

- The Myakka Rookery/Critical Wildlife Area (CWA) has started the annual nesting cycle with a minimum of 19 birds present. The count included 9 great egret, 2 great blue heron, and 8 roseate spoonbill. No wood stork were seen in the area.
- The mangrove island 0.33 miles north of the CWA had no activity.
- A large flock of lesser scaup was encountered south of Tarpon Point. At least 1500 lesser scaup were estimated from photos.

Activities observed along the river during this inspection: One resident was on their dock fishing above I-75. The dual pontoon sailboat on the peninsula near Snook Haven Park (SHP) remains abandoned there. The SHP concession tour boat was in operation and seen a mile south of SHP. Not far from downriver from that, a canoe with two people and a single kayaker were seen paddling. They came down from SHP. Two observers with a leased dog were seen along rambler's Rest (RR). A fisherman was on the southern pier at RR. A single bowrider with three people was encountered at the CWA. The motor was very loud, but they were traveling slow and appeared to be testing out the motor and steering.

Additional notes: Continued signs of minor erosion from egress to the water are present on conservation park lands and on private properties. These impacts are often cumulative. Human movement up and down the bank can reduce or eliminate riverine vegetation which holds the soil in place. During this survey the continued removal of bank vegetation, including trees, was apparent. Any practice that causes disturbance can be the first step toward erosion. Erosion can accelerate, especially when aggravated by natural and human activities.

Debris from Hurricane Ian remains present in the river area and Myakka River Protection Zone from near River Palms down to the Charlotte County line and may have a significant impact on natural resource values. It is important to note, the most impacted area from man-made debris is south of US 41. Some large items like dumpsters, trash cans, and barrels remain along the river. By far the most common remaining item is Styrofoam. In many areas that have received an initial effort to remove Styrofoam debris, but other areas have not been worked. Much of the Styrofoam has degraded and is breaking into small pieces. Also, much of the mangrove canopy is recovering and marsh vegetation is re-growing making this debris less visible. These factors make any future cleanup more difficult.

6 crab traps were observed.

See photos with descriptions.

River Section	River Use
Pavilion to Lower Lake	
Lower Lake to Deep Hole	
Deep Hole to Down's Dam	2 FPS volunteer monitors (DH) 3 hikers (DH) 1 hiker (DH)
Downs' Dam to Laurel Road	
Laurel Road to Border Road	
Border Road to Snook Haven	1 fisherman (residential dock)
Snook Haven to Rambler's Rest	1 dual pontoon sailboat (0, NIO@DOV) 1 concession tour boat (SHP) 1 canoe (2) 1 kayaker
Rambler's Rest to U.S. 41	2 observers with leashed dog (RR) 1 fisherman (RR)
US 41 to Rookery (CWA)	1 bowrider (3, CWA)
Rookery to Co. Line	

Vegetation Observations:**In flower**

Asclepias curassavica – bloodflower
Clerodendrum indicum - skyrocket*
Crinum americanum – string-lily
Ipomoea alba- moonflowers
Ipomoea indica - oceanblue morning-glory
Linaria canadensis – Canadian toadflax
Malvaviscus penduliflorus – Mazapan*
Persicaria punctata – dotted smartweed
Quercus spp. – Oak species
²
Sagittaria lancifolia– bulltongue arrowhead
Salix caroliniana – Carolina willow
Sphagneticola trilobata – creeping oxeye*²
Symphytotrichum carolinianum – climbing aster
Viburnum obovatum - Walter’s viburnum
Vigna luteola - hairy pod cowpea

Fruit/Seed/fertile

Abrus precatorius - rosary pea*¹
Acer rubrum - red maple
Ampelopsis arborea - peppervine
Baccharis halimifolia – groundsel tree
Clerodendrum indicum - skyrocket*
Hymenachne amplexicaulis – West Indian marsh grass*¹
Leucaena leucocephala -white leadtree*²
Malvaviscus penduliflorus – Mazapan*
Osmunda regalis L. var. spectabilis - royal fern
Psychotria tenuifolia – shortleaf wild coffee
Sagittaria lancifolia– bulltongue arrowhead
Schinus terebinthifolia – Brazilian Pepper*¹
Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani – softstem bulrush
Urena lobate - Caesarweed*¹
Urochloa maxima - guineagrass*¹
Urochloa mutica - paragrass*¹
Vigna luteola - hairy pod cowpea

¹Bird names follow The Sibley Guide to Birds (New York, 10/2000) for consistency.

Plant names follow Institute for Systematic Botany, online Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants for consistency.

*= indicates non-native, ¹ or ² = FLEPPC 2019 Listed Status, TNC= Technical non-compliance, BNC = blatant non-compliance, NIO = not in operation



Invasive grass reduction target area in orange with red photo-points along the river taken where burn was apparent.



Ben and Zahir scan the December burn area which was completely covered with tall non-native paragrass before the restoration efforts started in October 2023.



Another example of treated paragrass area which was later burned, now broadleaf species seedlings are emerging from the seed bank.



Zahir and Ben paddle along the recently burn marsh with low native vegetation including patches of *Hibiscus grandiflorus* returning.



Zahir located this beautiful green water snake at the river's edge just before the Lower Myakka Lake.



A few sandbars had evidence of feral hog damage. At this one, hogs impacted state-endangered lowland loosestrife.



This brown water snake was seen hiding in dense vegetation caught in a willow not far above Downs' Dam.



Current view of the approach to Downs' Dam.



Activities near the southern overlook at the Venetian Golf and River Club may have caused additional bank failure since the last inspection.



Trash (left) at the foot of the bank, folding table left behind for future use, and trash left behind in recent fire.



Remnant fire-pit (upper left, same as in above photo) and note large, cleared area for tents right off the river on the Carlton Reserve south of the Venetian Overlook. This site has been used many times in the past.



Example of shoreline project across from the VMRP where bank was intended (and permitted) to be stabilized with natural materials and plantings which never fully established.



This area along VMRP where the bank has experienced some annual erosion. This bank is near a multi-use recreational trail. Some discussions have occurred about moving the trail and/or attempting to stabilize the bank with natural materials and plantings.



Non-native American evergreen, *Syngonium podophyllum*, covers the bank to the mean-high water level in a section along Sleeping Turtles Preserve.



Japanese Climbing Fern, *Lygodium japonicum*, seen here along SHP, is not as commonly found in the river area as non-native “world old” or small-leaf climbing but both species are expanding post Hurricane Ian.



A commercial metal dumpster remains in the river area, from Hurricane Ian, at the inlet to the Venice Camp Retreat.



SHP concession boat stopped to view the only large alligator seen during the January 19th survey.



Scenic area dense with cabbage palms south of Rambler's Rest.



Roseate spoonbills checking out the CWA, note that the mangroves are still recovering from Hurricane Ian.



Large congregations of lesser scaup were spread over about a mile in a loose flock along the mangrove fringes of the Myakka State Forest.



Debris from Hurricane Ian remains especially in the tidal Myakka River. This example shows some Styrofoam insulation next to a large container of “Danger” labelled cleaning agent.