It is late March. All Florida State Parks have been closed to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The sun shines. A gentle breeze blows. It’s late morning and the swimming beach is quiet. In fact, so quiet, the vultures sit sunning atop the dive tower and in a huge cypress tree within the beach’s confines. This would never happen on a normal spring day in March. But the wildlife sees an opportunity and makes the best of it. It is a lesson where obstacles turn to opportunities.

The park administration, staff and resident volunteers are quick to seize the opportunities that the obstacles of park closure present. But how did we get to the point of closing the park?

By the third week of January, the first case of Covid-19 was reported in the US. By the end of February, the US reported its first death in Washington State. At the end of the first week of March, the US reported 300 cases and two deaths were reported in Florida. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. The NBA abruptly suspended its season. On March 12, Springtime Tallahassee was cancelled.

On March 13, all special events, tours, or interpretive programs within Florida State Parks in which visitors could be in close proximity to one another were cancelled until

Continued on Page 2
further notice. On Monday, March 16, State Park hours were reduced to 8:00am-5:00pm. The Lodge could still have overnight guests; but food service would be take-out only. By St Patrick’s Day, March 17, deaths in the US reached 100.

On Friday, March 20, the Lodge would no longer have overnight guests. Take-out food would still be available. The Spring Shop in the Concession Building would be open for the weekend (what would be its only weekend for the foreseeable future). On the same day, Governor DeSantis banned all in-restaurant dining and ordered all gyms to close. The Stock Market had lost 30% of its value since the beginning of the month.

On Saturday, March 21, the park opened with an eerie calm. It was the middle of what should have been a crushing Spring Break season. But by 11:00am there were only 30 people on the beach. By 3:00pm there were 150 people present. It was but a glimmer of what a “normal” weekend day would have been. By Monday, March 23 the Lodge was closed for business. The park, along with all other state parks, also closed.

With the park’s closing, a new ritual began each day at Wakulla Springs. The park administration, staff, and resident volunteers would meet at the shop and form a large circle. It was as if the entire group was poised to play a children’s game. Instead, the long list of park maintenance needs came out. There was an eagerness and anticipation among staff to address the work often relegated to the back burner for reasons of logistics and staff availability.

A case in point was the pressure cleaning of the river boats. Normally, the boats would have been heavily used for river
tours. With no tours, all the boats were pressure cleaned. The Trex® seats on three of the boats had a “brand-new” luster. The historic cypress seats on the Alligator were now ready for sanding and sealing. The life vests were a bright red orange. They were no longer tinged with mildew and grime.

Traffic and visitation would have impeded the painting of parking stripes and crosswalks throughout the park. Under the usual circumstances, traffic would have been rerouted and parking areas closed. What might have occurred over a period of weeks or even months was now accomplished in just a few days.

Prior to the park closing, arrangements had been made with a tree-cutting company to remove more than a dozen trees which were deemed a threat to park property or visitor safety. With the absence of visitors, some logistical precautions could be eliminated. The process moved swiftly and safely. With the aid of a stump grinder loaned from the district office, not only were the recently cut stumps removed; but stumps dating back to Hurricane Michael were eliminated as well.

The vast array of azalea bushes throughout the park would often go begging to be trimmed prior to June. The task is now underway and will be completed shortly. Trees along Park Drive are also being trimmed back so that it will be easier for buses, delivery trucks and large RV’s to make their way into the park. Brush around the water tower is being removed along with debris around the outside of the laundry building.

The pressure cleaner continues to be in heavy use. The Trex® decking at the Dogwood Pavilion is now spic and span. The propane tank at the laundry has been lovingly cleaned to a brand-new shine. The propane tank at the administration building is also on the list for cleaning. The
Obstacles to Opportunities (Continued)  By Jeff Hugo

administration building steps have been pressure-cleaned and made ready for painting.

Inside the Admin Building, Ad-

ministrative Assistant Melissa Moore was hard at work completing a record retentions project.

The Concession Building was pressure-cleaned and has now received a fresh coat of paint. The women’s restroom is getting a new toilet and air conditioner installed. Both restrooms will soon be deep cleaned with a new coat of paint following.

New signs have and are being posted throughout the park. Park gates have been repaired. New lifeguard chairs have been constructed. The pole barn at the shop has been cleaned and reorganized. Old files in the Administration Building have been organized and prepared for disposal.

Everyday routine maintenance and tasks continue as

“The propane tank at the laundry has been lovingly cleaned to a brand-new shine.”

Continued on Page 21
Resilience and Dedication  By Amy Conyers

Looking back on the last three months is mind blowing. In early March, we hosted the Division Management Meeting. There was a flurry of activity, preparing for our special guests. Also in the works were plans for a Dedication for the new Ferrell Tract Property, a celebration of Wakulla’s addition to the Old Growth Tree Network, we were looking ahead to events put on by the Friends such as the Car Show and the 5K.

Once the events wrapped up, it would be time to start hiring summer staff as our attendance would begin increasing as schools neared the end of the school year. Our spring season was revving up and we were in the fast lane to reach our busy summer season in no time.

I occasionally found myself wishing that time could just pause for a little while so that we could get caught up on maintenance and repairs. As the adage goes, be careful what you wish for.

Then the Covid-19 virus became more and more present in the news. Our attention began to shift to hand washing and stocking up on hand sanitizer. We began to question many of our standard practices and put new safeguards in place. The news of the growing threats became more and more pertinent.

On March 23, I locked the gate. Something that I have only done two other times at Wakulla. Once for Hurricane Michael, and once for another storm that fortunately didn’t amount to much.

This time, it felt very different. The wind wasn’t blowing. There was nothing to secure or tie down or put away. Should we stock up on fuel? Did any of our standard closure prep make sense? Looking ahead, our reopening goal was completely unknown. It wouldn’t simply be clearing the park drive of tree debris and picking up branches from the picnic area. There wasn’t a plan or a directive already in place for the procedures to follow in case of a pandemic.

We all had a lot of questions.

What would this virus and this closure mean for us? How long would we still be able to report to work without visitors coming into the park? Were we safe coming to work? Would we be asked to stay home? Unfortunately, I didn’t have many answers. No one did. We were in completely uncharted territory.

As usual, the Wakulla Family took the challenges in stride. Park staff, remaining Lodge staff, and volunteers did not falter. We were in a completely new atmosphere, masked and distant, with no tours to give or visitors to attend to. What we did have was each other and our mission.

Our sights were very quickly set to the projects that we never had enough time for. The cleaning, organizing, painting, mowing, trimming, fixing became our new daily norm. We found comfort in each other and in completing projects. Even with the cloud of uncertainty around us, we could celebrate our ability to gather in a big distant circle each morning. We could take a lunch break all together. We could easily compare notes, discuss successes and challenges, share skills and ideas, as well as stories.

It was focused time spent on the interactions that we previously only had precious moments to experience. We didn’t need to rush off to a boat tour or to open an office. We weren’t interrupted by a radio call or a ringing phone. We found every silver lining to this cloud (and even

“We found comfort in each other and in completing projects.”

Continued on Page 6
As nice as it was to have focused time for maintenance, I think we all realized that we were missing something. There was no one to appreciate how beautifully manicured the grounds and gardens were. No one to enjoy the pressure washed, painted, products of labor. Somehow, the spring ritual of turtles emerging from the water and seeking out a sunny spot to lay eggs in the picnic area was a little less exciting when there weren’t well intentioned visitors looking for a Ranger to “rescue the turtles”.

There were weeds growing in walkways that have always had enough traffic to combat growth previously. The squirrels... they looked so sad and hungry without their usual access to ground litter delicacies! We needed our visitors back.

It was definitely concerning to shift gears from virtual solitude to our expected influx of summer crowds. New cleaning and safety procedures were introduced rapidly. It seemed that each day brought the promise of a new direction and new challenges to our standard methodologies. We looked forward to bringing back our visitors to enjoy the park again, even with the ongoing uncertainty related to the virus.

We rapidly learned the new techniques that would keep everyone safe while enjoying or working in the park. Then we got to begin interpreting again! Social Distancing may not be the material that we most enjoy relaying to our visitors, but river tour skills shined through. Ever ready to interpret whatever is around the next river bend, our interpreters were ready to explain our new normal and reconnect the public to Wakulla in the safest manner possible.

The past three months have been full of new experiences for us all. It has not been easy and I know that we all had some moments of fear and despair, wondering when life would feel normal again. Through it all though, we have had each other. We have had safety and solidarity in the knowledge that we were all experiencing this together.

I am in awe of the group of people who devote their lives to Wakulla Springs State Park. I am humbled by the resilience and dedication shown daily and especially now. We are once again welcoming visitors and though it’s under different parameters, we’re still fulfilling our mission and providing resource based recreation while preserving and interpreting our natural and cultural resources. It feels good, and the visitors are glad to be back. The squirrels are happier now too.

“The squirrels are happier now too.”
When do you think things will get back to normal?" Young people on the beach asked that question more than once when the park reopened in May. It was totally understandable. For generations, young people, families, and visitors from afar had come to Wakulla Springs Beach to enjoy the refreshing river water ushering from the earth’s depths.

There were few restrictions. The ones that existed were implemented to establish respect and safety for visitors and the resource they enjoyed. Covid-19 created challenges to the existing paradigms of safety and respect.

For generations a hot and sunny Memorial Day weekend would see the beach and water crowded with hundreds of people. The two swim platforms would be jammed with sun bathers, socializers, and the aquatically playful. The dive tower’s two tiers would be crowded with those ready to make a plunge, those summoning the courage to make the plunge, and those never intending to make the plunge. It was the perfect place to solidify friendships and create new ones.

The invisible threat of Covid-19 has created alterations in the paradigms of Wakulla Springs visitation.

Although the swimming area is open, it is open to a lower human density. Capacity has been reduced and determined by social distancing recommendations. Guests are greeted upon entry and informed of 6-foot social distancing requirements, 15 person limits on each of the swimming platforms and a 10 person maximum on each of the two dive tower tiers.

The changes to the dive tower usage have been most difficult. Rather than being the traditional social hub of the beach, the tower now needs to be the jumping off point as it has never been in the past. It has become a place of action where people come to the tower, climb the steps and jump. Those who lose their nerve or have not yet mastered their reluctance are welcome to walk back down. Rangers and lifeguards do a lot of reminding with the intention of gaining guest cooperation in an effort to continue the tower’s safe use.

When a capacity on the beach is nearly met, the Ranger Station is notified. They relay to entering visitors that it may be as much as a two-hour wait to get in to swim. Once they reach the beach and find it at capacity, the attending ranger will take their name along with the number in their party. When a group leaves, visitors are allowed to enter in the order in which they registered.

Procedures at the Ranger Station have also taken a major shift. The park accepts cash payments, but no longer issues change or receipts. Any overpayment due to lack of correct change is welcomed as a donation to the park. Cash is placed in a drop box on the outside of the building.

The park still accepts credit cards and annual passes. Visitors can now purchase annual passes on line. (They are no longer available for sale at the park.)

Visitors can also pre-pay online on the same day as their visit and show their receipt via printed paper or on a device for admission.

The Lodge Dining Room, Soda Fountain, and Spring Shop are open. Breakfast is not being served, only lunch and dinner until overnight stays return. Currently, there is a 50% capacity on seating in the dining room.
Paradigms Shift (Continued)

Cherokee Sink and River Sinks are closed. River boat tours are not available. Park events have been discontinued for the immediate future.

Why are all of these changes happening? It is the park’s goal to keep as much of its resources safely open and available to the public. It requires a partnership between staff and guests alike to continue the freedom of enjoying its resources.

Freedom is not the right to have what you want when you want it. Freedom involves the responsibility to be safe and respectful of yourself, others and the world around you as you pursue your happiness. May we pursue it well at Wakulla Springs.

“Although the swimming area is open, it is open to a lower human density.”

Insect Intrigue: Cow Killer? By Jeff Hugo Photo by Robert Thompson

The male velvet ant is a stunningly ‘dressed’ member of the wasp family. His bright red-orange markings on a jet-black field complimented by shimmering black wings make him an immediate curiosity. Looking like the wasp he his, few would be tempted to pick him up and hold him in hand. But, male velvet ants have no stinger. They may go through the motions of stinging (enough to make most would-be handlers release him) but to no avail.

His female counterpart is gorgeously adorned as well. The thickly placed red and black hairs give her the appearance of an ant wearing velvet. Unlike the male, however, she does have a stinger. It is long and impressive. The venom she injects is not very toxic, but it is excruciatingly painful.

“‘The male velvet ant is a stunningly ‘dressed’ member of the wasp family.’”

Continued on Page 12
It is progress. The Highway 319 Improvement Project taking place along the River Sinks Tract will improve highway safety.

But there are casualties as well. To the few who visited River Sinks and deposited their four dollar entrance fee into the metal contraption which stood silent guard for eight years, it was a curiosity. It was unique. It was a work of art. It was as ‘bionic’ as a pay station could be.

The ‘bionic’ iron ranger will be replaced. Its replacement will be standard issue. Uniformity is important. And time will tell if the new sentinel stands up to the rigors of weather and visitation.

But the ‘bionic’ iron ranger, unknown to most, was a collaboration. It was a monument to ingenuity and a friendship as solid as the pay station that it created. That is worth remembering. The following reprinted article from March 2012 is a reminder.

Anderson Columbia workers helping to remove the old iron ranger at River Sinks.

Build a Better Iron Ranger and.... By Jeff Hugo; Photos by Jake Hines (Reprint from the March, 2012 Issue)

The iron ranger (an honor pay station designed to collect park fees from visitors) at the River Sinks Tract of Wakulla Springs State Park had weathered a number of attacks upon its fortifications. Its security had either been attempted or breached by saws, hammers, and pry bars. The final attack affording its demise occurred when the door sealing the precious deposit envelopes had been ripped from its body, lock and all.

A new, better (perhaps bionic) iron ranger would be needed at River Sinks. Who would rise to the challenge of procuring or creating such a stalwart and impenetrable agent for the park service?

With brilliance rivaling that of Dr. Frankenstein and the enthusiasm of teenage pranksters in reverse (focused on building rather than destroying), Park Rangers Allan Ritchie and Jason Vickery set themselves to the task.

Across the street from the park in the Wakulla State Forest, the rangers found a self-pay station with a superior design. Not satisfied, they thought like vandals and found weaknesses in the structure which they proceeded to eliminate.

With a design in hand, it was time to get materials. The extremely resourceful rangers scoured the park for what continued on page 10
Build a Better Iron Ranger and.... (Continued)

LEFT: The iron ranger from the rear showing its fortifications.
TOP RIGHT: Close-up of the folded steel plating security features.
BOTTOM RIGHT: The recessed lock.

They found an eight foot long section of well casing pipe with one inch thick walls near the park’s warehouse. It would serve as the super iron ranger’s body. They cleaned it, removed the rust and scale, and cut a door out of it with a blow torch.

The door’s hinge was made from large bolts welded together and run through equally large nuts which were welded to the iron ranger’s body. The hinge was further protected with steel plating welded over it.

To prevent the door from being pried open, strips of steel plating framed the door’s edges.

The lock for the door was recessed and encased in four inch diameter steel pipe. Any flat surfaces (conducive to destruction from hammer blows) were eliminated by heating and folding steel plate. The curved surfaces were then welded to the body.

Jason related that the project challenged their problem-solving skills, creativity, and technical abilities. In short, it was fun.

As the super iron ranger was carried by a strained park tractor to the River Sinks parking lot, there was a cautious optimism for its survival. Since its installation, the marks of recent battles are evident. But none has yet breached the design so carefully and thoughtfully crafted. Build a better iron ranger and....

Progress in the Parks By Jackie Turner Photos Courtesy jackie Turner

The Florida Park Service continues to build partnerships with businesses across the state. Corporate contributions include volunteer service. Employees and their families are working to improve their local parks. In 2020, Progressive Insurance marked their third year of service. On Sunday March 1, (Pre-Covid 19) Progressive Insurance families reported for duty across the state (Flo was not able to join them.

According to Christine Small, Florida Department of Environmental Protection Friend Groups & Volunteer Program Manager, “More than 500 employees and family members from 20 offices and service centers volunteered in 17 state parks.” Projects included removing invasive plants and planting native trees, trail maintenance and erosion control, fence construction and interpretive sign installation, painting buildings, playground maintenance and the very important task of litter

Continued on Page 11
Prior to Covid-19, volunteers from Progressive Insurance took on two challenging projects to help prepare the playground area in advance of new mulch.

At Wakulla Springs, volunteers took on two challenging projects to help prepare the playground area in advance of new mulch. Some took on the difficult task of removing shallow roots under play equipment. Others continued the tedious work of scrubbing the plastic retention wall. Their efforts were appreciated and helped prepare for the new mulch. It was a needed playground safety feature to cushion falls. After their service, they enjoyed a beautiful day for a company picnic in the park.

OneDEP in Service

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is comprised of many divisions including the Recreation and Parks (aka Florida Park Service [FPS]). Under DEP Secretary Noah Valenstein’s direction, the agency has embraced OneDEP, “Protecting Florida Together.” To achieve his goal, Secretary Valenstein has promoted interagency interaction. By extending free park entry to all DEP staff and their families (previously only available to FPS staff), he encouraged everyone in the DEP family to get outside and enjoy the parks.

To give back, Secretary Valenstein also encouraged all DEP staff to get out of the office and volunteer in the state park system.

While at the Wakulla Springs Lodge for a conference, DEP Office of General Counsel (OGC) staff invited Park Manager, Amy Conyers, to speak to their group. Amy was impressed by their interest and thoughtful questions. She was able to give them insight into the challenges of managing a park. That day their office offered to come back to the park for a volunteer project.

On a beautiful Friday in February 2020, OGC Tallahassee staff reported for duty. They had graciously volunteered to help with the removal of interior fencing which was in a burn zone and posed a safety hazard.

For three hours, seven OGC volunteers worked with Park Biologist Patty Wilbur and me to clear old overgrown wire fencing. It was physically demanding to separate fencing from intertwined roots and vines while rewarding to see the truck fill as we worked. Patty was very pleased with the progress and estimated about
Clearing the old overgrown wire fencing was physically demanding. (Event prior to Covid-19.)

1/8th mile had been cleared. Patty and I thanked them for their significant contribution to the park. Encouraging DEP staff to engage with those outside their office/division allowed for insight into other areas of the agency.

Wakulla Springs benefitted from the OneDEP initiative. We see more DEP staff and their families taking advantage of free park entry. We have enjoyed the volunteer service of OGC.

We look forward to the fulfillment of Division of Waste Management’s offer to combine their volunteer service with a team building event once safer conditions exist. Together we will make a difference.

Patty Wilbur estimated that about an eighth of a mile of wire fencing had been removed by the members of DEP’s Office of General Counsel. (Photo taken prior to Covid-19)

Insect Intrigue (Continued) By Jeff Hugo  Photos by Robert Thompson

And although the sting may feel like it could kill a cow, it never has. Unless humans have a severe allergic reaction, they too survive the experience. The pain associated with the sting is never forgotten.

The females search the ground for the burrows of ground nesting bees and wasps. They enter the burrows and lay their eggs on the larvae and pupae of these ground dwelling insects. The velvet ant larvae then eat their prey alive. It’s a wasp eat wasp world out there!

A cicada killer’s larvae can be the prey of the velvet ant.
It’s Dry, Dry, Dry  By Jeff Hugo

The Cypress Dome just northwest of the park’s administration building is one of the most dynamic ecosystems to be found in the park. It is a seasonal wetland. Most of the time, it is a depression which is filled with water. For the aquatic members of the community such as the copepods, amphipods, crayfish, salamanders, newts, and frogs; it is a paradise.

There was very little rain in March, April and May. The water level in the dome dropped precipitously. Life’s teeter totter began to swing in favor of the predators. Wading birds, racoons, and other meat-lovers now found a smorgasbord of offerings in an ever-concentrating area.

As of May 15, there were only two small kid-die-pools of water remaining. These remaining two depressions may be the work of a mother alligator’s excavating skills. Her digging may have provided water for herself and her babies until the rains return and once again fill the dome. The dramatic question: “Will the rain come in time?”

While the other aquatic creatures wait, they find some measure of security in the alligator-filled depression. Wading birds and racoons may think twice before becoming an item on an alligator’s dinner menu.

The dozens of humungous bullfrogs splish-splash into the water at the approach of anything threatening. A few of the dozen or so baby alligators resonate a guttural call seeking to enlist their elusive yet protective mother’s assistance. (She did not materialize; but, I did not push my luck.)

Even with little rain, the mosquitos in the dome are formidable. The ‘girls’ are eager for a blood meal in order to be able to produce a raft of eggs on the water’s surface. Hopefully, most of the offspring will fuel the surviving aquatic predators as the drama of life’s ‘teeter-totter’ provides bounty for some and famine for others.

1) Blue-lipped bullfrog morph. (Courtesy Kat Wilson)
2) Baby gator calls to mom.
3) Wary eyes!
4) Just trying to blend in.
We are hoping for a summer season complete with those lazy summer days many remember frolicking in the refreshing waters of Wakulla Spring. As a one-time lifeguard, now Wakulla Springs Park Ranger, I can assure you that it’s not a job for everyone. But for those special few, it could be their own dream job.

“You’re a lifeguard at Wakulla Springs? Why didn’t I think of that?” That’s the most common reaction I received from friends, family, and complete strangers over my six years of service as a Wakulla Springs Lifeguard. Most would imagine that I spent my days basking in the sun, swimming laps between docks, and trying to get as many different phones numbers as possible. And they would be right. But there is so much more....

As a Wakulla Springs lifeguard, you take on a role of responsibility that is formidable, uplifting, and fun. You are the unsung hero when called to action. You are the pathfinder when “little Jimmy” is missing. You are the comforter for those in pain. And on rare occasions you are the life-giver in moments of desperation. Using the American Red Cross Lifeguard Training, anyone who is willing can attain the skills required to fulfill the tasks.

Once prepared and hired on to the Wakulla Springs State Park lifeguard team, you will have obtained what was for me a “dream” job. The weather is beautiful, the scenery is fantastic; and let’s admit it...you’re probably going to be here anyway. It’s a great opportunity to start earning and saving up for whatever your future holds.

The Wakulla Springs lifeguard team has a very limited number of staff with a substantial area to monitor; and the task can be daunting. But not to worry. You are part of a team. Past lifeguarding crews have consistently held high standards for safety. Steady communication, teamwork, and a strong work ethic is the fuel that breeds success.

Working alongside Florida Park Service Rangers, you will be provided with the support needed to succeed. The rangers appreciate the work the lifeguards do and are very proud of what the lifeguards accomplish summer in and summer out.

Whether you are a seasoned lifeguard, or just starting to consider the opportunity; I can assure you that the summers will bring unpredictable forces into play. You will be tested as a lifeguard but also as an individual. The responsibility is real, but the satisfaction of the work is rarely available in other positions. I strongly encourage anyone who enjoys the great outdoors to research the position and discover if it could be a good fit.

The park would love to hear from anyone interested in being a lifeguard. It is looking for professionals who can work independently, self-supervise, and have a reliable means of transportation to and from the park. You’ll make lifelong bonds with the people you meet. You’ll earn a solid paycheck as a skilled employee for the State of Florida. And you’ll have a great time while you reap the personal, social and financial rewards of your position.

Once you have participated in a Lifeguard Certification program, complete a State of Florida Application and return it with a copy of your certification to Wakulla Springs State Park to the attention of Assistant Park Manager, John Melton for consideration. Contact John at John.S.Melton@FloridaDEP.gov or (850) 561-7272. Applications may be picked up at the Park’s Ranger Station or online at: https://www.dms.myflorida.com/content/download/59570/251607/version/4/file/State+App06-13.pdf.
During the month of April, volunteers were unable to work within the park. Park staff continued the weekly surveys in their absence. But with the advent of May, volunteers could once again resume assisting park staff. Their willingness and skills are greatly appreciated.

A good example is Former Park Ranger Bob Thompson. He could now return as a volunteer to drive the boat for the weekly wildlife survey on the Wakulla River. He brought along his camera.

The “eye-popping” photos on the next few pages are testimony to his photographic skill. They will bring you along on a virtual river boat tour. The wildlife still puts on quite a show!
A Wildlife Survey Photo Tour

Photos Courtesy of Robert Thompson
A Wildlife Survey Photo Tour (Continued) Photos Courtesy of Robert Thompson
A Wildlife Survey Photo Tour  (Continued)  Photos Courtesy of Robert Thompson
Though trouble was on the horizon, March began normally. Park staff members and volunteer Sandy Cook gathered at the beginning of the month to burn zone WK-R, diagonally across from the park entrance. The following weekend, Sandy came back to help park staff and crew members from The Nature Conservancy to burn zone WK-P, on the west side of Highway 61. Both burns went well. Two weeks later, Ranger Steven Urling and I assisted with a large burn at Torreya State Park.

The combination of hotter than normal temps, dry weather, and Hurricane Michael debris meant that the crew had to really hustle on that burn. Steven and I returned the next day to do additional mop-up, ensuring that everything stayed within the lines.

After that, the COVID-19 lockdown began. Our visitors, volunteers, and some of our staff had to stay away for a while. But nature hummed along all the same, and those of us who could still work at Wakulla Springs had to manage the park’s natural resources. We did our best to continue gathering data on the river, conducting weekly wildlife surveys and collecting secchi disk readings to monitor water clarity. The rangers also made daily observations on the river while running one river boat daily, to make sure the boats stayed in good running condition.

Unfortunately, the uncertainty caused by the early days of the pandemic lockdown meant that the winning bidder on our timber

Park Biologist Patty Wilbur on the Segway geared up for trail maintenance.

Kearstin Hess is trimming one of the park’s trails.
thinning and restoration at River Sinks decided to back out before the contract was signed. We’ll regroup and try again when the situation stabilizes. It’s a little frustrating, as Hurricane Michael had delayed this restoration previously.

We managed to burn the zone around the park manager’s residence in late April shortly after a rain. But drought conditions this spring meant that not much prescribed burning has been possible lately, though our fire lines are disked and ready to go. The Wakulla fire engine was even called to serve on a park service strike team deployment to fight the wildfires that raged around Pensacola recently.

One bright spot was that I enjoyed the opportunity to work with many of the rangers on projects out in the field this spring! Collin assisted me with removing water lettuce from Turner Sink. Kearstin and Charlie helped me replace several gates. Kat and I pruned the branches along the boat tour route. And we spent lots of time clearing roads and fire lines. We also did some much needed trimming of vegetation along the hiking trail. After a long day of trail mowing on the farthest end of the Sally Ward Trail, Kearstin and I were even rewarded to see a fox squirrel trotting along Wiregrass Road!

The summer looks like it will give us plenty of ways to keep busy. We’re still looking for opportunities to conduct prescribed burns. And summer storms guarantee that we’ll need to continue to check and clear our roads and trails. I also expect to spend many socially distant days surveying and treating exotic invasive plants in the farthest corners of the park. I’m grateful to work in such a beautiful place, with a wonderful group of people.
Please Note!

The safety of our visitors, staff, and volunteers is a top priority at Wakulla Springs State Park.

As part of ongoing statewide efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19, some park procedures and activities have been modified or suspended.

Visitors will find measures in place to reduce density to promote everyone’s safety.

Please investigate the option to prepay park entrance by visiting the Wakulla Springs home page on the FloridaStateParks.org website. Then click on the desired payment option. Otherwise, bring exact change, credit card, or annual pass for contactless payment of entrance fees.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at (850) 561-7276.

MISSION: To provide resource-based recreation while preserving, interpreting, and restoring natural and cultural resources.

Obstacles to Opportunities (Continued) By Jeff Hugo

An anhinga backlit by the morning sun as it dries its wings.

Administrative Assistant Melissa Moore is hard at work completing a record retentions project.

well. Even though tours are suspended, each day boat engines are started and run. A water sample is collected off the end of the dock. A different boat traverses the tour route each day. Significant wildlife is noted (two limpkins have been spotted repeatedly), the tour route is inspected for hazards, and water depth is measured. The park biologist is still making plans for prescribed burns once closely monitored conditions are right (some rain is needed).

Yes, there have been unexpected obstacles at Wakulla Springs. There may be some more. But the spirits of resilience, adaptability, and perseverance fuel the fire of opportunity. We witness it in the wildlife along the river and we take their lessons and apply them to our circumstances.