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An impressive black and yellow garden spider spins her web along the boardwalk.

The Corkscrew boardwalk takes you through the largest old-growth cypress forest in the world.



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CORKSCREW SANCTUARY OFFERS ANCIENT FOREST TOURS

By Lance Shearer
Eagle Correspondent

The trees at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, the most impressive and majestic ones, are the ancient bald cypress which tower above the boardwalk and create the tallest spires of the forest canopy.

Representing the largest stand of virgin cypress trees in the world, many of these gray-beards were already old when Ponce de Leon splashed ashore in Florida. They have survived floods, droughts, hurricanes, fires, lightning strikes and even humans — so far.

With the return of cooler weather, Corkscrew has once again started up the Ancient Forest Tours, giving the chance for a small group — no more than 10 — to walk the preserve's signature, 2.25-mile boardwalk in the company of a naturalist, to learn the facts and absorb the wonder. At Corkscrew Swamp, they want you to see the forest — and the trees. Unlike the old saying about not seeing the forest for the trees, gazing at one helps you understand the other, and both are worthy of contemplation.

For the first Ancient Forest Tour of the season on the morning of Oct. 21, seven visitors joined volunteer guide Rich Kuntz, an Advanced Florida Master Naturalist, and headed out into the swamp. With the boardwalk underfoot, there was no concern for getting one's feet wet — or for having too close of an encounter with the 14 foot alligator along the path.

Even before reaching the old growth cypress trees, a host of natural phenomena arrested the eye — Boston, strap, and rabbit's foot ferns, impressively large spiders tending their webs, and a profusion of wildflowers including narrow leaf sunflowers and bright purple pickerel weed. Once inside the cypress "cathedral," voices became more hushed, and the giant forest cypress rose overhead, many twined around

See TREE, 14A



LANCE SHEARER/EAGLE CORRESPONDENT (5)

Naturalist Rich Kuntz points out one of Corkscrew's "Landmark" cypress trees. In a harbinger of the approaching season, the Ancient Forest Tours have returned to Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, and will be held nine more times up to April 6.



"Do Not Pass Corkscrew Swamp" say the signs, and they're right.



German visitor Pascal Bauer looks through a scope set up to offer views of a ghost orchid.



LANCE SHEARER/EAGLE CORRESPONDENT (2)

"Corky," a 14 ft. alligator, rests along the boardwalk, and a smaller gator rests on him.

Naturalist Rich Kuntz tells the group about one of Corkscrew's "Landmark" cypress trees.

TREE
from 10A

with massive bands of strangler fig. Volunteers had been out early, clamping spotting scopes to the boardwalk's wooden railing, which gave visitors a close-up upview of an otherwise overlooked ghost orchid, another of Corkscrew's iconic inhabitants, growing high in a cypress tree.

Corkscrew managers have designated 12 of the massive trees as "Landmark Cypress," naming them after notable naturalists including John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Theodore Roosevelt and Harriet Hemenway, who pioneered the protection of wild birds, along with the Calusas and the early wardens who protected the birds, sometimes at the cost of their lives. Each Landmark Cypress has a sign telling more about the trees and their namesakes.

Some of the cypress are called pond cypress, and some baldcypress. There is some confusion whether they are actually two different species, or the pond cypress are merely bald cypress which haven't yet reached the size and age of the baldcypress. Each of the cypress types is related to California's redwoods, and along with them, are the only conifers which lose their needles or leaves during the winter — hence the name "baldcypress."

The boardwalk also traverses pine flatwoods, wet prairie, and skirts Lettuce Lakes, in which a plant called alligator flag, with long green leaves, grows in the water. The early settlers could see where an alligator was lurking, said Kuntz, by the movement of the leaves.

No flags were necessary to see "Corky," the 14 foot specimen, who was sunning himself a little way off the boardwalk, although the naturalists had helpfully placed a scope allowing visitors to see close enough to conduct a dental exam. As the group watched the massive saurian, and a maybe eight-foot female who was floating mostly submerged in the lake, one more gator appeared, and laid his head right down on



Corky's long tail. Seeing a red shouldered hawk swoop down on a fish for breakfast was almost anti-climactic.

If you have never been to Corkscrew Swamp, the Ancient Forest Tour will give you a very useful grounding in the area's natural surroundings. Even if you've visited the boardwalk many times, touring in the company of a knowledgeable naturalist is bound to teach you something new.

Taking the tour doesn't cost anything beyond the normal Corkscrew admission, but the excursions go out only once or twice a month, with a limit of 10 guests.

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