

# Take a walk

Wayside Shrine Trail at SFCC highlights what makes the Ridge unique

Florida grew out of the ocean over millions of years, becoming a peninsula of sand dunes, flatwoods, bay-heads and swamp.

The Lake Wales Ridge — running like a backbone through Lake, Orange, Polk and Highlands counties — was once a series of isolated islands.

Because of that isolation, the islands became home to a variety of one-of-a-kind insects, reptiles, birds and plants, each uniquely adapted to the harsh environment. Challenged by quick-draining, sandy soil, extreme heat, droughts, storms, wild fires and high winds, life evolved into hardy, if sometimes miniature, species.

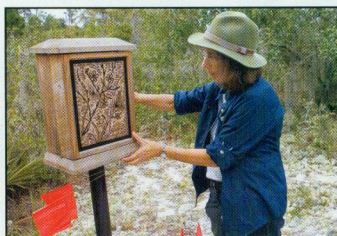
According to a guide by South Florida Community College, part of a student project, the Lake Wales Ridge “has one of the highest concentrations of threatened and endangered plants and animals in the United States.”

There are approximately 40 endangered and threatened species surviving on the ridge. Out of those 40 species, 20 plants and six animals are protected by the federal government. The guides adds that “Highlands County is ranked 11th in the nation for having the highest number of threatened or endangered species.”

Which makes discovering the college’s self guided Wildflower Wayside Shrine Trail a particular pleasure.

Molly Doctrow, an artist and curator of SFCC’s Museum of Florida Art and Culture, wrote the grants making the trail possible. The college set aside virtually undisturbed scrub land and students helped in conducting a census of the flora and fauna — 51 different plant species, including six that are endangered— have been documented along the .1466-mile trail.

While the space is small, the trail is



Mollie Doctrow shows one of the display boxes along the Wayside Trail.

designed for a leisurely pace. There are benches at strategic spots, and close observation is encouraged.

Taking a visitor for a walk, Doctrow can’t help bubbling with enthusiasm — partly because she grew up on the concrete of Los Angeles and is grateful for the contrast.

“Look at the close-up detail of it,” she said to a visitor, bending down to point out the delicate flowers of a gopher apple. She looked around. “It takes a while to know it,” Doctrow said, referring to the trail as a whole. “It changes all the time.” There are definite seasons.

The plant names are fun to say out loud. Rusty staggerbush, lantana, prickly pears, fetterbush, sandhill wireweed, blue-eyed grass, hog plum, and pygmy fringe trees mix with pines and four species of oak. On the ground, resembling light green beds of sea sponges, powder puff lichen appear alien and magical, as do the dixie reindeer lichen,

beard lichen and sand spikemoss. There are fresh deer and raccoon tracks every morning.

On the trail, traffic noise dies away to a stillness broken only by bird song and the rustling of leaves. It is hot, especially in the afternoon. Wear a hat and sun-block and bring water along.

To add to the experience, six special wooden boxes are posted along the trail. The doors are wood cuts with examples of the different flowers. Detailed information is included in the small displays. There are journal books in which to record emotions or sightings, and a drawer where visitors may put found feathers, interesting rocks or bits of bones for others to examine.

The college plans on extending the trail in the future, and adding codes to each wooden box allowing someone with a smart phone to bring up additional information from the trail’s website. There are no set hours or entrance fee. In fact there is barely an entrance. Plunge right in, walking softly, and taking the time to look closely — many flowers are extraordinarily beautiful, but tiny.

“The trail inspires people to the wonder of the scrubs,” Doctrow said. “It helps raise awareness of the Ridge and its beauty.”

The trail is on the north side of West College Drive (off of U.S. 27) driving east. There is only a small marker at the entrance. There is plenty of parking directly across the street. Call the college at 453-6661 for more information.