

### Section 3: Fort Myers Shores

Behind a house in Fort Myers Shores is a dock. An older woman and a boy walk to the end. Under them, Nick stands in the water.

"Grandma, the river doesn't seem to be moving," the boy says.

"That's because the river mostly flows in the deep channel in the middle. This is an oxbow of the river," the woman says.

The boy leans on the railing. Nick watches his reflection in the water. "What's an oxbow?"

"It's two things, really." She moves her hands to show the shape. "It's a U-shaped piece of wood that fits around the neck of an ox."

The boy picks up a leaf. "What's that got to do with a river?"

"When a river turns to make that same U-shape and is cut off from the main flow of the river, it's called an oxbow," the woman says.

The boy throws the leaf in the water. Nick watches it float.

"This is a shallow oxbow that was bypassed when the channel was dug and the river became the Okeechobee Waterway, or C-43 Canal. It is part of the Cross Florida shipping channel, which links the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean."

The boy picks up a beetle and places it on the railing. "How do you take the curves out of a river?"

The woman sighs. "It wasn't easy. It takes a big machine called a dredge. It's like a bulldozer, and it digs sand out of the river."

"Wow! I want to see that!" the boy says.

Nick walks closer to a piling beneath the dock.

"It was a long time ago. Workers began to dig canals to connect the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean and to drain marshes and wetlands to make drier land for houses and farming. They had to dynamite a waterfall to do it."

"You mean the river didn't flow from Lake Okeechobee?" the boy asks. He flicks the beetle off the railing, and Nick watches it plop on the water.

"It did, but not like today. It was very shallow — like they say of the Everglades — a river of grass," the woman says.

The boy watches the beetle. Nick does too.

The woman says, "The riverbed used to be white sand, and now it's covered with silt from the lake. The channel's been widened and deepened several times. It's perfect for boats."

Nick leans out from under the dock to catch the beetle.

The boy points. "That bird just ate my bug!"

Nick flies away.

### YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERONS

by Melissa Cain Nell, Conservation Lands Management Department, Manatee County

Florida has two kinds of night herons: black-crowned and yellow-crowned.

As chicks, both kinds have golden eyes and brown-and-white-streaked feathers. Adult black-crowned night-herons have red eyes and gray feathers. The yellow-crowned night-heron's head is black with a white stripe on its cheek. Named for their bright yellow forehead, both males and females grow a long, white feathery "crown" when looking for a mate. They are called "night" birds, but they often feed in the evening and morning. They eat blue crabs, mud crabs, mangrove crabs, fiddler crabs, small fish, aquatic insects and even frogs.

