




Section 4: Tatum Sawgrass Marsh

Beneath the bridge for S.R. 780, the river flows fast. A large branch is lodged against a bridge support. The water dammed behind it hardly moves. Lu swims there to rest. Branches from a swamp maple overhang the river.



Above her, a man and woman watch a swallow-tailed kite soar above Tatum Sawgrass Marsh. The man swings his arm in a wide arc. "Imagine all the water it took to fill the marsh. It's a lake now. I'm guessing that water covers the boardwalk at Crowley Museum and Nature Center."

The woman says, "Years ago, they drained this marsh and planted all kinds of nonnative grass for cattle."

"I'll bet it didn't look like this back then," the man says. They both laugh.

"When we canoed it, we saw those grasses growing like a wall along some places. Except for there, it looked like a scenic river. Now it looks wild," the woman says.

"Maybe that's why they call it a 'Wild and Scenic River,' " the man says.

The woman asks, "What does that mean?"

The man says, "The U.S. and Florida legislatures chose the name to tell everybody that a river is special. There are only three Wild and Scenic Rivers in Florida, but only the Myakka got this designation from the state."

Lu sees a tree frog as green as a leaf. She eats it.

The woman asks, "What does it need to be protected from?"

"Houses built near the river," the man answers.

"Houses don't hurt the river," the woman says.

"Clearing the land to build them does. Rain can wash sand into the river. Drilling wells, burying septic tanks, making seawalls and docks — it all damages the river. Even drips of oil from roads can wash into the water."

Lu sees a peninsula cooter. She dives below, circles and grabs the turtle.

"But look at this flood." The woman points to the river on both sides of the bridge. "It's doing more to harm the river than building a few houses."

The man says, "Having more water in the river doesn't harm it. The river is alive, so the water can be high or low or even change its banks. It's what people do or don't do beside the river that can hurt it."

Lu paddles back into the current.



MYAKKA ISLAND

by Carol Mahler

Islands are surrounded by water, but Myakka Island is not really an island. It is filled with water that drains into Myakka River. The land in this watershed that is natural is called Myakka Island. The state of Florida and Sarasota County own or manage some of the Myakka Island. People who own large areas of native land have given or sold conservation easements to protect the land and keep it natural. Around Myakka Island, people are building homes, roads, schools and businesses, so it has become an "island" in a sea of change.