

Wakulla Windows of Wonder

Written by Miz MerMulletMaid

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“In Mexico, they are called ‘cenotes.’ In Wakulla we call them our wonder.” begins the advertised description of the sinkhole hiking tour led by certified green guide, Marie-Anne Luber. I think back to my very first exposure to these glorious liquid wonders. I was a high school Tallahassee lassie who lived in a much larger world then. We didn’t venture into Wakulla County unless we were headed to Alligator Point or St. George Island for a family day of fun. Somewhere along the way I was befriended by a girl named Paige who had family roots in Wakulla and a car. One early summer Saturday afternoon, she drove a carload of us down to the “County” to show us some of the finer sights of Wakulla.

I had no idea where we were going, but quickly offered up a prayer and threw my fears out the window of her beat up white Corvair when we veered off the highway just south of the county line onto a dirt road going way too fast. I recall witnessing lush vivid greenery flying by as we zoomed down the dirt road swerving sharply around the curves underneath the canopy of the Wakulla woods. I remember hanging on for dear life, but gleefully immersed in the moment, like we were suspended safely somewhere in time. Paige slammed on brakes when Riversink and the large gathering of sinkhole swimmers came abruptly into view. We sat for a brief moment as our car came to a rest. There before us the afternoon sunlight filtered through the surrounding treetops and cast an alluring glow on the water and the swimmers in the sinkhole below. Shouts of merriment and laughter echoed off the sinkhole walls and rained down from the Tarzan acrobats who dangled from the rope swing before plunging into the icy cold water waiting beneath. It was a scene of pure bliss that began my love of Wakulla natural wonders.

Although that Saturday afternoon occurred more than a quarter century ago, Tamara Byrnes has heard sinkhole stories dating back even further. Tamara is a certified green guide who has worked alongside Cal Jamison, Wakulla Springs Ambassador, walking the woods collecting sinkhole data. She is also an adult educator at the Wakulla County Senior Center. Recently she and Cal escorted a group of folks from the center on a tour of some favorite sinkholes. Many recalled times spent at the sinkholes, especially the good fishing sinks. Cal knows those spots. He has been exploring the sinkholes and springs for over 30 years. Tromping through the woods and swamps in search of sinkholes, he has mapped over 360 of the natural pools in this area. He is considered the sinkhole savior with a mission to restore and protect these precious natural resources through education and awareness.

Years ago, it was commonly known that many a vehicle had “accidentally” vanished into the

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depths of a sinkhole. Cal related the tale of one long ago raid on Gator Sink by an overenthusiastic local church group intent on discouraging skinny-dippers by pouring motor oil copiously into the sink. He also knows of landowners who used sinkholes on their property as trash dumps. Sinkholes can measure up to a depth of 80 feet, but they are not bottomless as was once thought. We now know that the sinkholes are linked together through connecting systems to the Floridian Aquifer. While the group stopped at the edge of beautiful Emerald Sink, Cal described how specially trained divers use this sinkhole as the portal for access to an expansive underground cave system. Thirty seven miles of connecting cave systems have now been explored and mapped by divers using the aid of electric scooters to help propel them on their arduous journey. Some of the caves reach 200-300 feet below the surface, are as wide as 50 feet, and filled entirely with moving water making sinkhole diving an extremely dangerous endeavor. These underwater explorers finally reemerge from their underwater journey in Wakulla Springs after a decompression taking nearly 15 hours.

The formation of sinkholes occur worldwide and in the United States they can be found in Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Florida. Florida has more sinkholes, the most characteristic feature of a natural karst topography, than any other state. Our area karst geology consists of limestone which lies buried beneath a layer of sandy soil. Because our rain and groundwater is naturally acidic, as it pools under the sand, it slowly erodes away the surface of the rock which over time causes depressions. Eventually these depressions may collapse and a sinkhole is formed. These "karst windows" open directly to the underlying aquifer and some connect beyond to the cave systems which lead to Wakulla Springs.

The phenomenal clear blue color of many sinks is created by the Floridian Aquifer that feeds the sinkholes. Conversely, sinkholes provide a passageway for rainfall to replenish the subsurface groundwater. Generous amounts of rainfall that travel down 4 major dark water creeks changes the signature blue color of sinkholes to a dark tannin color during our rainy season. Another natural phenomenon called a spring boil that used to occur at Spring Creek was remembered by members on the senior tour. Known as the "Spring Creek Rise," fresh spring water at times would rise up above the water level of the tidal creek. Mysteriously the water now reverses itself instead, and is sucked down along with saltwater into Spring Creek and the underground passageway. A local dive shop owner has reported tasting salty water at 160 feet in some nearby sinkholes.

Marie-Anne who offers her guided sinkhole hiking tour, like Tamara, has received instruction and training from the Wakulla Springs Ambassador. She has studied the maps and explored much of the surrounding area of the Riversink Tract. She can tell you about the wildlife that lives in and around the sinkholes and can identify the surrounding vegetation. She knows the names like Smokey's Chimney, Venture, Cream, Promise and Go Between, and how to find the way to each of the sinks tucked back and hidden in the woods. Unless you happen to be a seasoned

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citizen who grew up around these parts, like many on the excursion with Tamara, this is not as easy as it may seem.

Tamara, Cal, and Marie-Anne are all quick to agree that protection of our springs and sinkholes is vital to safeguard the aquifer system that supplies 95% of Florida's drinking water. It is important to note that the major portion of our area springs, sinkholes, and the surrounding lands have now been purchased by the State to protect these resources, to lessen the degradation which would likely occur if not for some regulation. The old-timers would agree. They mourn the loss of some beloved sinks that have been spoiled due to misuse. The bright spot is there are many beautiful tranquil sinkhole sites still remaining, and people who love and are willing to protect these priceless natural treasures, our Wakulla windows of wonder.

Join Marie-Anne as she guides you to some idyllic spots within the Riversink Tract. This popular sinkhole hiking tour will be available during most weekends beginning in November. For details and to read the full description of Marie-Anne's green guided tour, visit www.PalmettoExpeditions.com, or call 850-WANDER'N (926-3376) to make your reservations.