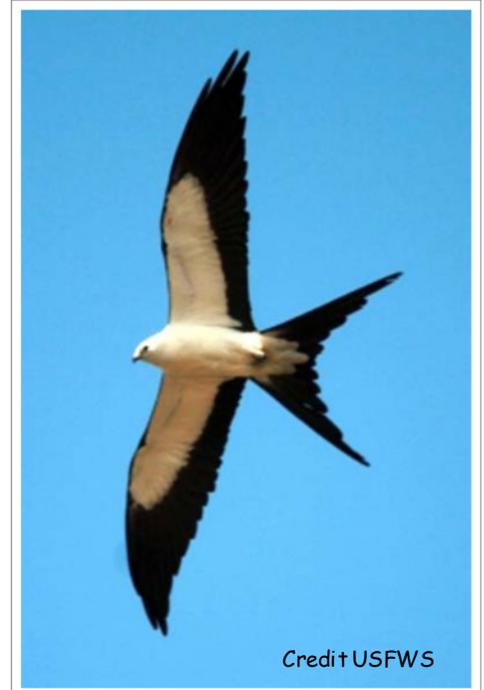

Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve

March - April 2026

Chairman's Message, By Cathie Foster

While our friends and families in the northern states are still battling snowfall, freezing temperatures and icy roads, I do believe we here in central Florida are done with our cold snaps and in the midst of a beautiful spring. The subtle signs are all around us if we just take the time to look. In bloom now at the Preserve you can see purple lupine and the small white flowers of Walters viburnum, and chickasaw plum (photo below) along the entrance/exit road. Looking over the edge of the boardwalk near the classroom building you might spot small white or purple-ish violets. Near the small pond (and other wet places) very soon the irises are going to just explode with their gorgeous purple blooms (one of my favorites).



But my very favorite sign of Spring is the return of the swallow-tailed kites. These strikingly beautiful black and white raptors migrate south annually in late summer to their homes in South America. And every Spring, usually sometime about now, they come north again to breed.

Once you see one elegantly soaring overhead, you won't mistake it for any other bird. They spend most of their day in the air, circling and weaving about, usually over swampy or marshy areas, seeking out a meal. They dine mainly on insects, which they catch and eat on the wing, but they will also eat small frogs and lizards. Two have already been spotted at Brooker Creek Preserve recently, so remember to look up!

See Upcoming Events page 3

Correction: FOBCP Native Plant Sale is Apr. 25

Annual Meeting – January 25, 2026

By Cathie Foster

How nice it was to spend the morning of our Annual Meeting chatting with FOBCP members and their guests. We know we have your support, but it is always wonderful to put faces to the names that we are so familiar with.

Huge thanks to all who attended, about 30 people in all, including County Commissioner Brian Scott, who offered thanks to the Friends for all we do to support Brooker Creek Preserve and to spread the word about the importance of "Our Wildest Place".

The slate of FOBCP Board of Directors, up for election for the next two years, was voted in by the membership. The full list of current directors is listed on page 18.

Our Annual Meeting is the time when we traditionally transfer our yearly Nature Store profit over to the Friends Operating Account. This year Mona Gardner, our Nature Store bookkeeper, presented us with a check for \$24,787.55, the FY2025 fiscal year profit. Our little store keeps doing better every year and we are so grateful to the volunteers who make that happen.



Mona presenting Cathie with the FY2025 Nature Store profits.

BEST WISHES TO PAM BROWN: Long time FOBCP Board member, Pam Brown, has stepped down from her place on the Board. In thanks for her service on the Board since 2009, she was presented with a framed Catesby's lily photo (our logo). We are sad to lose her, but she is still around if we ever need to pick her brain,

WELCOME TREVOR ACKERMAN: An old friend and former Brooker Creek volunteer and employee, Trevor Ackerman, recently moved back to the area and had been attending our Board meetings. He is very familiar with Brooker and his background includes fundraising for non-profits. So, we are happy to announce that he was not only elected to the Board of Directors, but also accepted the position of Vice-Chairman. Other officers elected are: Cathie Foster (Chair), Ed Helvenston (Treasurer), Evan Earle (Secretary) and Barb Hoffman (Business Director).



Cathie presenting Pam with a thank you for her many years of work with our Friends Board.

And finally, a HUGE thanks to FOBCP Board member Julie Wade for single-handedly organizing and setting up the yummy continental breakfast and to all who stayed to clean up afterward!



Yellow rat snake under the boardwalk. Photo by Ray Poyner.

Upcoming Events

Through Apr. 26, Gallery exhibit: BCP Plein Air 2026

Mar. 8 Off the Beaten Path Hike: Sandhill

Mar. 21 Star Party & Night Hikes (see p. 5)

Mar. 28 Wildflower Garden Work Day (9-11 am)

Mar. 29 Beekeepers Club

— No Keystone Cleanup with KPB this month.

Apr. 25 FOBCP Native Plant Sale (9 am-noon) (see p. 6)

Apr. 25 Wildflower Garden Work Day (8-10 am)

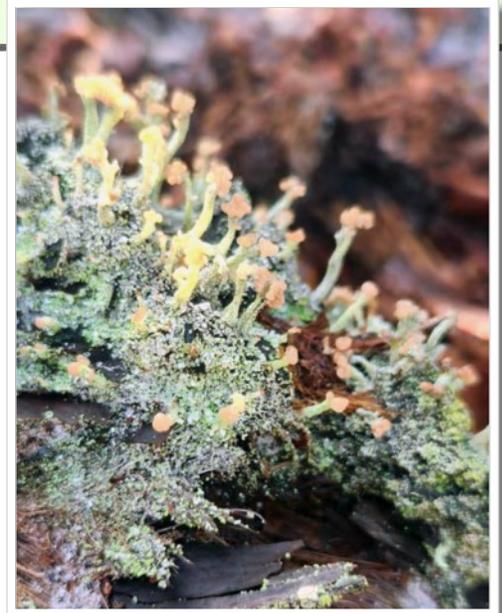
Apr. 26 Beekeepers Club

Apr. 26 FOBCP Gallery Reception: & Awards:
BCP Plein Air 2026 (1-3 pm) (see p. 10)

June 14 Off the Beaten Path Hike: Cypress Swamp (p. 4)

June 15 Keystone Rd. Cleanup with KPB (9 am)

Lichen, photographed on the Sandhill Stomp hike.



Night Hike, Feb. 21. A scorpion lit up under a blacklight. We found several in the fallen leaves along the trail. Fearsome - looking, but roughly half an inch long.

Friends  of Brooker Creek Preserve

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

A nature-based fundraising series of hikes



Description: This series of four hikes will take place in beautiful areas tucked away within Brooker Creek Preserve in sites that are not open to the public. The hikes begin at 9:00 am and last 3-4 hours.

Cost: \$25/hike/person or \$80 for the hike series. Members of the Friends get 10% off.

Our guide, **Dr. Craig Huegel**, was the first land manager when the Preserve was born in 1990. He can identify everything from the tiniest moss to the tallest tree including animal prints, bird calls, lichens, and more. He is full of stories and very patient in answering questions. The hikes will be educational *and fun!*



Off the Beaten Path Hikes:

March 8, 2026 – Sandhills – The only true sandhills of Brooker Creek Preserve. This site is in the northern end of the preserve and will feature an abundance of spring wildflowers.

June 14, 2026 - Cypress Swamp – Located in the southern part of the preserve, this site features orchids, ferns, and epiphytes. Plan to get wet as we plunge into the swamp! The butterfly orchids should be in bloom!

Sep. 13, 2026 – In Search of Catesby’s Lily – Located in the eastern part of the preserve, we will hunt for the threatened Catesby’s Lily. In so doing, we will see a profusion of beautiful fall wildflowers in full bloom.

Dec. 13, 2026 – Interior Wildlands – We will be in parts of the Preserve so remote and so pretty you won’t believe you are in Pinellas County!



For more information or to sign up, please email info@FriendsOfBrookerCreekPreserve.org. These hikes are popular and sell out quickly. Early sign-up is encouraged to save your space!





Star Party and Night Hikes!

Saturday, March 21, 2026

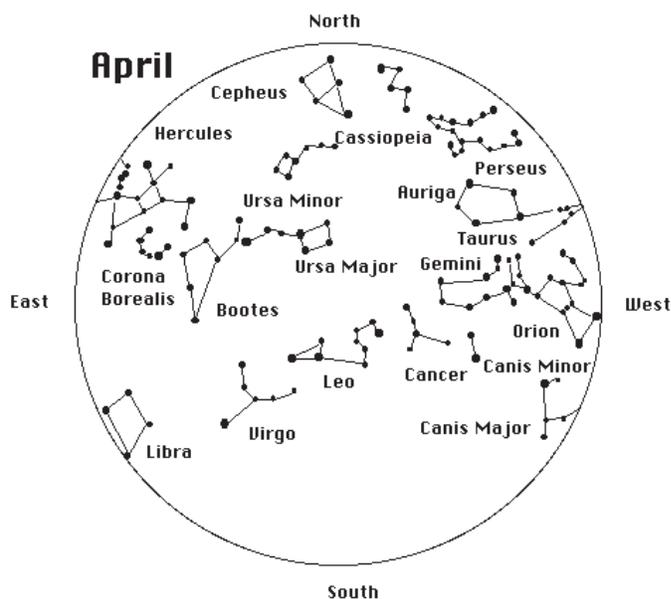
Arrive between 7:30 and 8:00 pm (reservations not needed)
Gates will close at 8:00

Observe the night sky and enjoy an evening at the Preserve with the Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve and the St. Petersburg Astronomy Club! Observe the stars through telescopes provided or bring your own.

Night hikes will be conducted, on a first come/first served basis along the .75 mile Ed Center Trail through the woods.

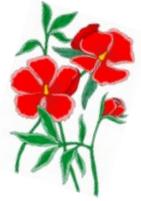
*****Closed-toe shoes are required for all night hikes.*****

Please bring water, insect repellent, and a chair if you like. As always, pets, smoking, and alcohol are not allowed.





NATIVE PLANT SALE



Saturday April 25

Brooker Creek Preserve main parking lot

9 a.m.—noon or while supplies last

Native plant experts on hand to help you choose the right plants for your yard

Nature Store News

Spring is on its way and beautiful signs of it are here already (see Chairman's Messages on page 1). If you are thinking about doing some Spring cleaning and de-cluttering around your home, keep in mind that our little Nature Store has a Second Nature table where we offer our customers donated items at very reasonable prices. We prefer that donated items be nature-based and in good shape. If you have something to donate, you can drop it off at the store during open hours: Thursday-Saturday 9 am-4 pm or Sunday 11 am-4 pm.

Acre Adoptions

With heartfelt appreciation for the following acre adoptions in January and February:

Michael & Cindy Wray

In memory of
Jim Davis
From Harriett Davis

Five acres in memory of
Stephen Garret Komlos
From Amy M. Komlos

In honor of
Hadley Derby
From Lou Petersen

AUDITORIUM GALLERY By Lynn Whitelaw

RECENT EVENT:

NATURE'S MEDICINE CHEST *AN EXHIBITION OF THE* *FLORIDA CIRCLE OF NATURE ARTISTS*

On Feb. 15 over 60 people, including artists, family, friends and FOBCP members, attended the closing reception for the *Nature's Medicine Chest* exhibition. The artists were members of the Florida Circle of Nature Artists affiliated with the American Society of Botanical Artists. As botanical illustrators, most of the members of the Circle are from the Sarasota, Venice, and Fort Myers area, and this was the first time many of them had seen the exhibit. The group's stunning artwork was accompanied by written statements on the botanical and medicinal properties of the depicted plants found on the West Coast of Florida.

Of the exhibitions in the Auditorium Gallery over the years, *Nature's Medicine Chest* was greatly admired by the public for both the artistic merit and its educational component. As an appreciation of the Friends group for providing the opportunity for the artists to exhibit their botanical art, Circle organizer Diane Harm presented a check to FOBCP Chairman, Cathy Foster for \$200 as a thank you. A special thank you also to BCP staff members James Stevenson and Sara Ratza for their warm welcome to the artists at the reception. During the exhibition four works were sold.



Diane Harm and Cathie Foster

For more information about the Auditorium Gallery exhibitions, contact Lynn Whitelaw, Volunteer Gallery Curator at rlwhitelaw7@msn.com



Carole Gorin
Catesby Lily and Passionflower
Colored pencil



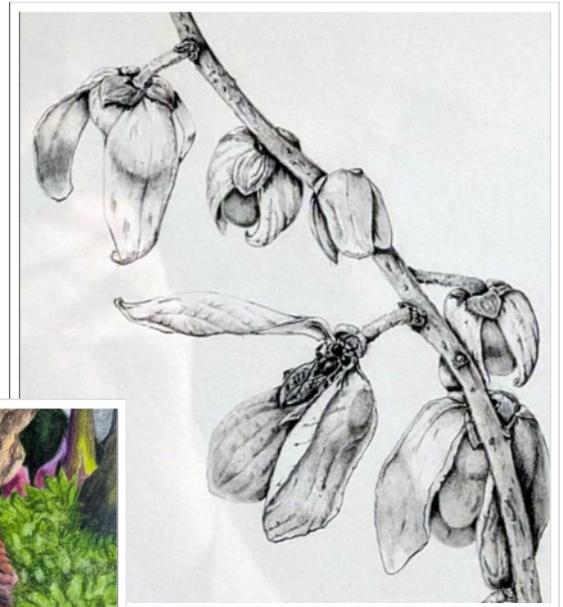
Judith Scillia
Black-Eyed Susan and Autograph Tree
Colored Pencil

Betsy Roe
Passionflower
Watercolor & Colored pencil

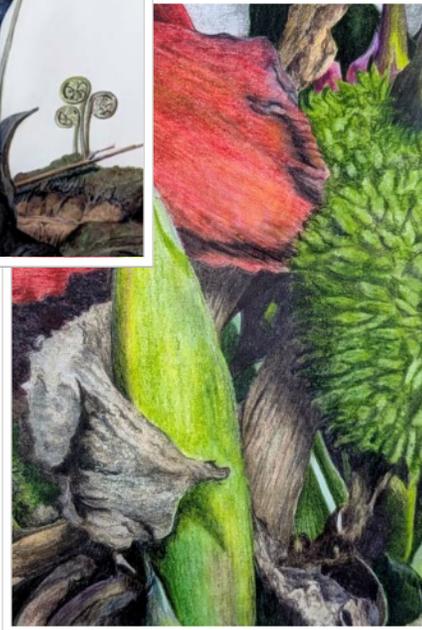
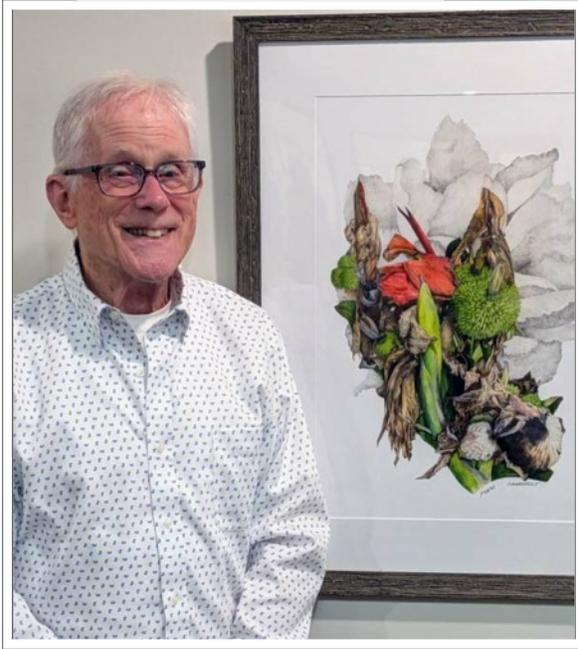


Susan Benjamin
American Beautyberry and
Spotted Beebalm, details
Watercolor

Peter Miller
Jack-in-the-Pulpit and
Canna Lily, details
Colored Pencil



Jeanette Atkinson
Netted Pawpaw
(with bee), detail
Graphite



Mary Jane Dimino
Red Maple, detail
Watercolor



Gail Swanson
Castor Bean Plant
Colored pencil



Diane Harm
Trumpet Vine
Watercolor

CURRENT EXHIBITION (On view through April 26):

BROOKER CREEK PRESERVE PLEIN AIR 2026

Closing Reception and Awards Program: April 26, 1-3 pm



Plein air, the act of creating art outdoors within nature (in 2-D drawing or painting media) has always inspired artists. On Friday, Feb. 20 and Saturday, Feb. 21, the Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve hosted **Plein Air 2026**, our annual two-day art event. This year 25 participating artists submitted 38 works and



enjoyed the "Chamber of Commerce" weather to creatively document the beauty of Brooker Creek Preserve while interacting with Preserve visitors and sharing a camaraderie with fellow artists.



This is a juried competition with cash prizes awarded for Best in Show (\$150), First (\$100), Second (\$75), Third (\$50) place, two Honorable Mention (\$25) awards, and a Visitor's Choice Award (\$25), given to the work most nominated by exhibition patrons. The judge for this year's **Plein Air 2026** is artist and retired curator of the Dunedin Fine Arts Center, Catherine Bergmann.

An **Artists' Reception & Awards Program** will be held Sunday, April 26 (1-3 pm). Please plan to attend to meet the artists and perhaps consider purchasing one of the creative works of these talented artists - most of the artwork is for sale and the monies go to supporting the artists with a 20% donation going to FOBCP for continuing programs like this. The Auditorium Gallery is open for public viewing Saturdays and Sundays, 1 to 3 pm.



From top, watercolor artist Theo van Eldrik, oil paint artist Sarah Schaller, and pastel artist Larry Burton.

Off the Beaten Path: Sandhill Stomp

By Craig Huegel

This past Sunday morning, March 9, we kicked off the 2026-27 edition of the Off the Beaten Path hiking series at Brooker Creek Preserve. The series consists of four walks to places not open to the public, four of my absolute favorite sites within the nearly 9,000-acre Preserve. This past weekend's walk was to the only mostly-intact sandhill plant community within the Preserve's boundaries. Sandhill occurs on old coastal dunes where the sandy soil rises high enough in elevation to allow for rainfall to rapidly percolate into the aquifer. Much of the northern third of Florida was once comprised of sandhill vegetation, but because such sites are very desirable for development, nearly all of this plant community has been converted to housing and commercial development. It has been estimated that only about 0.1% of Florida's original sandhills remain. Therefore, having a little of it within Brooker Creek Preserve is significant.

Our hikers on Sunday met in the parking area north of Keystone Road at 9 am and we carpooled from there north to our target starting point - less than 2 miles from the Pasco County line and in sight of Hillsborough County. It was a beautiful day for a walk. Bright and calm with temperatures that were comfortable. Even the tiniest elevation change in Florida changes plant communities. We began our walk in well-drained pine flatwoods and eventually came to the sandhill area. In plant terms, we went from a pine canopy of slash and longleaf pine with a dense understory of saw palmetto to a pine canopy almost totally comprised of longleaf pine and an understory dominated by grasses and wildflowers.



Top, sky-blue lupine.

Most sandhill wildflowers bloom heaviest in the fall, but we were mostly looking for the magnificent spring flowers of sky-blue lupine. We were not disappointed. Lupines are very short-lived perennials and our native species are virtually impossible to cultivate in a pot. You will not likely ever find sky-blue lupine for sale in a nursery. If you want to see one, you have to venture out into a sunny and deep-sand area like the place we spent our Sunday morning at in Brooker Creek Preserve.

Spring is also a good time to see native blueberries and pawpaws in bloom. We saw quite a few as well as some zebra swallowtails that use pawpaw as a host plant for their caterpillars. False pennyroyal was also abundant and in full flower. Some of us stayed just a bit longer and shared their lunches next to a very nice cypress dome on the way out. If you want to experience a spectacular cypress swamp, however, we'll be exploring my favorite for the next installment of the Off the Beaten Path series on Sunday June 14. We might get really wet, but we'll surely get really muddy and have a great time. Register at the Friends website: www.friendsofbrookercreekpreserve.org.



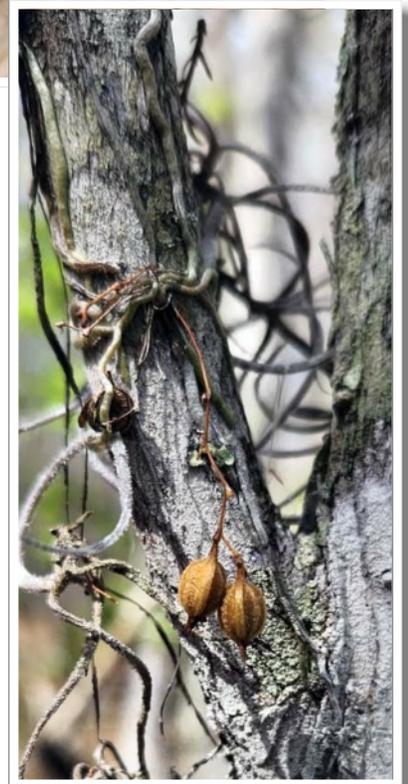
Right, flatwoods pawpaw and rose-rush.

Below, piriqueta, with false rosemary in the background.



After the sandhill, we visited a nearby swamp to seek out the tiny jingle bell orchid (right). Julie Wade's keen eye spotted several. Only the roots and brown seed capsules were visible.

Photos of flowers by Lisa Boing.





FOBCP Beekeepers Club By Cathie Foster



For information on our Friends of Brooker Creek
Beekeepers Club please visit
<https://www.friendsofbrookercreekpreserve.org>

or email your questions to
info@friendsofbrookercreekpreserve.org

Return The Preserve Work Days

If you know of a civic organization, business, or school looking for a hands-on volunteer opportunity, consider partnering with the Friends Of Brooker Creek Preserve (FOBCP) for a Return The Preserve (RTP) Work Day for your group. Volunteers will work with the FOBCP to remove exotic, invasive plants such as caesarweed and St. Augustine grass. In doing so, you will help to Return The Preserve to its natural environment. If you are interested, contact the FOBCP at:

Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve, 3940 Keystone Rd., Tarpon Springs, FL 34688
Voicemail: (727) 934-2680 info@friendsofbrookercreekpreserve.org

Volunteer News

Education Center Updates
March/April 2026

By Julia Myers, Education Support Specialist, Brooker Creek Preserve



Staff Updates: Please join us in celebrating our Victoria's advancement into a full-time position with the Parks and Conservation Resources Department at Weedon Island Preserve! This opportunity is well deserved, and Weedon Island is VERY fortunate to have her. Victoria will be deeply missed, but she will always be part of the BCP family. We thank her sincerely, on behalf of the people, plants, and animals she so thoughtfully cared for during her remarkable 2.5-year tenure.

The good news continues — we are excited to introduce our new part-time Education and Outreach Specialist, Sara Ratza! Sara has volunteered with us for a few years as a hike guide and she brings a rich background as an educator, artist, business owner, and more. Please join us in welcoming her to the Team!



Sara Ratza

The Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center Annual Report FY25 can be viewed [HERE](#).

Brooker in the News: The County put together an awesome promotional video for BCP last month, featuring our James as the narrator! It can be viewed here: [Brooker Creek Preserve](#).

Bay News 9 also featured the Preserve here: [Brooker Creek Preserve Nature Center](#)

Eagle Nest: Our eagles had one successful hatchling this year! Join Volunteer Alexa every Saturday in March from 2-3 pm to watch our eagles at their nest. We'll have a spotting scope set up so you can enjoy an up-close view. Stop by the bird blind at the end of the Bird Path in the afternoon, when eagles are most active and likely to be visible. We hope to see you there.

2026 LAKES & PONDS EDUCATION DAY



Join us for a free workshop for anyone interested in learning more about the health and care of our water resources and green spaces! We'll take a closer look at how stormwater ponds are managed and maintained—and why they matter. This event will feature Best Management Practices for Florida's lakes & ponds and is a great opportunity to:

- ✓ Connect with others and swap ideas
- ✓ Hear talks from 5 guest speakers
- ✓ Win fun raffle prizes
- ✓ Participate in a plant giveaway!



Saturday
11 April, 2026



9:00 AM to
1:30 PM



Brooker Creek
Environmental
Education Center at
3940 Keystone Road,
Tarpon Springs

Scan here and register before
April 9, 2026!



Questions or sponsorship interest?
Email watershed@pinellas.gov


Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve
ADOPT AN ANIMAL - \$35/adoption



*A program to enhance restoration and land management programs to help provide improved habitat for wildlife in **Brooker Creek Preserve***

The **ADOPT AN ANIMAL** program was established by the Friends in 2020 to give individuals the opportunity to help keep intact the ecological integrity of the Preserve. Funding will be used for:

- Removing exotic and invasive plants
- Restoring natural water flow
- Fire management
- Restoring natural plant communities

Animal adoptions make perfect gifts for birthdays, anniversaries, memorials, and more!

Upon receipt of your donation, the honoree will be sent by mail an adoption package with an adoption certificate, a fact sheet about the adopted animal, and a cuddly plush animal chosen for adoption. The donor will receive a thank you letter that can be used for tax purposes.

Donor Name: _____

Phone: (____) _____ Email: _____

in honor of in memory of for myself

Honoree Name: _____

Send packet to this address. This is the donor or honoree address (circle one):

I wish to adopt (\$35 each):

- | | | | | | | |
|--|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gopher Tortoise | <input type="checkbox"/> Deer Buck | <input type="checkbox"/> Raccoon | <input type="checkbox"/> Eagle | <input type="checkbox"/> Otter | <input type="checkbox"/> Alligator | <input type="checkbox"/> Owl |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gray Squirrel | <input type="checkbox"/> Deer Fawn | <input type="checkbox"/> Opossum | <input type="checkbox"/> Bat | <input type="checkbox"/> Coyote | <input type="checkbox"/> Bobcat | <input type="checkbox"/> Fox |

Total Due: \$ _____ Questions? info@FriendsOfBrookerCreekPreserve.org, 727-934-2680

Check endorsed to: **FOBCP**. Mail to: FOBCP, 3940 Keystone Road, Tarpon Springs, FL 34688

FEID #59-3302182 tax-exempt, non-profit corporation

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Friends  of
Brooker Creek Preserve

ADOPT AN ACRE



*A program to enhance restoration
and land management programs in
Brooker Creek Preserve*

The **ADOPT AN ACRE** program was established by the Friends in 2016 to give individuals the opportunity to help keep intact the ecological integrity of the Preserve.

100% of funding will be used for:

- Removing exotic and invasive plants
- Restoring the natural flow of water
- Fire management
- Restoring natural plant communities

Acres make great gifts for birthdays, anniversaries, memorials and more!

Upon receipt of the donation, the donor or honoree's name will be placed on the **ADOPT AN ACRE** display inside the Environmental Education Center for one year. A certificate will be sent to the honoree acknowledging the adoption.

Donor
Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: (_____) _____

Email: _____

___in honor of ___in memory of ___for myself

Honoree
Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: (_____) _____

I wish to adopt _____ acres @ \$100/acre

Total Due: _____

Make check payable to: FOBCP

Mail to: 3940 Keystone Road
Tarpon Springs, FL 34688

info@FriendsOfBrookerCreekPreserve.org

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Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve - Mission Statement: The mission of the Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve is to provide public support for the Preserve through fund raising, volunteer programs, and education to ensure that the Preserve remains a natural wilderness for future generations.

Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve - Land Use Position Statement: The Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve support land uses within the boundaries of Brooker Creek Preserve which have a main purpose that furthers the preservation, conservation, restoration or protection of the land and resources of the Brooker Creek Preserve.

Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve:
www.FriendsOfBrookerCreekPreserve.org
Email:
info@FriendsOfBrookerCreekPreserve.org
Voicemail: (727) 934-2680

Brooker Creek Preserve:
Phone: (727) 453-6900
Website: www.brookercreekpreserve.org
Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center is located at 3940 Keystone Road, Tarpon Springs, Florida, 34688. Phone: (727) 453-6800
Hours: Thurs. - Sat. 9am - 4pm, Sun., 11am - 4pm.

Friends Nature Store is located in the Education Center. Hours: Thurs. - Sat. 9am - 4pm, Sun., 11am - 4pm.

Preserve Hiking Trails open 7 days a week, 7am to 30 minutes before sunset. Closed the day after Thanksgiving and Dec. 25.

Horse Trails open 7 days a week, all year, sunrise to sunset.

This newsletter is published every other month. Please submit articles to Newsletter Editor Dr. Craig Huegel (727) 422-6583 or email Huegelc55@aol.com

Pinellas County PCR Mission statement: The mission of the Parks and Conservation Resources Department is to maintain and protect the inherent value of the County's natural, cultural and recreational resources through sustainable access, education, and stewardship that enhance quality of life for our community and future generations.

FOBCP Leadership 2026

Board of Directors

Officers

Chair: Cathie Foster
Vice Chair: Trevor Ackerman
Secretary: Evan Earle
Treasurer: Ed Helvenston
Business Director: Barb Hoffman

Directors:

Robert Burkard: Beekeeping
Allyn Childress: Grants
Evan Earle, Jr.: Return the Preserve Work Days
Cathie Foster: Nature Store Manager
Barbara Hoffman: Business Director/ Membership/Owl-O-Ween
Dr. Craig Huegel: Land Use/Newsletter Editor/Off-the-Beaten-Path Hikes
Chuck Parsons: 4th Grade Coordination
Ray Poynor: Craftsman, Night Hikes
Barbara Schultz: Publicity
Cathy Vogelsong: Newsletter Publisher
Julie Wade: Communications/Outreach

Further Leadership

Pam Brown: Wildflower Garden
Mona Gardner & Dixie Mills: Nature Store Bookkeepers
Cathy Ordiway: Website Master
Lynn Whitelaw: Art Gallery Curator

Registration Info: FEID #59-3302182 tax-exempt, non-profit corporation

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