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The Tortoise's Burrow

At Hugh Taylor Birch State Park

Hugh Taylor Birch State Park
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Distemper; Nature's act of give and take:

Distemper is no pretty thing. There is good reason to take your pets at an early age to get a healthy vaccination against this virus. It's not transmissible to humans (although we can and do carry the virus asymptotically) but to some of our most loved mammal friends including dogs (in the case of canine distemper) and cats (feline distemper) it is lethal. We know this first-hand here at Birch because we were all accustomed -daily -to seeing a good number of little raccoon residents who we see less of now. We even came to know individuals through face or color variation or size. "Oh look, there's *Pretty Mama!*" who was distinguished with an oddly petite face and uniquely, light tan fur distinguishing her from her darker-furred clan. Or, "I saw the hairless-tail-less raccoon again." and etc. It was certainly a magical moment for each of us to get a glimpse of one of our few gray foxes. We probably only counted 4 or so on the entire property, remembering two years back when three pups were discovered under a canoe at the shop area where their mama had decided to create her den. The rangers certainly shared the information when we caught glimpse of one, "I saw one of the foxes today," appreciative

responses always followed.

To our great sadness, we fear that there are no more foxes, and our raccoon numbers have plummeted at Birch, much as the complete loss of Marsh Rabbits years ago, probably due to similar circumstances.

Canine distemper has no treatment once infected and is highly contagious to a number of mammals, including raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), opossum (*Didelphis genianum*) and gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*)—each of whom take residence here at Birch. When the once-plump and sly little raccoons, who are known to be as dexterous as primates, began to look a bit like they had a cold, we wondered. When the conjunctivitis appeared, we worried, but could do nothing. When a few emerged from the woods, ragged, skin and bones and swaggering about as if intoxicated, our hearts sank and we knew we had a major issue hitting the park. Many visitors and neighbors living along AIA were rightly worried about Rabies, another lethal and contagious virus (one which is contagious to humans as well, but thankfully treatable). The symptoms, however, were a clear sign of Distemper: runny nose, watery eyes, conjunctivitis, pneumonia, wasting, debilitation, disorienta-

tion and death. Having caught a few of our raccoons we ushered them off to a humane end—and protection for the living — to the Wildlife Care Center where they confirmed that across the entire county Distemper was hitting hard. In our area alone the WCC had been pulling out a number of raccoons daily.

Tooth and Claw. Nature is not selective except to that which is susceptible, fit or held at bay by technology (for a while at least). It saddens us to witness so much death but even in death we learn great lessons about the amazing reality in which we live.

A month or so ago our district park biologist, Hank Smith rolled into the park at dusk as he typically did on his routines about the many parks of District 5. "I've come in to watch the raccoons," he announced. The man had a sever passion for the environment that he monitored, taught about and shared with others who were appreciative of the "wild spaces." He had a way that was both maverick—a typical trait of "green people" and he was also a people person. I was standing guard duty when he came in this last time and I conveyed my sadness to him about the death of all our little

critters. "It is sad, Hank replied, "but studies do confirm that there should only be one raccoon per twenty acres. Birch, in essence, has been about five times too concentrated in raccoons for their natural health equilibrium. " His response was both academic and compassionate, and it gave me pause for thought since Nature in all of her astounding complexities has found her own way for eons—and she works perfectly by herself.

Broward county does drop food vaccinations for Rabies and distemper, but even with technologies, not all is foolproof. The same can be said for the last words I will ever hear from our wonderful and respected park biologist, Hank, who always came in with a smile, with a word of wisdom, and certainly encouragement. Hank too succumbed to the beginnings and end-

ings we all share as part of Nature, passing away at the end of May despite medications and technologies. It seems that when Nature requires, she lends and she takes life. From this we can perpetually grieve or we can learn to celebrate the life that we experience daily, each little bit, each player who has helped to make us who we are today; the fox, the raccoon, or a wonderful man who dedicated his life to the unique nature of Florida. In this we keep the hope that Nature knows best since it is through her that all things come and go, and joyfully continues in magnificence.

Mark E. Foley, park ranger, Birch

GO M.Cruz!

Many thanks to Brent Wysocki and his crew for the introduction of [M.Cruz Rentals](#) to Hugh

Taylor Birch State Park as our new, private concession. M. Cruz has offered a wonderful highlight to the park by providing popular, guided tours on the futuristic, Jetson-like Segways around and outside of the park. M.Cruz also provides a host of other amenities including high-quality bike rentals and beach lounge chair rentals, T-shirt, hat and book sales, plus a variety of snacks and beverages for purchase. M.Cruz certainly brings a new and friendly atmosphere to our Beach Gate access where visitors may conveniently find these recreational and beach-oriented amenities to their convenience. Thanks M.Cruz! For more information about Segway or bike rentals, please call 954.235.5082 or take a short walk up to our Beach Gate where they will gladly be of service to you. Enjoy!

Monthly Highlights

Hurricane Season Begun!—Prepare! Store water, canned goods and get your batteries!

The Heat's UP—Bring out the water and gatoraid. Don't get caught by heat exhaustion!

Tidbits: Seagrape Fruiting
-Cocoa plum fruiting
- Atala butterfly sited.
- **June 21, Summer Solstice.**

Common Birds this month:

Nanday Conures—nesting
Piliated Woodpeckers
Yellow Crowned Night Herons
Chimney Swifts

Ask about our Friday walks!

- **Jun 6, Mangroves**
- **Jun 13 t.b.a.**
- **Jun 20 Full Moon Mangrove**
- **Jun 27 t.b.a.**

• Environmental Tip of the Month

Reduce! This is the first vital step in helping the environment. Reduce, Recycle and Reuse is the adage. Plastic is one of the worst things we can put into the environment. Consider getting reusable grocery bags and seek out biodegradable plastics. Plastic bags from groceries constitute one of the biggest pollutants today, with billions of tons dumped into our landfills each year. Publix and Whole Foods sell high-quality, reusable bags at very low prices.

FRIENDS OF BIRCH St. Pk.

Share your ideas and help enhance the features of our park through this wonderful volunteer, citizen's organization. Inquire at the Ranger Station today!