

Rambling the Venus Sands Both White and Yellow



The trip to Archbold Biological Station was expected to be informative. But who knew it would be such an adventure of good humor, unexpected turns, and even sublime delight? Located on the southern end of the Lake Wales Ridge the privately funded Archbold Station focuses scientific research and conservation efforts on Florida scrub habitat. Their web site ([click here](#)) provides extensive information about the fascinating history and work of the facility.

The adventure began with a late afternoon drive west on scenic route 714 through an extraordinary road canopied by hundred-year-old oaks. We rounded north around Lake O passing through downtown Okeechobee and onward west up onto a clearly discernable elevation then followed the ridge south to Archbold Station. Google tells us the station is located in the town of Venus. Wondering at the name we speculated how it might have come to be. But that afternoon negotiating the fading light around substantial old buildings focused our attention. We located our evening's lodging, claimed our rooms, and ate supper together on the porch of Rosemary cottage. Then off by flashlight to a lecture in a beautiful new education center also attended by native plant folks from the Tarflower Chapter. Archbold senior researcher, Eric Menges, set the scene for the next day by discussing native plant species found in the area along with research into the complexities of habitat, species reproduction, demography, and prescribed and natural burns. He introduced us to a distinction between areas of white sand and yellow sand indicative of higher iron concentration. The significance of the differences in sand color continued to intrigue me as we each repaired to our rooms in search of sleep.

In the morning we made breakfast within the old dining room filled with ethnographic curiosities collected presumably by Richard Archbold in the first half of the 20th century. I felt myself transported to a world of great wealth and gentlemanly adventure. The toaster was an antique as was the original wooden

seated ladies toilet in the powder room around the corner. I mention the toilet only because one of our members was seen waving frantically from the window. Finding herself locked-in she contemplated standing on that sturdy seat in order to climb out the window. Fortunately an easier rescue through the door was accompanied by good natured giggles and the knowledge that this was a story to tell and retell.

Out on a sandy fire break trail we ambled ever so slowly taking in plant after plant, sharing observations and questions. Our guide, Stephanie, a vibrant young scientist led us to find the endangered Lake Placid Scrub Mint where we too were observed by a Florida scrub jay overhead on the wire. We backtracked down the white sand trail into an unusual rosemary scrub plant community to experience the “rosemary balds” each surrounded by bare open sand. Along the way we witnessed an ongoing demographic study characterized by flags and metal disks marking plant individuals over time within a delineated grid. Then unexpectedly we encountered two young scientists drawing blood from a “non breeding female” scrub jay as part of their research measuring stress levels among this threatened native birds.

Waiting quietly at a distance we were finally signaled to come close. We watched as the banded bird was carefully inserted into a nylon stocking foot and suspended from a scale to document a weight of 71 grams. The researcher delicately extricated the jay and brought her out and away from their equipment for a photo op. Oh lucky day to see this intelligent and beautiful creature so close up. And then he asked for a volunteer to release the bird. My heart jumped at the chance but my mind waited in the interest of fairness for what seemed to be several seconds before the words “I’d love to” exited my mouth. Quietly to me, “lets see if you’re a jay whisperer”, as he placed the frightened creature on her back in my cradling hands. I felt her warmth and slight mass. For a second or two after he let her go she lay still before realizing she was free. My heart said “go little bird” and she turned and pushed off from the heel of my thumb with her little birdy feet. My heart soared with her and I felt like a Disney heroine from an animated kids movie! My story to tell and retell.



After a full morning and with the sun heating up we headed back for a much-appreciated bagged lunch in the old dining room. Without the energy for more trail exploration by foot my carpool agreed to head home perhaps driving the road up "red hill" for a look-see where the yellow sand prevailed. And prevail it did. Before we knew it our heavy vehicle was stuck in the sand. We got out, loaded branches in front of and behind the tires and pushed. For all our efforts the wheels just spun deeper and deeper into the enveloping yellow sand. After a complicated cell phone call which was received with much amusement we were rescued by an employee of the Biological Station in a fearsome looking piece of heavy equipment with massive rolling blades on the back. "Your not the first," he said, "I rescued maybe 30 groups in 40 years from the same place". Another story to be told and retold. After laughter and congratulations we got home safely and very glad for the wonderful adventure.



I haven't used names so that individual actors might have the pleasure of claiming their own roles. Personally, I learned a lot and thoroughly enjoyed the company of my fellow Cocoplums. Not sure I learned what I was supposed to about the effects of yellow vs. white sand on native plants. However I do want to thank the yellow sand for reminding me once again that for all her beauty nature doesn't like to be taken for granted.

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