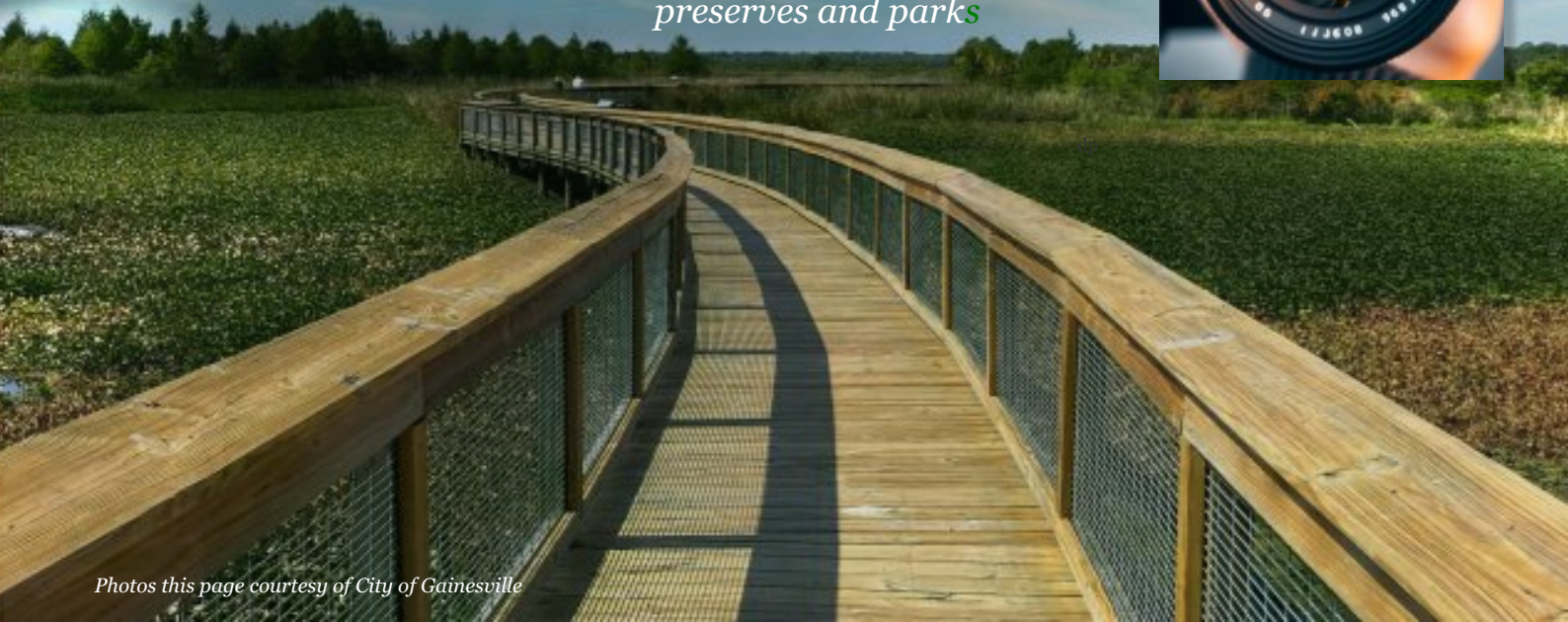


# THE P • A • R • K • S

*Featuring the fine stalking and camera skills of our own Becky Hinson on her visits to local wildlife preserves and parks*



*Photos this page courtesy of City of Gainesville*

Are you ready for a new pair of walking shoes yet? If you're on my exercise plan, you're probably on your third pair by now. If so, lace them up and head over to Gainesville to the **Sweetwater Wetlands Park**. It's a great place to exercise safely and view wildlife at the same time. Plan to make it a day as the Park is 59 miles away or approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes.

While you're in the neighborhood, stop by Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park. It's more of an escape into the wilderness so be



ready to hike. If you're lucky, you'll see bison and wild horses there.

Sweetwater is located at 325 SW Williston Road in Alachua County. They're open from 7am to sunset daily. Entrance fees are \$5 per car and \$2 per person for bicyclists, pedestrians and buses. Bring correct change to leave in the honor box. Mobility tours are available on request by calling 352-554-5871. You must schedule these tours at least two weeks in advance. If you have other special needs accommodations,

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call the number above 48 hours in advance. Included is almost one mile of ADA accessible trail on pervious concrete and boardwalk surfaces and viewing platforms. The walking areas are clean and well maintained. Restrooms are available.

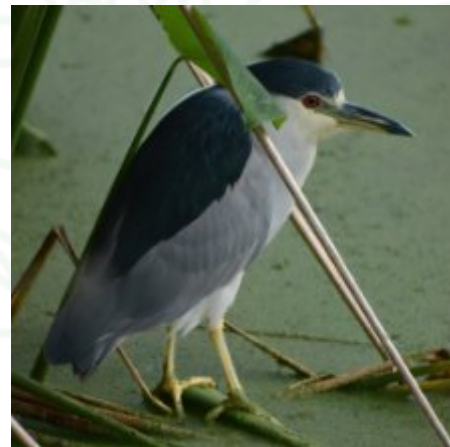
The park consists of 125 acres of man-made ponds and wetlands. The purpose of Sweetwater was to improve water quality of wetlands in both Paynes Prairie and the Florida Aquifer. Water is filtered as it flows into Paynes Prairie from Sweetwater Branch. The origin of this creek is located northeast of downtown Gainesville. Stormwater runoff has been diverted into the creek for over a century, buried in culverts throughout the city. In the 1930's ranchers cut canals through the prairie killing off the wetlands. Plans were made to build a natural water filtration system and the hiking trails were a bonus. The result was a beautiful spot to enjoy the beauty of Florida.

Because of the potential conflict with alligators and other wildlife, pets are never allowed in the park. Biking, horseback riding, camping or driving cars are not allowed. Fishing is also not permitted but you can photograph as long as you don't use a drone.

The park has 3.5 miles on crushed gravel trails and boardwalks surrounded by beautiful native plants, animals, birds, turtles, bobcats, otters, butterflies and more. In fact, it's home to more than 260 species of birds and animals. I was lucky enough to see the Cracker horses, in the distance, on my last trip.

Gainesville is home to many nature parks including the Morningside Nature Center, Loblolly Woods Nature Park, Bivens Arm Nature Park and Clear Lake Nature Park. Don't forget to stop by the Butterfly Rainforest at the Florida Museum of Natural History. Get off that couch and take the family to Gainesville for an afternoon stroll through the park!

*Photos this page Becky Hinson*



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