

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

LAKE WOODRUFF NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

This week's article represents somewhat of a departure from the past 2 years. Instead of describing a particular kind of animal, this one is about one of the many wonderful natural areas we have to explore within our region — a subject suggested by Roberta, a participant on our last nature walk in Victoria Gardens. From time to time, I'll highlight one of our state parks, national wildlife refuges, national and state forests, national seashore, and county nature preserves — all together totaling about a million acres of public lands within an hour's

drive of Victoria Park. Visiting any one of these places is a great way to experience the wildlife, scenery, and native plants of central Florida.

Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge is located in DeLeon Springs and is easily reached by driving on route 17 north out of DeLand (it's about 14 miles from Victoria Park). It comprises 22,000 acres of marshes, lakes, ponds, wetlands, pine forests, and other habitats along the St. John's River. Several trails go along the edges of the water impoundments, with the longest distance being 3 miles from the refuge's parking lot (6 miles round-trip). There are also a few shorter, 1/2-mile trails through beautiful oak-palm hammocks and cypress swamps. Birds are plentiful, especially waterfowl and wading birds such as egrets, herons, anhingas, ibises, gallinules, and ducks. Ospreys, red-shouldered hawks, barred owls and other raptors inhabit the refuge, and there is an active bald eagle nest visible from the Myakka Trail. I've seen bobcats, black bears, and plenty of otters while

walking or biking along the trails and dirt roads, and alligators and turtles (including gopher tortoises) are plentiful.

The Refuge is open to visitors every day from dawn to dusk, and it's never crowded. There is a small Visitor Center with informative pamphlets and exhibits along the entrance road. You'll see people fishing, bird-watching, or just taking a relaxing walk along the trails in this, one of 530 units in our nation's cherished system of National Wildlife Refuges.