WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

Bear Pond and Seminole State Forest

Even in the middle of Florida's hot summers it's still possible to enjoy the many natural areas that have been set aside to protect our wildlife and provide recreation. Less than 20 miles from Victoria Park there is Seminole State Forest, a 27,500-acre tract comprised of pine woodlands, wetlands, cypress swamps, sand-pine scrub, open grasslands, hardwood forests, springs, and the beautiful Blackwater Creek — officially designated a National Wild and Scenic River (see my attached photo). Some sections of this tract are among the best places to see the endangered Florida Scrub Jay.

Throughout this vast area there are many miles of trails and hard-packed dirt roads that are perfect for bicycles. My favorite is the 6 1/2-mile (one-way) route that connects the Forest's 2 main parking areas: off route 46 ("Bear Pond") in the south and route 44 ("Cassia") in the north. Other roads and trails intersect this route, making longer rides possible, and at each main intersection there is a large map of the Forest with "You Are Here" arrows for people like me who get lost a lot. This pleasant route crosses prairie-like expanses, pine forests, and Blackwater Creek. I've seen gopher tortoises, swallow-tailed kites, sandhill cranes, egrets, and many beautiful songbirds. butterflies, and dragonflies while riding here. On hot days, bring plenty of water.

Perhaps a better way to enjoy this forest in summer is to park at the Bear Pond access area and walk the short 6/10-mile trail around this picturesque body of water. It's level, easy, mostly shaded, and there are plenty of colorful

wildflowers and birds. For longer hikes, many people walk the dirt road from this parking lot and, in a few minutes, get on the orange-blazed Florida National Scenic Trail. To get there, take the Sanford exit off Interstate 4, turn right (west) onto route 46, and in a few miles, just after crossing the Wekiva River, look for the brown signs for the Bear Pond parking lot.