

## [Latest Weeki Wachee Preserve expansion now open to public](#)

### Tampa Bay Nature

Posted by:

Posted on : April 27 2009

By Janel Heflin, Special to The Laker

ARIPEKA – The latest portion of preserved land to become part of the vast Weeki Wachee Preserve that spans from Sea Pines in Hudson north to the Citrus County line is now officially open to the public.

After several weeks of land preparation, and the completion of a small parking area, the Aripeka Sandhills Tract will now serve as a place of solitude and reflection for hikers, and mountain bikers.

It will also act as an enormously important addition to the Weeki Wachee Preserve expanse that is home to the few remaining Florida Black Bear, as well as numerous other species of concern.

“We originally purchased the subject property from Aripeka of Pasco, LLC on November 8, 2007,” said Ron Daniel with the ELAMP. “The property was not officially opened to the public until after we sold a 50 percent interest in the property to Swiftmud (Southwest Florida Water Management District). That acquisition to Swiftmud was October 8, 2008. Swiftmud staff then proceeded to do fencing, gate opening, etc. for public use.”

A recent drive-by resulted in the conclusion that the parcel was finally opened to the public within the last month. It was purchased by the Environmental Lands and Acquisition Management Program (ELAMP) for Pasco County using a portion of the Penny for Pasco tax.

The ELAMP purchased the Aripeka Sandhills Tract, formerly known as Aripeka Heights for \$4,350,000.50, a purchase price approved by the Board of County Commissioners on August 21, 2007.

As has taken place with the preservation of numerous other environmentally sensitive properties acquired by the ELAMP, Swiftmud has taken on the responsibility of caring for the 210-acre parcel.

“It is now part of the Weeki Wachee Preserve, and managed consistent with the other lands owned and managed by Swiftmud,” Daniel adds.

Daniel has been part of the acquisition process of the parcel since it was first nominated for consideration by John Buehler of Aripeka of Pasco, LLC. Daniel knows well the environmental value of the property, and the importance of its addition to the Weeki Wachee Preserve.

“It is, without question, one of the key pieces in the southern end of the Weeki Wachee Preserve,” notes Daniel. “It consists of many diverse areas including high quality wetlands and sandhill habitat considered to be globally vulnerable to extinction, and imperiled in the state according to the Florida Natural Areas Inventory. There have been numerous sightings of the Florida Black Bear on the

property, and the area was included in a black bear study conducted by the University of Kentucky in 2003 in which radio telemetry data were collected of bears extensively using the Aripeka Heights property.”

According to Daniel, the Defenders of Wildlife encouraged protection of the property for its value to bears, and for its subsequent protection of habitat for many other species and for the entire ecosystem.

“It is definitely worth spending several hours to enjoy nature, animals, birds and the beauty of what we have in a natural setting,” adds Daniel.

The Aripeka Sandhills Tract is located off of Aripeka Road in Northwestern Pasco, and is directly across the road from a parcel that Swiftmud recently swapped with developers of the proposed Sunwest Harbortowne, a development that will have regional impact if given final approval by all required agencies.

Officials with Pasco County gave the go ahead on the project that will, if completed, consist of hundreds of upscale homes, a deep-water marina, shops, restaurants, and a convention center, all to rest on environmentally sensitive land that abuts the Gulf of Mexico.

Developers have a long way to go before a decision on final approval on the project including the final report of the Tampa Bay Planning Council.

Developers plan on turning the parcel Swiftmud swapped into a golf course.

The land swap was hotly debated and argued against by various concerned environmental groups. Among opponents: The Gulf Coast Conservancy that argued that it is bad news for black bears, as it could mean the devastation of the remaining Florida Black Bear population.

With the interruption of their current migratory patterns, the Black Bears will have no choice other than to seek alternate routes when attempting to traverse the Weeki Wachee Preserve on their way to more southerly portions that span through Northwestern Pasco County to the edge of Sea Pines in Hudson placing them in danger of overexposure to man as death due to vehicular impact will most certainly be on the rise as the bears attempt to find a new way back to their old home on the south side of the parcel.

The opening of the Aripeka Sandhills Tract to the public is seen as a true reason to celebrate by all involved in its preservation.

Finally, after years of controversy, the parcel, originally slated to become home to 235 upscale residential units, is finally part of the Weeki Wachee Preserve, and will remain forever protected.

### **More on the Web**

To learn more about Swiftmud and preserved lands visit [www.swfwmd.state.fl.us](http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us) .

To learn more about ELAMP visit [www.pascocountyfl.net/elamp/elamp.html](http://www.pascocountyfl.net/elamp/elamp.html)