



Myakka River State Park March 2019



Iris Savannaharum

Avid visitors may have already seen these, but March is the ideal blooming time for Prairie Iris (also known as Carolina Iris, Walter Dixie Iris, or Blue Flag). The flowers typically start blooming in late February, peak in March, and end by the first or second week of April.

Commonly mistaken as lilies, these are truly irises. They have stalks that grow to about 2-3 feet tall. The purple flower is 3-4 inches wide. Usually, only one or two flowers bloom per stalk, but they bloom in “pods” nearby one another.

Prairie Iris usually bloom in shallow, wet areas, on the edge between dry land and shallow water. Look for them on the sides of the main road, Big Flats Marsh, and Powerline Road.

In addition to being stunning, Prairie Irises play an important role in the natural environment. They provide nectar to butterflies and seeds on which birds love to munch.



The *iris savannarum* you see in the park today didn't always have that name. It was included with other flowers as *iris hexagona*. New genetic testing and information has now differentiated these similar flowers. *Iris hexagona* is primarily found in northern Florida, where the peninsula meets the panhandle. *Iris savannarum* is found all over Florida (including in Myakka). New developments in botany continue to aid our understanding of the incredible plants of our natural world.

Please be careful and **do not touch** the Prairie Iris. They are toxic to humans. Skin contact can cause serious rash (and ingestion is significantly worse). This natural beauty is best left untouched, both for you and the flower!

"Since Iris is the Greek goddess for the Messenger of Love, her sacred flower is considered the symbol of communication and messages. Greek men would often plant an iris on the graves of their beloved women as a tribute to the goddess Iris, whose duty it was to take the souls of women to the Elysian fields."

-Hana No Monogatari, *The Stories of Flowers*

The second flower is almost ready to bloom!

Vocabulary Word of the Month!

Rhizome

A **rhizome** is a system of roots living and growing under the soil. Periodically, a rhizome will send shoots above soil.

Prairie Iris is **rhizomatic**. Many of the flowers you see in the park are growing from preexisting root structures. They bloom above the soil only once per year.





Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

The “Bird with an Attitude”

Great Blue Herons are a common sight wading in Myakka’s shallow waters. These gargantuan beasts resemble their dinosaur ancestors in their shape, size, and fierce temperaments. GBHs are solitary, and they will snap at anything that invades their space.

Great Blues have a varied diet, eating almost anything within reach and attainable. They primarily feast on fish (and here in the park, they seem to prefer Armored Catfish). However, they will eat insects, invertebrates, reptiles, birds, and small mammals. A Park Ranger even reported seeing a GBH eat an 18” alligator!



Mating season (starting December) offers a unique opportunity to see Great Blues socializing with one another. GBHs nest in large colonies (“heronries”), usually in trees with some nests on the ground. Their coloration becomes more distinct, and they gain extra “fluff” (especially on the back of their head). Males make flamboyant displays in their desired nest spot. Pairs engage in courtship dances, ritualized greetings, and other elaborate mating behavior. Generally, the male will bring nest material and the female will arrange it.

Clutches are usually 3-5 eggs, incubate for about one month, and then hatchlings leave the nest when they are 2-3 months old. Juveniles tend to be duller and greyer in color.



The young GBH on the left ultimately won this tussle for dinner.

As soon as mating is over, Great Blue Herons become their fierce, independent, antisocial selves. They spread out across the shallows of Myakka River State Park, feeding and chasing away anything that gets too close!

Photography by Mike Kaplan

March Events

Every Monday: Florida Tales, 7:00pm, Log Pavilion

Hear the legends of Old Florida! Free.

Every Thursday: Coffee Hour, 9:00am, Log Pavilion

Learn about the park and make new friends! Coffee and snacks provided; \$2 donation appreciated.

Every Thursday: Ranger Guided Hike, 10:00am

Free. Limited spots available; sign up at Ranger Station or by calling (941) 361-6511.

3/7: Ecosystems @
Powerline

3/14: Freshwater @
Bridge

3/21: Beginning Birding
@ Birdwalk

3/28: History @ South
Pavilion

Every Friday: Prairie Hike, 8:30am, Visitor Center

Free, registration required. Info/registration at www.myakkahikes.com

Every Saturday: Campfire Circle, 7:00pm, Log Pavilion Amphitheater

Free. Please wear weather-appropriate clothing.

3/2: Myakka's
Watershed

3/9: Florida
Cracker

3/16: FWC

3/23: Diverse
Ecosystems

3/30: Park
History



Alter Eagles Concert

March 15th, 2019 at 7:00 p.m.

Join the Moon Over Myakka Concert Series with the Alter Eagles! Composed of military veterans and civic-minded musicians, the band routinely performs for fundraisers. They pool their talents to provide the most accurate live recreation of the greatest American band of all time, The Eagles.

\$25/person. Tickets available here:

<https://www.friendsofmyakkariver.org/events>



Moon Over Myakka Bike Ride

5:15pm, Visitor Center- Join the Friends of Myakka River on a moonlit bike ride. \$10/person, lights and helmets required, reserve by calling (941) 373-7839.

Burn Baby Burn...

Myakka River State Park utilizes prescribed fire as a powerful resource management tool. Our natural ecosystem is Florida Dry Prairie, and left to the state of nature, it would burn every 2-4 years. The species of the Dry Prairie rely on frequent fire and are well adapted to it. Fire can easily clear unhealthy overgrowth, enabling delicate species of flowers and grass to bloom. It fertilizes the soil, and migratory birds are naturally drawn to recently-burnt bushes as a place to rest. Prescribed fires also help reduce the risk of wildfire.

Prescribed fire has a long and controversial history. Cattle ranchers in Florida burned land to promote the growth of grazing grasses. Environmental activists of the early twentieth century petitioned against such burns, as they believed them to be harmful to nature. However, recent developments in scientific studies have proven that natural burns are critical to maintaining a healthy, native, natural ecosystem.



**Want to learn more? Check out this video made by
Everglades National Park:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwPcmQKSXK4>**

Our biologists and rangers carefully monitor all factors influencing a prescribed burn. They seek ideal weather, ground moisture, wind, and wildlife mating cycle conditions. Every part of the burn is planned in detail, beginning and ending with safety meetings.

The burn crew will have multiple small vehicles filled with water and fuel mixtures. The rangers themselves will be wearing lots of fireproof gear for protection. The team is led by a Burn Boss, with team leaders directing groups of about four. One person on the team is an igniter, holding the drip torch that sets the initial blaze. There will be at least one spotter, monitoring the fire, ensuring it doesn't spread and no one gets hurt. Also on the team is a sawyer (a chainsaw operator) that can prevent hazards before they occur.

Ideally, a fire burns itself out without much intervention. Once the zone is no longer ablaze, the team looks for lingering embers and the occasional flare-up. These are extinguished with fire rakes and water. For the next few days, rangers will monitor the zone for any lasting hotspots.

Regrowth begins immediately. Saw palmetto buds can be seen the day after a burn! Wildflowers flourish after a prescribed fire, and the grasses that grow have twice the capacity to convert carbon dioxide into oxygen as trees. The globally-imperiled Florida Dry Prairie thrives due to our prescribed fire efforts.