

Development closes in on scrub of Lake Wales Ridge

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SUNRAY -- While cars whiz past the landscape on U.S. Highway 27, the 4-inch-tall Avon Park harebell maintains a tenuous grip -- both literally and figuratively -- in white sugar sand at Saddle Blanket Scrub Preserve in southern Polk County.

Endangered animals, such as the manatee and Florida panther, get more attention. But the fate of rare plants, such as the flowering harebell, is a growing environmental concern as development eats into their scarce habitat.

Areas such as Saddle Blanket are the last stand for the endangered harebell, along with many other rare plants and animals that have called the scrub of the Lake Wales Ridge home since it was Florida's first beachfront property eons ago.

Scrub is the unglamorous name for the Florida ecosystem that's similar to a desert. Sparsely populated by shrubs instead of trees with dry, sugary sand, it has one of the highest concentrations of endangered plant species in the United States. The ridge is the only home to 16 plants listed as endangered by the federal government, according to researchers at Archbold Biological Station in Lake Placid.

"Our existence on the planet Earth is lessened every time we lose one of our fellow inhabitants," Steve Morrison of The Nature Conservancy said of the need to preserve the ridge's unique ecosystem.

Though less well-known than the Everglades, the Lake Wales Ridge scrub is the oldest ecosystem in Florida. Today only about 15 percent of the scrub ecosystem that once existed in Florida survives. Much of the land was turned into citrus groves and ranch land, and more recently, housing developments.

"I am optimistic," said Beatriz Pace-Aldana, a conservation biologist with The Nature Conservancy at Tiger Creek Preserve in Babson Park. "There is a lot of commitment on state and federal levels and private organizations like The Nature Conservancy. I am optimistic, but it will always be challenging."

More than 2 million years ago, when the ocean covered most of Florida, only the highest places, such as the Lake Wales Ridge, stayed above water. The ridge extends about 100 miles from Clermont south to the Highlands County town of Venus and is 4 to 10 miles wide. It generally lies just east of and parallel to U.S. 27.

The scrub is thorny and wild, home to more shrubs than trees. Often ravaged by fires started by lightning, the plants that flourish in the well-drained sand dunes had to adapt in some strange ways.

The sand pine keeps its seeds tucked inside cones until fire kills the parent plant and releases the seeds. Florida rosemary leaches a chemical into the sand that prevents its seedlings from germinating until the parent plant dies. The saw palmetto has a creeping palm trunk just below the surface that allows the plant to sprout back from fire in as little as three days.

Threatened animals that also call the ridge home include the Eastern indigo snake, Florida scrub-jay and the 5-inch-long sand skink, a curious variety of lizard that is built for "swimming" through sand in search of food with its torpedo-shaped body, tiny front legs and transparent eyelids.

Morrison of The Nature Conservancy recently was out at Saddle Blanket Lakes Scrub Preserve, about 20 miles south of Lake Wales. The area has been closed since the hurricanes of 2004, and still-high water levels make it difficult to get to some areas.

Morrison said the hurricanes helped preserve the area by knocking down many of the larger trees that had escaped prescribed fires. The area, about 800 acres, was purchased in 1986, but not before developers had cleared a section that was supposed to be a road.

Saddle Blanket is one of three sites the Avon Park harebell, also called the rabbit-bell, is found. As he walks through the scrub, Morrison is surrounded by endangered short-leaved rosemary. Under his feet, he points out blue-green crytobiotic soil, a mixture of algae, lichens and mosses that forms a crust in the sand and helps stop erosion. For reasons unknown, harvester ants living in the sand surround their entrances with small bits of charcoal from past fires.

"We've done a hell of a job saving what is left, but the human impact is surrounding these areas," Morrison said of the ridge.

With the price of property skyrocketing on and around the ridge, knocking some land purchases off preservation budgets, some agencies have resorted to buying conservation-easement rights, meaning the owner retains title to the land, but it is protected from development. Recently, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection bought conservation-easement rights to more than 800 acres east of Lake Reedy in south Polk.

For the past 21 years, Historic Bok Sanctuary in Lake Wales has been part of the Center for Plant Conservation program, which includes growing endangered plants, propagation, seed-storage reintroduction and monitoring plants back in the wild. The endangered-plant garden is open to the public and contains 25 endangered scrub plants along with some of the more common plants. Signs in the garden help visitors identify the species.

Walking trails are maintained through some of the protected scrub areas, as are 14 miles of trails at Tiger Creek Preserve in Babson Park in Polk County. Archbold Biological Station in Lake Placid offers programs from elementary through adult education.

"Life would be pretty bleak for humans on this planet if we don't have very many species to share the Earth with," Morrison said.

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