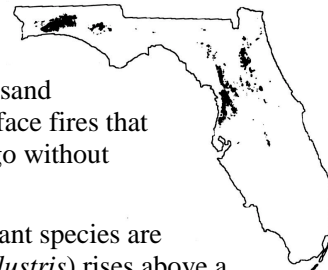


Will Sandhill Still Have a Home in Hernando?

Getting to know sandhill. What we call the sandhill ecosystem was once common in Hernando along xeric or dry sand ridges supporting high pine plant communities. Our remaining sandhills can be found occurring on rolling uplands and sand ridges. Sandhills are “pyric” or fire controlled, and require frequent, low-intensity surface fires that occur every one to ten years to maintain their open character. The longer these areas go without burning, the more prevalent the oaks, and the fewer the understory plants remain.



The sandhill's high pine community grades into longleaf pine flatwoods, and many plant species are common to both. In sandhill, a park-like woodland of stately longleaf pines (*Pinus palustris*) rises above a continuous cover of wiregrass (*Aristida stricta*) and other plants and grasses. The characteristic open canopy allows sunlight to reach the ground giving rise to a herbaceous ground cover featuring lopsided Indian grass (*Sorghastrum secundum*), greeneyes (*Berlandiera pumila*), goldenaster (*Chrysopsis scabrella*), blazing star (*Liatrix pauciflora*), paint brush (*Carphephorus corymbosus*), and sandhill milkweed (*Asclepias humistrata*), to name a few of the showiest. In scattered occasional clumps you will find deciduous oaks, most frequently turkey oak (*Quercus laevis*), along with persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*) and saw palmetto. On the state and federal endangered species list are the sandhill-endemic claspwing warea (*Warea amplexifolia*) and Carter's mustard (*W. carteri*). Sandhill communities also are home to sensitive animal species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise, Florida gopher frog, and eastern indigo Snake.

Where has all the sandhill gone? Once representing the largest forest type in the southeastern coastal plain, 90% of Florida's sandhill systems have disappeared over the last century. In 1936, about 7.6 million acres of forests dominated by longleaf pine were present in Florida. By 1987 there were only 950,000 acres (Taylor, 1998). It is estimated that sandhill originally covered 20 percent of Florida, covering much of the Panhandle and the northern two-thirds of the peninsula. Hernando is one of the few counties in peninsular Florida to be home to sandhill communities, and much of this is found on the Brooksville Ridge.

Well-drained soil and the open character have made it prime land for development, as well as agri-timber and citrus groves. Sandhill in our county that has dodged development or agricultural use typically has been transformed to xeric hammock by fire suppression. And there is worse news; in Hernando, the mature pines remaining are now threatened by the Southern Pine Beetle, which has infested over 2300 acres in the county. While the beetle prefers loblolly pine, when swarming the beetle is less discriminating, and will infest weakened longleafs as well.

Where you can see it. True sandhill is now hard to find. In order to preserve or restore sandhill, it must occupy large enough areas to be managed with fire, and it must have at least a minimal level of species diversity, which may eliminate many pasturelands from restoration.

In Hernando County, one of the best places to see sandhill is at the Nature Conservancy's Janet Butterfield Brooks Preserve. The fall flowers are spectacular, as those who have participated on our annual joint field trip with Hernando Audubon will attest. Weeki Wachee Preserve, Chassahowitzka Wildlife Management Area, Annutteliga Hammock and some areas of the state forest also contain expanses of sandhill which are being preserved or restored.

To see sandhill restoration in action, visit Chinsegut Nature Center. Decades of fire suppression on this 480-acre property had allowed the pines of the sandhill to be engulfed by a dense growth of evergreen oaks. Over time, sandhill plants once common to the property were shaded and pushed out. To those who know the Chinsegut property, it is immediately evident that that removal of the oaks has been largely accomplished, revealing rolling hills of pine once hidden from view. After infested pines are removed, the next stage is perhaps the most rewarding. Native plant aficionados will watch nature, with the help of man, reintroduce wiregrass and other sandhill plant species, until the property is once more home to the color and diversity of the “real Florida.”

by Cindy Liberton

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