

15 MINUTES

Waiting for something to happen with Henry David Thoreau

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“Enjoy your walk!” a sign at the entrance to Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve demanded, the only voice thus far on an otherwise silent Sunday morning at the south Fort Myers nature park.

At 8 a.m. light filtered through tall, delicate trees stuck almost quivering in the ground, as if they were skinny, bushy-topped spears dropped straight down from the sky. The boardwalk was almost empty. One man stood on a pier in shorts and a tanktop. He watched a bird bob to the surface in a pond and make a line across the water towards another bird.

As the boardwalk wound into the woods, a sign suddenly appeared and instructed, “Look behind you into the woods about 30 ft. Can you find the tree that is pink on one side?”



Wow. Yes. Thanks for pointing that out. “The pink plant life is called lichen...”

Another sign showed where you stand in the boardwalk’s overall scheme of things (“You are here”). Another more inconspicuous one contained a quote by Henry David

Thoreau: “You learn that if you sit down in the woods and wait something happens.”

Valerie Thomas, 51, was doing something like that. She had stopped in the middle of the boardwalk near a place called “Wood Duck Pond,” just down the way from the amphitheater. She was gazing into the woods.

Thomas said she was heeding Henry David Thoreau’s suggestion on her visit to the preserve this morning.

“So many times people are in such a hurry and if people would just stop,” she said. “I saw a squirrel eating the wings off a maple leaf.”

Something in the woods chirped.

“That’s the squirrel right there,” she said. Something else in the woods barked.

“That was a barred owl,” Thomas said. “They’re doing that for you...See, if you’d been clomping along you might not have heard that.”

Somewhere was the deep buzz of a distant airplane.

“I love to be here, it’s beautiful. It’s gorgeous. I have to take my son to school most mornings, so when I don’t I like to be here. You feel like you’re by yourself even though you can hear the cars.”

To her the sound of traffic will not distract from the beauty of nature, or Florida’s noticeable seasonal changes.

“Seasons are subtle, very subtle in Florida,” she said. “But you can see, if you really just stop and look. Have you noticed? Have you noticed all of a sudden what’s going on? ...Red-shouldered Hawks have been seen getting amorous...So it’s spring. Everywhere else it’s winter, but here things are really starting to happen.”



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTOS BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Valeri Thomas, heeding Henry David Thoreau’s suggestion, on her visit to the preserve.

The amorous hawks may also be spotted on powerlines while driving, she said.

Thomas has lived in South Florida for over 30 years, is originally from Ohio and about one year ago quit her job — which was no longer worth its cost in stress, she said. After that, she started keeping a closer eye on the wildlife beyond the path.

“I always liked to hike, but never really attended to it,” she said. “There’s so many cool places to go that are right here close that people don’t take advantage of. But everyone’s not a nature freak like I am.”

She is also married and has a 12 year-old son. They live in Estero.

“Down there in Mallville,” she said. “God almighty, do we really need all those stores?

People can’t buy all that stuff in 100 years.”

She and her family are trying to sell their house and move to Gainesville.

“Worst time in the history of the Universe to sell a house,” she said.

For those new to bird watching, Thomas recommends traveling light.

“All you really need is a halfway decent pair of binoculars and probably a bird guide,” she said. “And if it’s your first time, go with someone who can identify some of the sounds.”

Nearing 9 a.m. more walkers appeared, but no power walkers. Thankfully, that’s not allowed at the Slough Preserve (as a sign at the front entrance said, one of 10 rules). Visitors here are encouraged to take their time. ■

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