

Journalism Writing Sample
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“Lake Alice”
February 2003

It’s February, the dead of winter, which means it’s cold, cold, *cold* outside—sometimes it goes all the way down into the *20s* here in North Central Florida. *Brrr!*

But it’s also the month of Valentine’s Day and love and romance and all that kind of mushy stuff, so if you think you can brave the chill, grab your sweetie, bundle up, and head on out to the shores of Lake Alice on the UF campus.

Lake Alice? you say? For Valentine’s?

Hell yes!

Lake Alice isn’t just that big alligator showcase you have to drive around when you’re going to the Rec Center or the Harn Museum (last month’s Free Gainesville site, which you of course visited, right? *Right?*)—it also happens to be one of the most romantic spots in town, at least at this time of year, as we’ll soon see. And best of all, it’s free, so you can save all your hard-earned cash for a fancy dinner afterwards, which will help you score big points with your S.O. You’re welcome.

Let’s get the technical stuff out of the way right now: Lake Alice, with a surface area of around 73 acres, is UF’s main watershed. Since 1948, UF has pumped treated sewage effluent into the Lake’s wetlands system for final biofiltration.

Feeling romantic yet?

The eastern end of Lake Alice—which actually stretches all the way to the parking garage on North-South Drive—is a largely impenetrable swamp and marsh; the western part is nestled in your standard mesic hammock forest of oak, ash, loblolly pine, magnolia, hickory, sweetgum, dogwood, cherry laurel, etc. The north and west shores support the best scenic potential; a sidewalk parallels Museum Drive, roughly following the shoreline from the Medicinal Gardens to the new Baughman Meditation Center.

The Medicinal Gardens used to be a lot more impressive than they are now—they haven’t been kept up for at least ten years, thanks to budget cuts and/or general lack of interest—so don’t expect anything like what you’ll find at Kanapaha Botanical Gardens. Instead, it feels more like somebody’s back yard these days, but to me that is precisely its charm. Because there’s no longer anything special to draw people here, you’re almost assured of having the place completely to yourself as you wander the quiet paths and cross the bridges over the little streams; I wish I had a back yard like this. Continue along the paths into the woods, and after a little exploring you’ll find yourself at an overlook that offers a spectacular view across the Lake to the Baughman Center. Come out here in the early morning sometime—seeing the rising sun flash off the Baughman Center’s bevels of reflective glass and out onto the water is better than any fireworks display.

From the Gardens, head west along the sidewalk and you’ll eventually see the Bat House, home to one of the largest colonies of Mexican free-tailed bats in the Southeast—about 60,000 of them! These bats, along with a smaller colony of Southeastern bats, eat 30-60 million insects every night. That’s more than 600 pounds of mosquitoes and other pests. Several years ago, the UF Administration in their infinite wisdom decided it would be a great idea to tear down the Bat House and the surrounding Community Garden to build a new 176-unit dorm on Lake Alice’s fragile shores. Fortunately, public outcry led them to abandon this brilliant plan.

Dozens of people gather here every evening just after sunset but before total darkness to watch the bats emerge from the House for their nightly feeding frenzy. The exodus only takes ten or fifteen minutes, so make sure you get here early or you'll miss it. Of course, just like most of us the bats don't exactly enjoy getting out of bed when it's cold, so spring and summer are actually the best times for bat watching.

Continuing around the bend now, we come to the new Baughman Meditation Center, situated at Lake Alice's westernmost point—right on what used to be my favorite picnic spot. I have to admit I was a little upset when the University started building something here, but I don't mind a bit anymore. It's hard to feel anything but *inspired* when you see this building—its soaring, cathedral-like glass and cypress walls and copper roof reflect the natural setting perfectly; inside, the travertine marble and pine planking and the gorgeous view lead one easily into peaceful contemplation. When you start wiggling out toward the end of the semester, this is a great place to come to get yourself together.

The Baughman Center has already become an extremely popular spot for weddings. It's also a great place to study, or to just sit and think, to relax and watch the Lake and the trees. . . . This is without a doubt the most beautiful and majestic structure on campus. The University finally did something right. (Of course, it *was* someone else's idea.)

It's time now for the grand finale of our tour, and the reason you're out in the cold on Valentine's Day. Backtrack to the parking area across from the Bat House; here the shoreline juts out into the Lake, providing the best view of everything. Two small islands here (they're artificial, but you wouldn't know that just by looking at them) give the alligators in Lake Alice a safe place for basking in the warmer seasons. You probably won't see any gators now, but what you will see more than makes up for that, I promise.

Lake Alice is a popular spot for more species of birds than I can name. Limpkins, bitterns, gallinules, bobolinks, ducks, and egrets just for starters (so I'm told by a bird-savvy friend). Some of these are year-round residents, some are migratory, but no matter what you can always find something to watch.

From October or November through about April, though, you can see the best show of the year. Hundreds of white ibises overwinter here. They spend their days off doing bird things, but as the sun starts to go down they flock back to the trees on the islands. Starting about an hour before sunset the brilliantly white ibises glide gracefully in over the Lake, groups of eight or a dozen or more flying in formation, wheeling in the air, dipping down suddenly to slow themselves, then rising up at the last moment to find a branch. Dozens of anhingas—ungainly darker birds that look like cormorants—glide in as well, although much less gracefully; their awkward landings more often than not shake loose their brethren, who then take off with an imperious ratcheting sound to circle the tree once or twice as they look for a new roost—and invariably unseat someone else when they settle on it.

Before long, the branches and the islands are covered in white—and as the sun sinks lower, its slanting rays strike the mass of white feathers and the trees and ground light up with an unearthly golden radiance, set off by the fainter, redder glow of the sunlit trees on the far shore. This is a truly wondrous sight, but it doesn't last long, so if you're planning this as a surprise for someone, head out a day or two beforehand to double-check your timing.

Of course, once the sun drops behind the trees, and the sky—and the ibises—start to go dark, it's time to head across the street to stake out a position for bat watching. And once the bats have all gone out for dinner, it's your turn. But be careful—after standing in the cold, that fancy restaurant and that fine food will feel extra cozy, and after sights like these, that expensive bottle of wine might just go to your heads and lead to some extra-special Valentine's shenanigans for you later on.

Here's hoping, anyway.

JAMES C. BASSETT

503.964.8873

www.jamescbassett.com

jcassett@gmail.com

“Boulware Springs and the Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail”

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You’re not fooling anyone, you know.

In spite of your New Year’s resolutions, everyone knows you’ve been a lump all winter. I know January was cold, but that’s no excuse. I’m sorry to have to break the news to you, but playing BMX on your PlayStation does *not* count as riding your bike—which means the most exercise you’ve actually gotten since October has been walking to the Lil Champ for a bag of Cheetos and a 12-pack of light beer. Not good.

Well, the weather is turning nice again—it’s March, which around here means it’s already back up into the 80s—so hang up those excuses, get up off your flabby and couch-creased butt, and dust off that bike (the real one) or those rollerblades, because it’s time to hit the Trail!

Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail State Park stretches 16 miles along an old converted rail bed from (surprise!) Gainesville to Hawthorne, and runs through some of the prettiest and wildest scenery in the area, including Paynes Prairie and the Lochloosa Wildlife Management Area—and spring is the best time to see it. The Trail is paved the entire way for biking, skating, and hiking; for equestrians, a grassy horse trail runs alongside the paved pathway for most of the distance. It’s definitely worth visiting, even if you can’t make the whole 32-mile round trip.

And best of all, it is—of course—completely free.

The Gainesville trailhead starts adjacent to Boulware Springs State Park and Historic Waterworks about 3 miles southeast of downtown. Boulware Springs, named for one of the area’s earliest white settlers—the name is pronounced “bull-wear” these days, although a recent article in the *Gainesville Sun* (motto: “We’re not a real newspaper, but we play one in Gainesville”) casts some doubt on the historical accuracy of this pronunciation—has been a part of Gainesville history quite literally from the very beginning.

In 1854 local citizens gathered at the springs to vote on relocating Alachua County’s seat from Newnansville; they voted that day to create a brand new city to serve as the county seat, and they voted to call the city “Gainesville.” In 1891 the burgeoning metropolis purchased the springs and built a pump house to provide water to the city’s residents, and in 1905 Gainesville’s future was secured when an offer of free water from Boulware Springs was pivotal in the State’s decision to locate the University of Florida here rather than in Lake City (in your face, Columbia County!). Of course, local Native Americans were making use of the springs and the 300,000 gallons of crystal-clear water it puts out every day from the Floridan Aquifer long before there was a Gainesville, or even white settlers, in the area—at least as early as 500 B.C.

In 1989, Boulware Springs was designated an American Water Landmark (betcha didn’t even know there was such a thing) and added to the National Register of Historic Places. GRU restored the original pump house, springs, and grounds for use as a public park. The State Park now boasts a picnic pavilion (complete with gas grill) overlooking the springs and pump house, and trail loops, in case the Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail seems too ambitious for you. The air-conditioned pump house can be rented out for weddings, etc., and has a full kitchen, function space, and handicap-accessible restrooms—as well as a fantastic view of the springs.

Even if you’re not into the exercise, it’s still worth driving out here just to walk around the springs. It’s beautiful, relaxing, and romantic—what more could you want? Well, how about fish? There are plenty living in the springs, including one old legend who’s at least 2-1/2 feet long, so it’s kind of like going to an aquarium, too. But be forewarned, you’re not allowed to swim in the springs, as inviting as they may be on, say, a sweltering summer Sunday afternoon. If you get caught in the water, expect a stern lecture from a Park Service ranger. Trust me. . . .

Once you strike out on the Trail, you’ll pass through forest, field, pine sandhills, and prairie—17 distinct natural communities in all, so I’m told—past sinkholes and over streams, and if you’re lucky you’ll see gators, deer, turtles, snakes, armadillos, hawks, and plenty of other wildlife. Remember, this is not a zoo; these are

JAMES C. BASSETT

503.964.8873

www.jamescbassett.com

jcbassett@gmail.com

wild animals, so be careful. The Sweetwater Overlook offers incredible views of what is probably the most picturesque scenery in North Central Florida. Sunsets here are absolutely stunning!

Be aware that in spite of the paved trail, this is truly a wilderness area, so be sure to save up enough energy to get yourself back home. There are no buses or cabs out here, so if you wear yourself out along the way, it's going to be a very unpleasant several miles back. If you're going to do anything more than a short jaunt, remember to bring along water and a snack. There are no vending machines out here. And aside from Boulware Springs, the only restrooms (and very primitive ones at that) are located at mile markers 1.0 and 6.6—but of course, this is the wilderness, so if you find yourself *really* needing to answer the call of nature, well, you know. . . . But hey—a lot of private land borders the Trail, so be cool, okay?

Hiking is permitted on the entire length of the Trail. Bicycling and rollerblading are allowed everywhere except on the La Chua Trail. Horses are allowed on the Trail except east of the Lochloosa trailhead; be advised that you will need to have current Coggins papers with you as proof of a Negative Coggins result. And for those who are into bloodsports, fishing is permitted from the bridges over Prairie Creek and Lochloosa Creek.

Once you get back to the Gainesville trailhead, there's still one more sight to see. Just inside the Boulware Springs Park entrance you'll find the new permanent facilities for Florida Wildlife Care, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the care and conservation of native Florida wildlife and habitat. While these wonderful people are involved in educating the public about how to live cooperatively with wildlife as urbanization and development encroach more and more upon natural habitats, FWC's primary mission is to care for injured and orphaned wildlife. If you've ever wanted to care for a bunch of cute, furry little baby squirrels, these are the people you need to talk to. They rely almost entirely on volunteers to do everything from fostering and caring for the animals to running the office and mowing the grass, so, seriously, get in touch with them.

Florida Wildlife Care operates in accordance with federal, state, and local laws; is permitted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; and they're working toward certification by the Florida Wildlife Rehabilitators Association and accreditation by the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council and the National Rehabilitators Association. These folks are serious about what they're doing, people, so lend a hand. It's probably the closest you'll ever get to real live wild animals (as opposed to ugly fake fiberglass Gators draped in the American flag or dressed as pizza delivery drones)!

The Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail and Boulware Springs are located at 3300 and 3400 SE 15th Street, respectively. Take University Avenue east past Waldo Road and take the right fork onto SR 20 (at Auto Zone), then turn right on SE 15th Street (at Fast Eddie's Funtastic Foods—I kid you not). The Parks are about 2 miles south on your right; if the road makes a hard left turn, you've gone about 1/4 mile too far. Both have plenty of parking; parking for horse trailers is available at the Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail.

To reach the Hawthorne trailhead, follow the signs on US 301 or CR 2080 out of Hawthorne. Equestrian access, with plenty of trailer parking, is only available at the Wildlife Management Area, 7209 SE 200th Drive.

Please note that all of these parking facilities are remote, and break-ins are fairly common, so keep valuables out of sight, or better yet, just leave them home. You won't need your Game Boy or MP3 player out here.

Boulware Springs is open 7 days a week from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. November-April and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. May-October. The Paynes Prairie portion of the Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail is open from 8 a.m. to sunset every day of the year. For information call 352-334-2170 or 352-334-2231.

For information about Florida Wildlife Care, call 352-371-4400 or drop by the center between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. any day, or email Volunteer Coordinator Shirley Mogensen at Shirleyiam@aol.com. The FWC website is located at <http://www.afn.org/~fwc/>.