

# Pristine Osceola site is headed for state's rare wilderness treasury

☐ If the land purchase is completed, one of the state's finest undisturbed sites will be preserved.

By Katherine Bouma

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

One of the few known U.S. territories of the rare caracara and other imperiled animals might soon be preserved, say state officials who are working to buy the Osceola County land.

The St. Johns River Water Management District board of directors voted recently to buy 8,792 acres of the Triple N Ranch in southeastern Osceola.

"There are few areas like it left in Florida," said Jim Cox, a biologist with the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. "Really, it's rare to find that large an area with trees that size."

The land, east of U.S. Highway 441, would connect the Bull Creek and Three Lakes wildlife management areas, scientists said.

The land is home to the headwaters of Crabgrass Creek, which is headwaters of the St. Johns River, officials said.

"We're generally in the water protection business," said Ray Bunton, director of the division of land acquisition for St. Johns. "You also get wildlife protection and habitat protection because they're all tied to the water."

In addition to caracara, a threatened bird of prey, the area is home

to gopher tortoises, swallow-tailed kites and a variety of carnivorous plants, scientists said.

"It's a really incredible site," said Katy NeSmith, a zoologist for the Florida Natural Areas Inventory.

The area also could support grasshopper sparrows and red-cockaded woodpeckers, NeSmith said. Both endangered species live at Three Lakes.

"The trees right now on the site are on the verge of being the earliest age possible for red-cockaded woodpeckers, about 70 years old," Cox said.

The ranchers who owned the land before recently selling to a Realtor managed it for quail hunting, using the prescribed burns the land needed, he said. Except for one part of the land, it isn't even suffering from the effects of cattle grazing, NeSmith said.

Outside public land, it's almost unheard of to find such a large tract of land that's in such good shape, biologists said.

Five land types that are increasingly rare in Florida coexist on the ranch: prairie marshes, cypress heads, hardwood swamps, dry prai-

ries and pine savanna, Cox said.

Although cypress harvesting could ruin parts of the swamp without notice at any time, the land is not immediately threatened by development, Cox said. That has allowed the state to get the land for \$920 an acre, a fraction of the price of precious land elsewhere in the state, he said.

"But I don't think any area in Florida is safe from development," Cox said.

The \$8.3 million sale must be approved by the Game and Fish commission and, because it uses Preservation 2000 funds, the Cabinet, said the agency's land acquisition coordinator, Bob Guido.

Game and Fish is slated to pay half the bill for the land and manage it. Cox said the land would be open to the public for hunting and a variety of recreational uses like camping, bird-watching and hiking.

"It's a great opportunity," Cox said. "There are few sites around the state that are even close to this."

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