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### **The Florida Wildlife Corridor: Archbold Biological Station important partner in science and conservation**

The Florida Wildlife Corridor team has just completed its third expedition. Unlike the team's first two 1,000-mile expeditions—Everglades to Okefenokee in 2012 and Glades to Gulf in 2015—which took 100 days and 70 days respectively, this recent Heartland to Headwaters adventure was a mini-trek lasting just one week, from April 15-22. Cheering on the team at their kick-off event were Archbold board members and staff. Archbold has been an important science and conservation partner for the Corridor since the beginning.

“Carlton Ward Jr. one of the Florida Wildlife Corridor leaders, was at Archbold when he first got the idea for the Corridor expeditions” remembers Dr. Hilary Swain, Executive Director at Archbold. “Carlton, a well-known conservation photographer, was at the Station attending a symposium on regional Black Bear biology. He became intrigued by the GPS collar data tracking male bears traveling hundreds of miles across the state, successfully using the patchwork of green spaces and intervening wildlife corridors made up of private and public lands. Joe Guthrie, a University of Kentucky graduate student and biologist on the Black Bear project who was working at Archbold at the time, talked about how highways like US 27 and I-4 were major obstacles for bears. Sitting in the back of the room, amazed by how little the public knew or understood about bear and panther movements in Florida, Carlton had his 'light-bulb moment'. His idea—to mount a 'human-powered' expedition, literally following in the path of bears and other large animals like panthers derived from scientific data, and to share the human stories

from these expeditions to inform and inspire the public about the need for broad swaths of land connecting Florida's green spaces.”

Ward recruited Joe Guthrie and fellow conservationist Mallory Lykes Dimmitt to round out the expedition team. Together, they pored over Archbold’s computer mapping data and planned their route for the first expedition in 2012. They started in Everglades National Park and, after one thousand miles and one hundred days of hiking, biking, riding, paddle boarding, and kayaking, they ended in Okefenokee National Park in Georgia. Two of those 2012 expedition days were spent at Archbold. Three years later in 2015, their second expedition completed another epic 1,000-mile journey, one that took them from just south of Orlando and around Florida's Forgotten Coast to the Alabama border.

In 2018, there wasn't time for a full-blown expedition so the Florida Wildlife Corridor team decided on a shorter journey, but one with huge corridor significance. All of their expeditions have highlighted the need to protect an interconnected statewide wildlife corridor, but for 2018 the team decided "to navigate and document a critical chokepoint of the Corridor that can possibly still be saved." They focused on the need to protect lands west of Orlando, the last remaining patches of green here that connect north and south Florida. And they highlighted where more wildlife crossings are needed in this section under I-4 to allow assist the large animals that move north from Highlands County, in the headwaters of the Everglades, and have to cross I-4 on their way to the Green Swamp and back again.

Archbold continues to be excited about its long association with the Florida Wildlife Corridor, ever since the moment of inception. Three Archbold board members, Chairman Mary Hufty, Lela Love, and Vevie Lykes Dimmitt were present for the celebratory kick-off launch of the 2018 *Heartland to Headwaters: Corridor at a Crossroads* which was launched from The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve in Kissimmee. They were accompanied by Executive Director Hilary Swain, Education Coordinator Dustin Angell, Research Assistant Emily Angell, and Development Director Deborah Pollard. A week later Vevie Dimmitt and Hilary Swain were also present at Little Everglades Ranch near Dade City, to greet the team at the end of their trip. The expeditioners looked exhausted but exhilarated to have completed their adventure. Mallory Dimmitt described their first few days as "very heavy-going, through lands that had not been managed for decades, presenting some the most difficult, impenetrable hiking they had experienced on any expedition." Trailing gallantly in their wake was the Grizzly Creek film crew with the added challenge of carrying their heavy equipment through the dense thickets.

Lindsay Cross, executive director of the Florida Wildlife Corridor explains its mission and methods: “Using a science-based approach, on-the-ground knowledge of the Corridor, and the support of thousands of followers throughout the state and nation, the Florida Wildlife

Corridor now embarks on its most important journey—to accelerate the rate of conservation in Florida by 10% annually in order to protect 300,000 acres within the Corridor by the end of 2020.” Archbold’s research, conducted on multiple sites throughout the Corridor, have made it a vital Corridor partner. Swain explains, “Our science drives conservation action by providing long-term data and significant results to conservation organizations such as the Florida Wildlife Corridor.” In addition, the 20,000 acres managed by Archbold, including scrub habitats of the Station and the grasslands of Buck Island Ranch, are a critical part of the Corridor, connecting some of Florida’s most precious conservation lands.

The Florida Wildlife Corridor has been such a successful strategy for engaging Floridians with conservation and to promote wildlife connectivity. Two films and two books from the first and the second expeditions attracted attention from National Geographic, PBS and news outlets throughout the state and beyond. The Corridor has expansive and fully engaged social media outreach. Perhaps their most impressive feat has been creating dozens of new partnerships throughout Florida, including agencies, policy makers, businesses, conservation groups, foundations, and ranching families. Look out for new videos and articles coming from this third expedition. Their Florida Wildlife Corridor expeditions are this upcoming generation’s epic Florida adventures. Their voices, echoing from the swamps and woodlands across this state, are a riveting call to action.



**Photo 1: Archbold staff and board members joined with other supporters of the Florida Wildlife Corridor for the expedition kickoff event last month. Photo by Alex Morrison.**



**Photo 2: Florida Wildlife Corridor expeditioners Mallory Lykes Dimmitt (left), Joe Guthrie (middle), and Carlton Ward (right) at the expedition kickoff event. Photo by Dustin Angell.**



**Photo 3: Carlton Ward visited Buck Island Ranch last fall to photograph some of the research projects on site. Here he takes a break and chats with interns Jaide Allenbrand (left) and Avarna Jain (middle). Photo by Dustin Angell.**



**Photo 4: Carlton Ward at work photographing wildlife research on Buck Island Ranch, a conservation easement site, and a part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Photo by Dustin Angell.**