

Enchanted Forest, Endangered Forest

Written by Jim W. Harper, BT Contributor
February 2015

This sprawling regional park offers a glimpse of life before development



The protestors carefully painted butterflies and pine trees onto posters while relaxing under Shelter No. 2. Before them an open grassy field and clear sky framed the forested area in the distance that was the object of their affection: pine rocklands.

Larry and Penny Thompson Memorial Park was the perfect spot for activists to gather before the “Rally for the Rocklands,” held January 17 near Zoo Miami. That afternoon they walked alongside an undeveloped forest of pine rocklands slated for a large development anchored by a Walmart.

The problem with development here is that pine rocklands is one of the rarest ecosystems in the world. A particular type of forest with Miami oolite limestone near the surface, pine rocklands exist only in Cuba, the Bahamas, and Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

Recent research has placed several of the forest inhabitants on the federally endangered species list, and one special insect, the Miami tiger beetle, is known only from the few hundred acres around the zoo.

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With the battle underway between the beetle and the bulldozer, you should probably hurry to see the rockland forest.



Larry and Penny Thompson Memorial Park offers a chance to experience what Miami used to look like. On one side of the entryway street are houses, and on the other side is open forest. Before mass urbanization, pine rocklands covered much of eastern Miami-Dade County, but today only two percent of the habitat remains.

Much of the 275 acres in Thompson Memorial Park is preserved pine rocklands. The ecosystem is easy to identify by its signature slash pines and thick underbrush, here dominated by saw palmettos. Many paths through the park reveal the sharp and uneven limestone just below the greenery.

Want to live in the forest? Pitch a tent or drive your RV into the park's campground. It is the only full hookup campground operated by Miami-Dade County Parks and Recreation. A night per tent costs \$17, and one of the 240 RV spaces costs \$34 per night.

The park is named after the late couple Larry and Penny Thompson; he (1911-1973) was a longtime *Miami Herald* columnist, and she (1917-1975) was a champion of women's aviation (and made frequent appearances in his columns). The campground's office features an historical display of personal memorabilia.

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The clean, modern campsite looks full, and many of the RV residents appear to have settled down for the winter. They're growing tomato plants, riding three-wheeled bikes, and hanging out damp laundry. At 2:00 p.m., they scurry to the recreation building for an ice-cream social.

The campground is blooming now with mango and lychee trees planted decades ago as an agricultural experiment by the University of Miami, which still owns some property nearby (last year it sold 88 acres to Ram Realty, the potential Walmart developer). Signs warn visitors to avoid the fruit trees because a contractor collects the fruit. But on dark summer nights, mangoes must go missing.

Fences separate the campground from the larger and more natural areas of the park. You're unlikely to see many people here because of its large size and relatively remote location, six miles southwest of Kendall. Area visitors pay for Zoo Miami and miss the equally large and free adjacent park with only native inhabitants.

You probably won't see any endangered species either; they're mostly small and, well, rare. The endangered plants may require an expert's identification. Only a few hundred of the funky Florida bonneted bats remain; it's considered the rarest mammal in the United States. Numbers are unknown for the Eastern indigo snake, the Bartram's scrub-hairstreak butterfly, and the Florida leafwing butterfly. But they're in there, somewhere. For now.

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A large freshwater lake creates a focal point for the park's more human elements. For unknown reasons, a sandy beach and play area are closed until summer, and several large structures, including a waterslide, stand inaccessible behind large fences. These facilities charge per visitor, but entering the park is free.

Families congregate around the playground and pavilions near the lake's southern border. Rent one of the nine shelters for under \$200 per day. Watch little black coots swim near the reedy shoreline in the clear water.

Hordes of turkey vultures congregate and "sunbathe" on the closed beach. Look up, and you'll see dozens of them circling all around the park. These giant scavengers rule the roost. Or do they smell something at the zoo?

Around the lake, runners enjoy a clearly marked 5K trail, and high schools and fundraisers hold cross-country events here. The mostly paved trail, carved out of the pine rocklands, is bumpy and rocky.

Even better, unpaved and unmarked trails wind through the woods. Don't worry about getting

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lost, as you're never more than about a quarter-mile from some marker of civilization, such as a restroom. The trails along the park's southern border buzz with the passing traffic on Eureka Drive.



With a little persistence, you can lose yourself in nature. Take time to listen to the wind, watch the buzzards fly, and touch a small pine tree. The brilliant green of the seedling trees is a beautiful reminder of nature's constant renewal.

The maintenance of pine rocklands is not effortless. Look at the charred trunks of living palm and pines trees, and you begin to appreciate the necessity of fire. Prescribed burns help keep these isolated patches of pine rocklands healthy.

Other nearby pine rocklands are not nearly as healthy or beautiful, because invasive plants have crowded out the native species and degraded the habitat. Critics of the Ram Realty site claim that the University of Miami willfully neglected the property to make its sale more palatable.

Larry and Penny Thompson Memorial Park proves that pine rocklands can thrive when protected. The only really visible problems here are stray cats and large amounts of litter. Clean up the trash, educate the public, and install recycling bins and more trashcans -- and this park

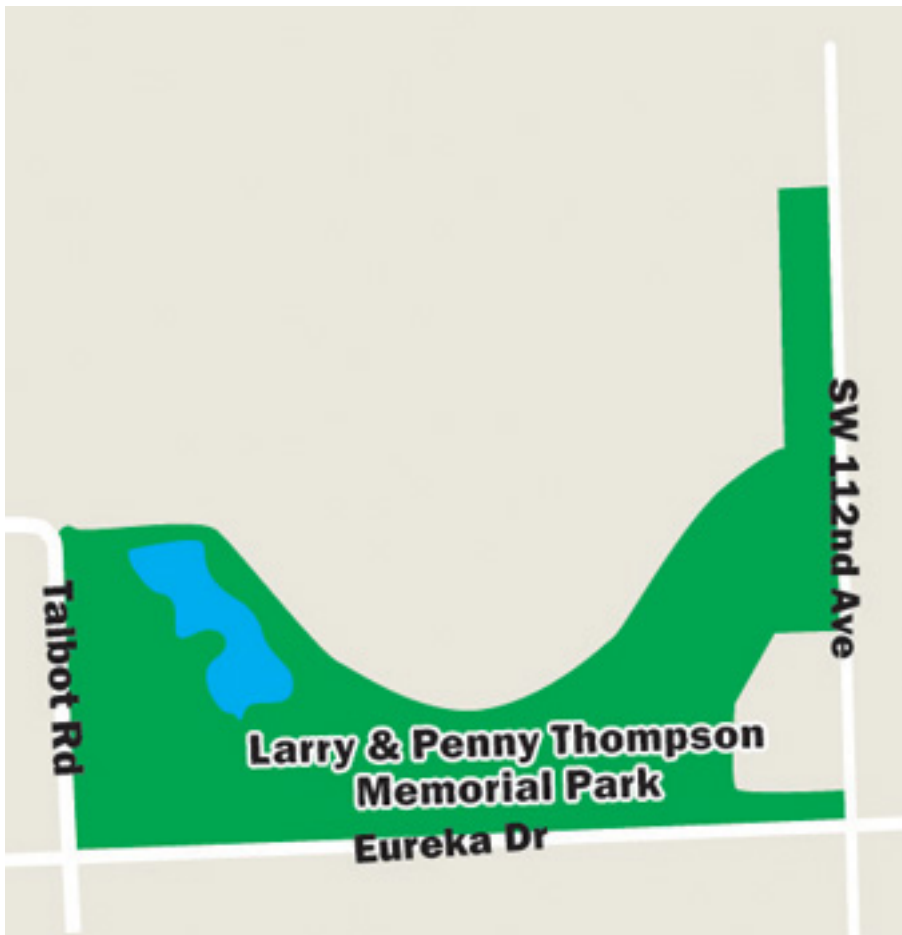
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would be close to perfect.

Perfection for nature lovers, though, would be protection of the whole area.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com



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Miami, FL 33177
305-232-1049

Park Rating



□

Hours: Sunrise to sunset

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|-------------------------|-----------|
| Picnic Tables | : Yes |
| Barbecues | : Yes |
| Picnic pavilions | : Yes |
| Tennis courts | : No |
| Athletic fields | : No |
| Night lighting | : Yes |
| Swimming pool | : Yes |
| Playground | : Yes |
| Special features | : Camping |