An Enchanted Place – Boyd Hill Nature Preserve

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“I do not understand how anyone can live without one small place of enchantment to turn to.”
— Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

From a small island in the southern edges of Lake Maggiore, one can see the urban skyline in the distance across the shimmering, blue-gray water. Though close, the city seems far away, for this is a place of respite from the demands of daily life. Here one can rest in the shade of old oaks dripping with Spanish moss, in the company of Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons. Alligators watch balefully, their eyes just above the water line, and moorhens call from among the bulrushes.

Just a few miles south of downtown St. Petersburg, one of west-central Florida’s booming coastal cities, is a relatively unknown city park called Boyd Hill Nature Preserve. Consisting of 245 acres along the shore of Lake Maggiore and close to the southern tip of Pinellas County -- where the currents of Tampa Bay run under the Sunshine Skyway and out to the Gulf of Mexico -- this park is, indeed, an enchanted place.

For those who have found it, Boyd Hill can be a refuge in an urbanized and densely populated county. Entering through its large wooden gates — left open for the public during the pandemic of 2020 — one immediately feels the cares of the world fall away. The main trail leads through mixed forest of stately oaks and slash pine, and meanders along the lake shore (Figure 1). Crossing the bridge to the marsh path, there are likely to be baby alligators lounging in the reeds, with a watchful mother nearby. Night Herons and egrets fish along the shore; anhinga dry their wings in the branches of trees. An attentive visitor can see turtles swimming beneath the still surface of the water.
Figure 1: Path through the wild coffee, beneath pines and Spanish Moss; April 2019.
The swamp path is lined with Bald Cypresses, their knees rising above the muddy ground. In the rainy season, this wetland is a shimmering, living pool, where water moccasins sun themselves on downed trees, and otters frolic under the boardwalk. Look up, for among the trees, a yellow rat snake may be resting.

Further into the park, the path becomes wilder, lined with tumbles of firebush and wild coffee, wax myrtle, sword ferns and muhly grass. Deeper into the oak hammock, the trail crosses a stream where raccoons are often seen fishing, and if one is lucky, an armadillo waddles determinedly by — urgently off to do important armadillo things. The trail opens into a pine forest, where trees of impressive height reach upwards, and owls rest, unseen, in their branches. Box turtles can also be found along the edges of cool, shaded trails, along with one of Florida’s most common snakes, the Black Racer. Lucky visitors might experience an encounter with one of the most endangered snakes in the state, the illusive, iridescent Indigo snake.

The southern edge of the park contains a scrub habitat, open, hotter. Ospreys, recognized by the distinctive black mask across their eyes, build their platform nests atop dead trees, returning to the same nesting site each year. Magnificent in flight, their eerie cries fill the air as they circle overhead, before heading to the water to hunt for fish. The sandy soil is home to numerous gopher tortoise burrows, and a hiker can often see these endangered reptiles, with their thick shells and leathery skin, moving slowly through the underbrush in search of soft leaves. This is old Florida in all its diverse beauty: stark, verdant, alive.

A hike through Boyd Hill can take a half an hour, or several hours, depending on one’s whim. The flat, easy trails meander from the lake, swamps and marsh habitats, through the pine flatwoods, oak hammocks and scrub. There are occasional benches for resting, and water stations.

A final stop on the way out is the live bird aviary, where some 13 birds of prey — all injured and unable to be returned to the wild — live in large, airy cages. The most famous resident, perhaps, is Abiaka, a Southern Bald Eagle who has lived at the park since he was a youngster.

Boyd Hill is an oasis in a densely populated, urban county. Its protected wild spaces allow humans a respite from their hectic, stressful lives, and a chance to feel our close connection once again to this precious land.