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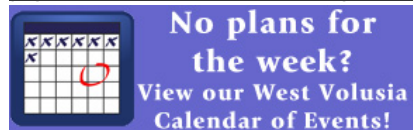


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## Development: Who watches out for wildlife?

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Submitted by Editor on Wed, 01/31/2018 - 4:53pm



**CRANE LANE** — Two Florida sandhill cranes forage along Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Beltway just north of the entrance to Victoria Gardens. They spent hours in the area Jan. 29. The annual environmental-management assessment required of Victoria Park developer The Kolter Group was completed in November 2017. This assessment revealed the crane population is healthy due to plenty of wetland nesting areas within Victoria Park's boundaries.

**BEACON PHOTO/ERIKA WEBB**



**HIGH WATER** — As more rain ushered in another cold front Jan. 29, water rushes south along the fence separating a Victoria Park preserve from the east shoulder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Beltway on DeLand's east side. The area lies west of a developing section of Victoria Gardens. A November assessment of Victoria's site-management practices revealed excess rainfall has affected some of the wildlife-dependent habitats.

**BEACON PHOTO/ERIKA WEBB**

*Editor's note: This is one in a series of stories on the effects of development in Victoria Park and elsewhere in southeast DeLand. Our next story will look at development's effect on the threatened gopher tortoise, which is protected by state law, as well as other animals not protected by law.*

Topping many people's list of objections to rampant development is the inevitability of displacing and imperiling wildlife.

Opponents point to mass wildlife casualties — both immediate and eventual — that result from clear-cutting thousands of acres and filling low-lying areas with sand.

A year ago, earthmoving equipment began to dump many feet of sand on property near Blue Lake Hills that had been clear-cut in preparation for development in Victoria Trails. The project abutted two sides of the 2.5 acres Cindy and Rajeev Bakrania call home.

The Bakranias, who chose the spot for wildlife-watching, were distraught.

Imagining what might have happened to the animals that lived in the woods that were ravaged brought their neighbor Katrina Collum to tears.

Like the Bakranias, Collum and her husband, Terry Collum, also took great delight in glimpsing deer, birds, rabbits and other inhabitants of the woods near their home.

Cindy Bakrania could not prove the empty, cracked tortoise shell she found on her property was a circumstantial victim of the clear-cutting machinery's melee. But her heart could not ignore the possibility, she said.

Victoria Trails construction continues. Meanwhile, plans are steaming ahead for Victoria Oaks, with 580 or so homes at the corner of Blue Lake Avenue and Taylor Road, and Sawyer's Landing, with 92 more in the vicinity.

Other than neighbors who protest as project after project is approved, who's watching out for the wildlife?

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and St. Johns River Water Management District get annual reports, as required by the voluminous Site Mitigation and Management Plan that's part of the Victoria Park Development of Regional Impact approved by DeLand and Lake Helen in 1999.

Before the DRI was approved, environmental consultants Modica and Associates of Clermont conducted studies and surveys of the wildlife whose habitat was destined to become Victoria Park.

Their work was used by the permitting agencies — the Water Management District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and FWC — to create the Site Mitigation and Management Plan and shape the DRI.

The plan addresses wetlands, woodlands and protected wildlife species, including the Florida scrub jay, Eastern indigo snake and gopher tortoise.

According to the plan:

Dredging and filling would occur in 15 percent of the total wetlands within the project limits. Some would be entirely drained and filled, others partially.

These impacts to the wetlands would involve "small, disturbed wetlands ... dominated by carpet grass, an invasive species," the plan states. The more-pristine wetlands would be preserved.

Ultimately, 32.5 acres of Victoria Park's total 215 acres of wetlands would be impacted. Carpet grass had adversely affected less than one-half of an acre within Victoria Park property limits.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the time said Victoria Park, which was planned to add more than 4,000 homes on nearly 2,000 acres, "is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Florida scrub jay or Eastern indigo snake."

Gopher tortoises and scrub jays are classified as "threatened" by the FWC, which annually assesses the habitat-quality and management practices of Victoria Park.

In November 2017, Orlando-based Miller Legg, working for the Victoria Park Community Council, completed the required annual habitat-assessment report that's provided to FWC and the Water Management District.

The company reported that land-management practices, such as mowing and other light mechanical clearing, have kept the preserve area attractive to wildlife inhabitants. This year's report did note, however, that the preserve had been affected by high water levels attributed to Hurricane Irma, and poaching of saw-palmetto berries.

Only one scrub jay was observed during two-day monitoring of the species, according to the report, which noted the healthy bird was using areas mowed two years ago. Miller Legg said ongoing mowing "will mostly assist in maintaining optimal habitat for gopher tortoises, but will also provide significant management value for jays."

The report also noted bush-hogging and dry-drum chopping decrease understory density and overhead canopy, maintaining a healthy ratio of scrub oaks to open space for optimal scrub-jay nesting.

Miller Legg also completed a Sandhill Crane Nesting Report for 2017, which is required to maintain Victoria Park's permits from the FWC and Water Management District, determining that "human disturbance is minimal to crane nesting connected with this Project."

The firm will continue to monitor Victoria Park, checking rainfall and water levels, and evaluating the maintenance needs based on site conditions, according to the report.

"The Victoria Park Community Council is dedicated to working with the responsible agencies for support in management decisions and is following agency recommendations to re-evaluate and re-establish a prescribed fire program in the near future," the report states.

Within the document are photos of incidentally sighted wildlife, including a gopher tortoise along the power-line easement, as well as a fox squirrel and a scrub jay near the golf course.

"The wetlands of the Victoria Park Community continue to provide feeding and nesting habitat for Florida sandhill cranes and several additional state and/or federally listed wetland dependent bird species," the report states. "We look forward to reporting on the continuing success of the cranes within the Victoria Park Community in the future."

#### **Victoria Park conservation by the numbers**

**1,859**

Acres in Victoria Park

**873**

Acres set aside for conservation. This includes 244 acres for recreation, including golf courses and parks, along with 191 acres in sandhill-crane habitat, 182 in wetlands, 154 in scrub-jay habitat, 110 in gopher-tortoise habitat, 60 acres of lakes and 40 acres for stormwater management. (The numbers add up to 981 acres because some of the acreage is included in more than one category.)

"Although the permittee has not provided sufficient site-specific details to describe fully the land-management plan, we affirm that habitat improvement is a worthy concept. Future construction permits will be required to implement specific land-management measures and provide a maintenance schedule prior to undertaking wetland impacts."

— **The St. Johns River Water Management District, in a April 2000 letter to the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council about the Victoria Park Site Mitigation and Management report**

"The St. Johns River Water Management District "found that the project's conceptual design has minimized wetland impacts, and that the conceptual mitigation will preclude unacceptably adverse impacts to wildlife ..."

— **The East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, in a May 2000 letter to then-DeLand Mayor David Rigsby**

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