

Winter Visitor Lends Helping Hand In Preserve

by Sharon Millian

Walt Johnson is a snowbird. When the cold winds blow in northern Ohio, he heads south to Florida, where he lives out the winter months in a home in East Lake Woodlands. But even before he has gotten here, he has already scheduled his time to the Brooker Creek Preserve. Johnson volunteers for the preserve for two mornings a week, three or four hours each day. He has volunteered at the preserve for about eight years now, maintaining the trails and helping with the animaltracking project.

"Every time we go out it is something different," says Johnson. "I get a lot of enjoyment out of helping out. It is such a unique place. People should realize what a great thing it is to have all that land set aside."

Johnson says he and the other volunteers work to pick up on the trails and kill the exotic plants, spray them and cut them down. "What we are really trying to do there is keep it a preserve, not a park," he says. "The preserve is primarily for the plants and animals, but we're trying to keep the trails open so people can see the nature. "We have seen tracks of a bobcat, and we have seen a lot of deer," he says. "Volunteers do not have to live here all year," says Jeanne Johnson.

"Walt returns faithfully to us each year in the winter," says Jeanne Johnson, the administrative support supervisor. "He chooses to volunteer when he is here in Florida, rather than sit back and enjoy the mild weather from a golf cart." "Our bimonthly volunteer newsletter keeps seasonal volunteers interested and informed about what is happening at the preserve," she says. "I have seasonal volunteers who e-mail me their return date, and that enables me to schedule their volunteer activities so that they can take advantage of the time they have as soon as they return."

Most of the volunteers at the preserve become quickly attached to its natural beauty. It keeps them coming back for more. "It's the real Florida," says Walt Johnson. " The beaches are nice and I enjoy playing golf a little bit, but I think that if that was all you did, you would miss out on what is really happening in Florida."

