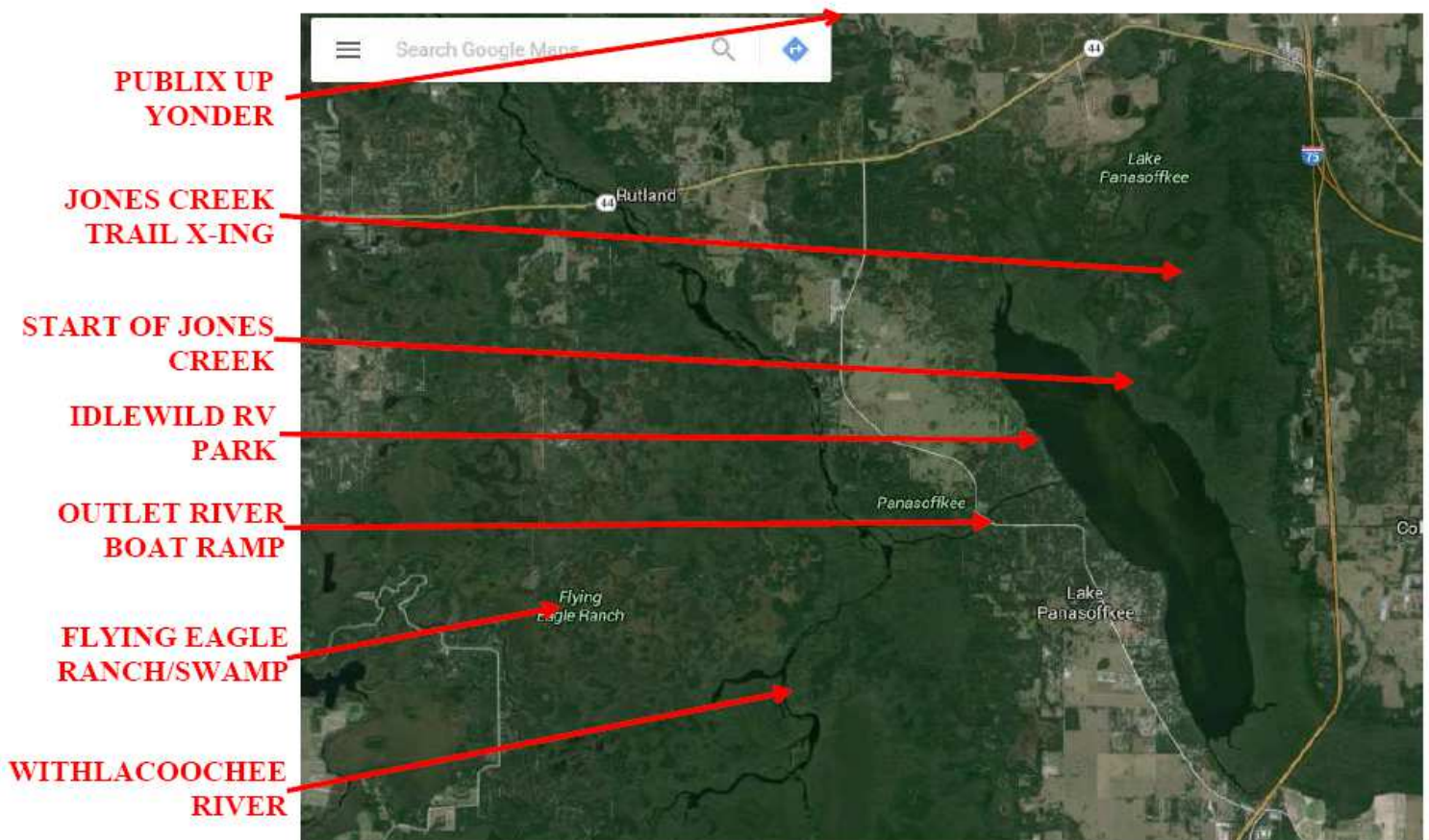


Lake Panasoffkee. Although I'm still not certain if it's pronounced pana-sof(t)-key or pana-soof-key, as is often the case with these phonetic, anglicized translations of the original Indian names. I had checked off a few major deadlines work-wise and had a couple other to-do's push out, so found myself 3:00pm Friday afternoon in the awkward position of being temporarily caught up. So I start scanning the map for a paddling trip and run across Lake Pan, or more specifically, some travel logs of kayaking up Little Jones Creek. Their put-in point was the Idlewild Lodge on the west shore of the lake, which I call to make sure you can just pay to launch a boat, but then ask if there are any rv sites available. There are. I stop short of reserving one, but tell him I'll probably show up in the morning with my trailer and will take a site for the night. I've tried to get the trailer setup so all I have to do is backup, hookup, and go. Except for it having a dedicated pot to boil water in with a vegetable steamer, I'm there. I pack up the cooler (and veggie steamer), heave the big green board on my car, grab the trailer, and hit the road. (It's only like an hour away.)

Map below. I like maps. Have become a map junkie. I've tweaked my phone so it will store in memory map and satellite views of the area I'm going to. So with that and gps, I don't need cell service to navigate, or more specifically, not get lost. And it was a good call this trip. Some cell service, but otherwise out in the boonies. Which was kinda nice. So much of the state has been turned into a resort it was refreshing to be in what's left of actual rural Florida. Well, to a point. I failed to pick up a few provisions. Most notably, milk. But figured I would just hit a Publix or other grocery store after I got off the turnpike. But nothing doing, nothing really on the way. After parking the rig about at the site I walk back into the office and ask where the nearest grocery store is. He says Inverness, which is about 20 miles away. WTF?! In most of Florida you can't throw a rock without hitting a Publix, which by the way, is the best grocery store chain in the universe. He asks what I need and I say milk, and he says there's a couple of dollar stores about 5 miles down the road. Dollar store milk? Yuk! But when in Rome...



I put-in the paddle-barge at the boat ramp and head out across the lake to find Little Jones Creek. Pretty stiff cross-breeze and somewhat choppy, but not the worst I've seen. It's about a mile across the lake, but the wind had blown me about half a mile off course by the time I got across. I stop to get my bearings on the map and as the wind is blowing me towards shore, I look up and am about to run into a damn gator lying on a log. Close call, just a few feet away, guess distracted driving applies to boats too. But he was small, maybe 5', and there was plenty of open water, so as long as there's enough room for the 2 of you I don't sweat the gators too much. Then again, I normally don't ram them with my board either. It's more when you're in tight confines, like Little Jones Creek, where you're presented with a quandary. I've had it happen a few times. You'll be paddling down a narrow river or creek, then at a bend a large gator will slip into the water in right front of you. Now, he's either coming towards you (not likely), sitting there (possible), or going away from you (most likely), in which case you'll get to do this whole little dance all over again when you catch back up with him. When that's happened to me, I've called it a day and turned around. And was prepared to do so on this trip as well. So with all that in mind, Little Jones Creek...



A cathedral of cypress trees and water as far as the eye can see in all directions. With the sinuous nature of the trees being reflected on of the still water its somewhat disorienting. That's one way to put it. Another would be that it's terrifying. Sensory overload. Like you're brain can't process all of the organic material your eyes are scanning. It all looks alive and moving. More like you're traveling through the belly of a living organism. The wind doesn't blow, the swamp breathes. The picture below doesn't do it justice, that's toward the entrance. I should have taken more pictures deeper in, but was occupied with not getting lost or sneaking up on a gator. That and its hard to stop paddling in the current without getting pushed around. But considering I could still find myself on the map, I pressed on. Made it a couple miles to the trail crossing where I was confronted with a fresh deadfall tree that thoroughly blocked the creek. So took that as my cue to head back. Smooth sailing downstream, just some tricky steering. I had made some mental notes at the various forks along the way as to hopefully not get lost. But the current was pretty steady so you could just look at which way the leaves were flowing fastest on the water. Go with the flow bro.



Ah, back to open water. I'd never been happier to see a windy, choppy lake dotted with bass boats. Hadn't seen a single person the whole trip up and back the creek. A couple of gators, but they were off to the side and swimming away so no real scares thankfully. Didn't even really seem them, just heard the splash and looked in time to see the tip of the tail slip in the water. The wind was partially to my back so was a pretty quick trip back across the lake. Having checked Little Jones Creek off of the list, time to settle into camp and go into town for that milk. Dollar General and Family Dollar were about 5 miles down the road, right across the street from each other; competitive dollar store market in these parts. Grabbed some milk, couldn't find the organic hummus section, then waited in line as an old gal checking out went through every permutation of things to buy that would max out her EBT card to the fullest. Lake Panasoffkee, what it lacks in organic groceries, it more than makes up for in dollar stores and catfish restaurants.



Back at camp, I see a fellow camper walking my way and he says, “I really like you’re trailer there, mind if I take a look?” I, of course, roll out the red carpet, give him the spiel and grand tour. He is smitten with it. We keep chatting, all the while he has two little dogs, one in each arm. Turns out he’s camped right next to me and does fishing charters. Has a big airboat there. Sonny’s Charter Service. Says he’s been doing it over 30yrs and has been “here” over four years. I wondered if “here” meant this campsite, or just the general area, but didn’t ask. The campsite was basically full, but not many people around. Privately owned campsite, so think it was mainly long term rentals. Nothing wrong with that, just a slightly different scene than the state or national parks. It wasn’t hard to see Sonny here had spent much of his life on a boat, on the water, in Florida and dispensed sage swamp wisdom. He asked where I paddled to and told him Little Jones Creek. “How far did you get?” “To the trail crossing, there was a big felled tree there, so turned around.” “To the trail crossing? That’s pretty far up there.” I don’t know if he was impressed, but he at least seemed to figure I wasn’t a total pussy. He recommended the outlet river down to the Withlacoochee river for another paddle trip (gotta love these names, pronounced just like it’s spelled, with-la-coo-chee). But he also warned of the airboats, “During the week you’re fine, but on the weekends many of them folks are drunk! Just stay to the right. Just stay to the right.” I look over to the rudder on his airboat and in fancy, scrolly letters it says “Old No. 7”. “Old No. 7?” I ask. He shakes his head and says, “I quit drinking years ago, and this is my 7<sup>th</sup> airboat, but as soon as I put that on there, I was like, dang it!”



First light the next morning...



The Outlet River, appropriately named. Put in is at a park about halfway between the lake and Withlacoochee river, maybe a 1 mile paddle each way. Nice leisurely paddle. Which was good because I was a little worn out from the previous day's 6+ mile paddle. Can't you just see the fall colors of Florida?



Made it to the Withlacoochee where it really opens up. To the west, straight ahead in the photo, is a vast marsh, the Flying Eagle Ranch. Sonny said there's an island a few miles into it that a lot of airboaters meet up at. Said it's called mailbox island because someone took one of those Tampa Tribune newspaper mailboxes and planted on the island. Makes a funny image, middle of a swamp, then you see a newspaper mailbox, I like it. Some say you've haven't seen Florida until you've been on a boat, but probably more accurately, you ain't seen shit in Florida until you've been on an airboat, which ironically I never have. But I'm seriously considering going back and hiring Sonny for a charter. Think he could show me more around here in a day than I could discover in a lifetime.





I paddle back upstream and not far from the take-out I pass a few airboats going downstream. Three of them, seemed to be a group. I had hugged the right side the whole trip as Sonny had strongly suggested. But these fellas were going slow and waved; no problem. I get to the ramp and drag out the barge, just to the side of the ramp where I'm not blocking the way. Then a jon boat comes flying up the river to dock at the ramp. Then I hear sirens. Then a police car, an ambulance, a fire truck, then another police car come flying into the park. All I can make out is "airboat accident". All the emergency vehicles pull up and basically encircle me. I'm out of the way, but can't get out of the situation. Young boy comes up from the boat and has a few dings on the head, but seems fine otherwise. But his older sister didn't fare as well. Blood streaming down her face. She was crying, so obviously injured, but not life threatening it didn't appear, or sound. From what I can gather someone lost control of their airboat and careened into the cypress trees, which sent the kids flying out of their seats (they should really put seat belts on those things). I think the little boy got flung into the trees, but the poor girl got flung into the front of the boat, ouch! Quick way to turn a fun day into a nightmare. In a lull after the initial drama I grab my board and sneak out to my car. When I got back to camp who comes driving up but Sonny. Asks if I paddled down outlet, and I say yes, it was nice. Then says, "I heard there was an airboat accident." I say, "Yes, I was stuck in the middle of the aftermath at the ramp. Think I passed them right before it happened. But I was hugging the right just like you said, really appreciate that advice, Sonny!" He smiled and nodded in approval.



Nothing too eventful on the drive back to town. Took the backroads due east to hit the north side of town where I store the trailer. A few more classic, Florida named towns on the way. Okahumpka (Oak-uh-hump-ka), Yalaha (Yu-la-ha), Howey-in-the-Hills (don't think that last one was an Indian name). Yalaha has this great, huge german bakery. Every Saturday is like a festival, good day trip thing to do. But a little further down the road is as place I've hit in the past, BC's General Store, right next to the old post office. It was like a museum of general stores, probably had stuff on the shelves that hadn't been produced in 30yrs. But they also had good bbq. Has a screened in porch on the front with a couple of smokers. Usually, there would be a large black woman in there napping, occasionally rousing to turn some meat or swat some flies from her face (not sure if the screen was there to keep flies out or in). But I had read a year ago or so in the paper that the gal was finally retiring and closing up shop, but as I drive by I can see/smell the smokers going. Pull a quick U-ey and stop to check it out. A couple of fellas had taken it over and picked up where the old gal left off. I asked if they took over the business, but he seemed a little take aback at the question. Said they didn't take it over technically, but the family has been helpful and they're hoping it goes well. This place has been a general store for probably 100yrs and selling bbq for maybe 30yrs, so think they'll do fine.



Well, that was the end of this adventure. Will start scanning the map for the next one...