

The pristine environment of Sun 'n Lakes Preserve provided an ideal backdrop for 5K trail run  
By: Corine Burgess

There is a place right here in Sebring that provides those who visit a unique and memorable natural experience. Combine that with exercise, competition and fundraising opportunities and you have the Inaugural Seminole 5-K trail-run. On a beautiful Saturday morning on March 5, 2011, forty runners took off on the first run of its kind held at the pristine Sun 'n Lakes Preserve. The trail run took participants through parts of the Preserve that showcased the incredible and unique beauty of the site.

One of the management goals for the Preserve is to “provide passive recreation and outdoor education.” The Highlands County Parks and Natural Resources Department is doing just that by offering citizens this type of event. Runner Sarah Smith stated, “It’s a great trail. I’d like to see more runs here. It is so much better than running on a road; it’s more exciting.” Sarah’s point of view was shared by many of the participants and all agreed that they would love to run at the site again.

Kim Price, age 34, came in first place with a time of 24 minutes and 48 seconds. She stated, “I loved this race. I’m a cross country runner and I would like to see more races out here.” All of the runners had positive comments and the Overall Male Winner, Danny Cool, age 12, with a time of 26 minutes and 31 seconds, stated, “That was fun! It was a lot more fun than just a 5K.”

Paula Jean Lunt, second place winner, stated, “It was absolutely wonderful. It is the best 5K I’ve run in Sebring and I’ve been running for eight years.” The run was a fund-raiser for the Highlands Seminole Club and a chance for the Highlands County Parks & Natural Resources Department to showcase the passive recreational opportunities that the Preserve has to offer.

Carlos Torres, District Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), came in first in his age group with a time of 31:08. He said of the run, “This was fun. It was my first trail run and it was exciting to see nature. It is a great opportunity to share nature with the citizens in a healthy way. Once people find out how beautiful it is out here, the participation will increase.” Javier Torres, also an employee of NRCS, was a first timer for a long distance run and he felt that the run was challenging. He stated, “It is a nice trail; it is very clean and beautiful out here.” Former County Administrator Carl Cool stated, “It was fun and different. This is a great time of year for the run. I would like to see more runs out here.”

The event was a group effort between Highlands County staff, Highlands Seminole Club members and experienced 5K organizer Chet Brojek. Chet has been organizing these types of runs for about 40 years and assisted John Palmer and Erin McCarta, Highlands Seminole Club members, with the event. Working with staff from the Parks & Natural Resources Department, the 5K was laid out, trails were trimmed, maps were made, signs placed and all the preparations were made for the big day. This is the type of event that encourages citizens to be exposed to the rare and natural beauty of the area. By holding runs and other non-invasive events at the site, more and more people will understand its value.

Erin McCarta, the Seminole Club's President, thanked Highlands County for allowing the runners to use the site. "Many of the runners didn't even know about the Preserve," McCarta stated. Hopefully more events of this type will be held at the Sun 'n Lakes Preserve in the future. The Preserve is approximately 1,350 acres and consists of various plant communities such as pine flatwoods, cypress swamp, cutthroat seeps, and various types of marshes and wetlands. Hiking the rugged nature trails, biking, and fishing are some of the activities that are enjoyed by citizens who visit the Preserve. It is located at the end of Sun 'n Lakes Blvd. in Sebring.

The run was certainly unique with its ruggedness. The trails at the Sun 'n Lakes Preserve are designed for hiking and biking and some areas are very narrow and required the athletes to run single-file. Runners were excited and challenged, but felt that it was just the right amount of difficulty for a fun time and a good run.

Congratulations to all the runners for taking on this very exciting trail run. The staff at Highlands County's Parks and Natural Resources is encouraged by the success of this event. We believe we have made one more positive step towards this goal and would like to thank the Highlands Seminole Club for recognizing the potential of the site. We look forward to more passive recreational activities and events in the future.

#### RACE RESULTS:

Overall Female Winner – Kim Price 24:48

Overall Male Winner – Danny Cool 26:31

Female Master: Paula Jean Lunt 25:08

Male Master: Ron Bednosky 29:42

Female Grand Master: Lois Hotchkiss 34:50

Male Grand Master: Carl Cool 33:34

Female Age Group Finishers: (14 & Under) Savannah Oldfield 34:44, (25-29) Holly Kelsey 36:52, Maria Fabela 40:46; (30-34) Sarah Smith 36:23, Meagan Bell 1:04:35; (35-39) Kelly Griffin 28:22, Lori Ashworth 33:07; (40-44) Vicki Musselman 28:21, Julia Miller 44:52; (45-49) Pam Farr 31:45, Susie Whitehead 42:21; (55-59) Martie Brooker 35:18, Peggy Essex-Klammer 40:08; (65-69) Fran Rolston 59:25.

Male Age Group Finishers: (14 & Under) Dane Kelsey, Jr; 51:38 (15-19) Zach Farr 30:13; (25-29) Raulie Raulerson 28:25, Calvin Crowell 47:14; (30-34) Carlos Torres 31:08, Dane Kelsey 51:38, David Bell 1:04:37; (35-39) Bryant Musselman 27:07, Javier Torres 41:46, Randal Ennis 47:16; (40-44) Steve Ashworth 29:46, (50-54) John Whitehead 34:03, Steve Farr 34:26; (55-59) Dr. Mike McLeod 33:35; (65-69) Cliff Ables 42:00.