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Wekiva Paint Out is back with artists and easels outdoors

Wekiva Island is known as a bustling waterfront hub, especially during hot summer days when Floridians pack in for a round of cornhole or a drink at the bar. But during an early March morning, the island is showing off a different, more natural side.

Painters set up their easels along the shores of the Wekiva River, hoping to brush into existence an interpretation of a sunning egret or a peaceful sunrise. The Wekiva Paint Out is back for its 14th year of plein air painting.

Twenty-seven artists camp March 1-7 at Wekiwa Springs State Park, toting painting tools and unleashing their creativity daily to bring forth works of art outdoors in the state park and at Wekiva Island.

Manon Sander, a painter from Palm Beach County, has enjoyed the camaraderie with other artists during her third Wekiva Paint Out.

“It’s one of the paint outs I look forward to the most because it’s like summer camp for painters. We stay in the cabins and we’re all together,” she said while interpreting a riverfront scene with her oil paints.



While the environment is hard to control when painting outdoors, Sander expressed similar sentiments about painting en plein air.



Nearby, Sarasota artist Michelle Held painted an egret with a background of golden grass. She’s become known for her bird paintings.

“I started painting them here at Wekiva. This is my fifth paint out,” she said. “The birds don’t sit still, the clouds and the light don’t stay. Nothing really sits still, but I do like to capture things en plein air.”



“It feels a little bit more immediate than being in the studio, which sometimes feels stale,” she said. “There are so many rewards because it’s different when you feel the sun on your skin and hear the birds. It’s just so beautiful.”

But Sander also recognizes there are threats to Florida’s natural environment, which is also her subject matter.

“If all the beautiful places disappear, we’ll run out of subject matter. Then we’ll have to do still life, which is more boring,” she said. “It’s also about recording a disappearing landscape. A lot of us are impressionists, so you put a lot of emotion into a piece.”

The Wekiva Paint Out also gives participating artists a chance to give back to the environment that inspires their work. Almost half of the proceeds from sales of artwork are used to benefit Keep Seminole Beautiful and Wekiva Wilderness Trust.

“The great part of being an artist is that you can use your art to help others,” Sander said. “I can use what I love doing to help others for a good cause.”

And she’s doing just that for Keep Seminole Beautiful, which focuses on keeping the river clean through events.

“We started doing river cleanups in 2009 and we’ve removed three tons of trash” said Mary Sue Weinaug, executive director of the nonprofit and co-owner of Wekiva Island. “We want fresh water for our children and their children, so it’s important to us to keep this water clean.”



In an effort to make Wekiwa Springs State Park more accessible to people with disabilities, the Wekiva Wilderness Trust is ramping up their fundraising efforts for an accessible Serenity Garden.

“We’re conscious that everyone deserves to be able to use the parks and not just able-bodied people,” said Don Philpott, president of the trust. “Every cent that we get, as a share of the proceeds, will go to the Serenity Garden this year.”

But at least this week, artists will find their own serenity with canvas and paintbrushes in hand, taking a leaf out of nature’s book.

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