

Park ranger works, lives in Duette Preserve

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DUETTE — Johnny McLeod has a big yard.

McLeod's home is Duette Preserve, a roughly 25,000-acre wilderness park owned by Manatee County

government about 38 miles northeast of downtown Bradenton.

He is the park ranger and lives on park property in a county-owned three-bedroom home with his wife and five children.

"I kind of consider myself the luckiest person in the

county to live here and have this job," McLeod said. "I'm sure there are several thousand people that would love to have it."

Born in Arcadia and raised in Myakka City, McLeod is comfortable living with nature and critters dotting the landscape far from city

lights.

Bobcats, hogs, deer, turkeys, quail, fox squirrels, gopher tortoises, scrub jays, ospreys, owls, egrets, eagles, hawks and a variety of songbirds are his closest neighbors. The nearest humans live about a quarter-mile away on Rawls Road.

"This is one of the last places you can still leave your keys in the car at night," McLeod said.

McLeod supervises maintenance of the park, which includes mowing about 500 acres, grading and filling nearly 30 miles of trails,

RANGER TO 10B



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Park ranger Johnny McLeod supervises maintenance of the Duette Preserve, which includes mowing about 500 acres, grading and filling nearly 30 miles of trails.

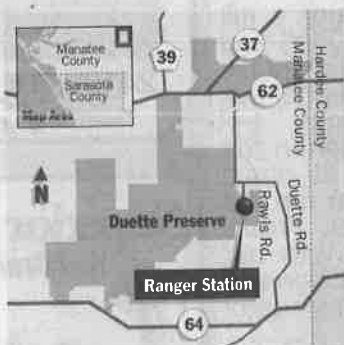
RANGER FROM 1B

cleaning the campground, painting and repairing buildings, leading prescribed burns to remove brush and prevent uncontrolled fires, overseeing timber contractors, restoring wetlands and removing exotic plants, primarily Cogan's grass.

Park property features scrub oak, live oak, slash pines, long-leaf pines, saw-tooth palmetto and wire grass.

"We probably planted at least 50,000 long-leaf pines last year," McLeod said recently while taking this reporter on a park tour. "We had some school groups come out and they planted trees and we had some church groups plant trees for us. We do that two or three times a year."

"The park is really shaping up," he said. "It's really look-



CRAIG WHITE/The Herald

companies nearly 20 years ago. Duette Preserve is located at the headwaters of the watershed draining into Lake Manatee, which provides the county's drinking water.

"Johnny brings a unique perspective to the management of our conservation lands that he loves," Hunsicker said. "His knowledge of the land and the way it functions has been extremely

hunting weekends, likely because few people know the park exists.

"Every weekend, we have people say that they didn't know this park was here," McLeod said. "But we're trying to do better in getting the word out."

McLeod, a former citrus grove worker, joined the Duette Preserve staff in 2001 when he learned of a job opening while deer hunting at the park with a friend, Bobby McCurry.

"I wouldn't have ever gotten hired here if I hadn't attended the hunting program," he said. "At first it was just being a park ranger. I worked here three years before I moved into the house when Danny Smith took another job elsewhere."

Trips into town mean heading to Bradenton for work-related travel and a 22-mile jaunt to Wauchula for grocery shopping and other per-