

Loxahatchee Love

VIEWS OF
THE WILD AND
SCENIC RIVER,
FROM ONE LOCAL
PHOTOGRAPHER'S
CANOE

by MICHELLE LEE RIBEIRO | photography by MARK COOK

London-born photographer Mark Cook grew up in a small rural village in Southern England, where he spent much of his youth in local woodlands, fields, and rivers. He developed an early passion for the natural world during those times, which ultimately led to a career in the natural sciences.

Armed with an MSc in ecology and a PhD in avian behavioral ecology, Cook has spent his professional life working in sync with nature. He has studied arctic seabirds on remote Scottish islands and neotropical songbirds in the rainforests of Puerto Rico. He currently leads a group of research scientists at the South Florida Water Management District, where for the past 18 years he has focused on the restoration and management of wetland animals in the Everglades—including wading birds such as herons, egrets, storks, and ibises.



“Modern society has disconnected us from nature,” says Cook, who now resides in Jupiter Farms. “But as a species, we are a part of—and remain very much reliant on—our natural environment.”

He began photographing his environs to document his scientific studies and soon discovered a passion for shooting the wonder and beauty of the swamp. “Wildlife photography is a game of patience that requires long periods of quiet time within nature,” he says. “For me, it provides that essential reconnection with the world we belong to, allows for a greater understanding of nature, and affords me an artistic outlet that I don’t get in my scientific career.”

For this photo essay, Cook took three canoe trips on the Loxahatchee—two solo and a third with his wife and two daughters. He went from Riverbend Park downstream to Trapper Nelson’s and back again, where enormous ancient cypress trees envelop part of the river. He traveled upriver from Jonathan Dickinson, paddling the lower reaches of the river where it is wider, more tidal, influenced by salt water, and surrounded by red mangroves and different species of wildlife. All in all, Cook covered around 8 to 10 miles over 14 hours, shooting the photos you see on these pages.

One of the highlights of his journey came when he encountered a wild barred owl. “After hearing the simian-like sounds of a male owl calling to its partner, I paddled upstream, searching for about an hour for this cryptic bird until I finally located him on a low branch in the shadows of dense vegetation,” says Cook. “I hauled up the canoe, waded through the river, crawled through the undergrowth, and managed to eventually get within about 10 feet of him. I sat on a log to rest and spent 30 wonderful minutes with him in his natural environment, watching him preen, sleep, and occasionally call to his mate.”

Cook is no stranger to the Loxahatchee. Living in Jupiter Farms allows him plenty of opportunities to explore in his free time. The river is one of the many “wild” areas he appreciates having on his doorstep—especially as a natural scientist who, well, definitely knows his stuff.

As he so eloquently puts it: “Within just 20 minutes of paddling from the launch at Riverbend Park, one is transported back in time to a primeval Florida of towering ancient cypress trees dripping with Spanish moss, epiphytic bromeliads and orchids, and a lush tropical understory of palms and giant ferns reminiscent of the Devonian Period. Out there, one expects to see prehistoric animals, and indeed one does—in the form of sleeping alligators and colorful river turtles adorning the river banks and primitive Florida garfish cruising the backwater pools. Large predatory birds like the great blue heron, a direct descendant of the dinosaur, prowl the forested margins while the strange calls of limpkins and barred owls add to the ancient soundscape.”

An ode to the Loxahatchee, in all of its wild glory. ♦

Little blue heron



A white-tailed deer
on the riverbank

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Barred owl



Florida red-bellied cooter turtles





Swamp lily



Arrowhead vine

WEB BONUS! See more photos from this shoot at jupitermag.com/loxlove



An aninga perched in front of red mangrove prop roots