

Lake to Ocean 26: South Florida Equestrian Trail Ride Organized by the Florida Horsemen's Club

Overview of the Lake to Ocean 26 Ride

The Lake to Ocean 26 (L to O 26) is a highly anticipated three-day equestrian trail ride and campout event in South Florida. Riders begin their journey at Dupui's equestrian camp (gate 3) near Lake Okeechobee and travel eastward to Eagles View camp in Jonathan Dickinson State Park, which is located on the Atlantic coast. Participants may choose to ride all three legs, join for a single segment, or volunteer to assist with the event.

The Florida National Scenic Trail

The Florida National Scenic Trail is one of eleven trails in the United States designated as long-distance trails by the National Trails System Act of 1968. Jim Kern, a passionate trail hiker and Miami resident, founded the Florida Trail Association. In 1966, Kern secured permission to mark a hiking trail through Ocala National Forest. Today, the trail spans 1,400 miles from Gulf Island Seashore in the Panhandle to the Oasis Visitor Center in the Everglades Cypress Preserve. It received official National Scenic Trail status in 1983.

A spur of the trail begins at Port Mayaca on the eastern side of Lake Okeechobee and stretches 60 miles east to Hobe Sound Beach. The Florida Trail Association spent ten years marking this section and securing necessary permissions. This spur forms the route for the Ocean to Lake event, now known as the Lake to Ocean 26 (L to O 26). The ride starts at Dupuis equestrian campground and concludes in Jonathan Dickinson State Park, with the trail slightly shortened at both ends.

In 2005, this section of the Florida Trail received designation as a state greenway. The inaugural Ocean to Lake event was held in February 2006, celebrating the successful completion and official recognition of the Ocean to Lake Trail. Supported by the Seminole Tribe, the event served as both a cultural celebration and an effort to preserve historic trails.

Cultural Heritage and Historical Reenactments

The event's rich cultural legacy was highlighted by a 19th-century mule-driven chuck wagon and a Seminole Indian known as Swamp Owl. Swamp Owl, whose real name is Paul Morrison, is descended from the Seminole Tribe on his grandmother's side and Mohawk ancestry on his grandfather's side. He brought history to life at Corbett camp "I," sitting on a bearskin and sharing stories of old Florida land and wildlife with fellow campers around the campfire.

As a boy, Morrison was drawn to dressing as an Indian, which led him to participate in detailed battlefield reenactments. During the event, Swamp Owl and his black stallion Smokey passed the Seminole Ring of Unity to groups of riders, symbolizing unity and tradition. The ring will eventually be presented to Riverbend Park, where it will be displayed when a new building is built for Seminole artifacts and educational displays.

Continuity and Recent Developments

After a hiatus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the retirement of key volunteers, the event was revived by the Florida Horsemen's Club. It is now named Lake to Ocean 26, reflecting the West-to-East direction from Lake Okeechobee to the Atlantic Ocean. This year's ride and campout will begin on Friday morning, April 24, at Dupuis Management Area Equestrian Camp. Riders will follow the marked trail for 22 miles to camp "I" in the J.W. Corbett Management Area. For convenience, campers can arrange to have their trailers moved to Corbett before the ride. Following the Corbett campout, riders proceed to Riverbend Park and will complete the adventure on Sunday with lunch at Eagles View camp in Jonathan Dickinson.

Although the F.H.C. was hesitant to organize such a large event, Tara McLeod from Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center changed minds by offering assistance and volunteers. Permits and permissions must be arranged, and proof of insurance must be provided to the managers of all transited properties. Trails need to be marked. Sign-up sheets and banking arrangements must be in place. Signing up volunteers is also a large part of the Lake to Ocean event, and it certainly would not be possible without them, but it is all worth it as it is a pleasure to bring the horse community together for fun and good conversation.

Event Information

For additional details, participants are encouraged to visit the "Lake to Ocean Horse Trail Ride" Facebook page. All necessary information for riders is available under the "files" tab.

— John Kavaliauskas, Florida Horsemen's Club