FLORIDA’S TRUE GIFTS

In a season filled with celebration, an appreciation for wild miracles

BY TRACEY MINKIN
blooming, the plant will drop a pod that offers the hope of progeny. These are long odds. It’s remarkable that there are any ghost orchids left at all.

Call it a gift—a miraculous one—springing from a wild, wet corner of the world that overflows with strange and beautiful abundance. From creatures so small that they remain unseen to vast networks of coral ranging offshore for hundreds of miles, Florida is a parade of nature so varied that cataloging those gifts may best be done from the sky.

See it from the vantage point of one of more than 500 species of birds—warblers and waterfowl, eagles and hawks, storks and ibis—that make Florida home or a place for rest and sustenance during long and strenuous migrations. Imagine skimming airborne above the state’s narrow western handle, a ribbon of blindingly white sands backed by forests that hold two of the world’s rarest species of evergreens. Wheel south and survey coastlines threaded by rivers and laced with mangrove-etched lagoons. Trace the parallel wonder—one on the Gulf of Mexico, one on the Atlantic Ocean—of hundreds of miles of narrow islands. Though called barriers, they might better be called nurseries: Their pale sands, mounded into dunes and spread along the shore, are the fragile nesting places of animals as diverse as least terns, just shy of two ounces, and leatherback sea turtles, sometimes half a ton. As the peninsula tapers southward, see how it begins to blend with the seas that surround it, becoming more water than earth. See that strand of cays dangle, like an unfinished thought, from land’s end. Those 1,350 miles of coastline, lined with glamorous beaches and tropical foliage, might feel like holiday department store windows full of Florida’s finest wares. But the most important gift lies

**“My heart swelled with uncontrollable delight”**

From the journal of John James Audubon, on approaching the Florida coastline.
“Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed”

From Wallace Stegner’s Wilderness Letter, 1960
in the interior. The Seminole Indians named it Big Water: Okeechobee. Covering 730 square miles, the state’s largest lake fills with freshwater flowing south through Florida limestone. And, like hands cupped heavenward, it catches the rain from thunderheads that pile up and unleash during long wet seasons.

And it overflows. Breaching Okeechobee’s southern shore, there emerges a river as shallow as six inches and as broad as 60 miles. Originally, it crept south unimpeded across almost 31,000 square miles of marsh, sliding over saw-grass and around cypress, pushing through mazes of mangroves to flow onto the sea grass flats of Florida Bay.

For millennia, that landscape spawned hundreds of species that developed fragile relationships among each other and with their environs. The Everglades became a swampy Eden, a natural kingdom beyond the ken of poets. Legions of thin-legged wading birds stalked the flats, brown pelicans skimmed the shore in tight chevrons. Roseate spoonbills, tucking their coral-pink wings, swung their bills in quick arcs as if searching for something to flow onto the sea grass flats of Florida Bay. Under snow-turning constellations, thousands of loggerhead, green, and leatherback sea turtles emerge from the ocean and hump up damp sands. They are heavy—in bulk, with eggs, and with the threat of extinction. In a ritual as inexorable as the tide, mother turtles dig pits for their own bodies, and then deeper holes beneath. Into those chambers they lay around 100 Ping-Pong ball–sized eggs, and then labor to cover their cache. Sapped of energy when they emerge, they pause, gather strength, and make for the sea with what can only be viewed as relief.

Two months later, life emerges. The size of skipping stones, hatchlings use their tiny flippers and indomitable drive to climb up the discarded shells of their incubation, up through the sand, into the wide and dangerous world. Called by instinct toward light created by moving water, they skitter down their mothers’ paths to the sea. One in about 1,000 will survive to adulthood. And if female, despite roaming the ocean for hundreds of miles, she will return to the beach of her birth to lay her own eggs. She will return to Florida, trusting that it will be there for her, and for another generation. She will endeavor to give the most meaningful gift she can offer. Her wildness, and the sheer miracle of it all.