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WEEK OF NOVEMBER 21-27, 2018

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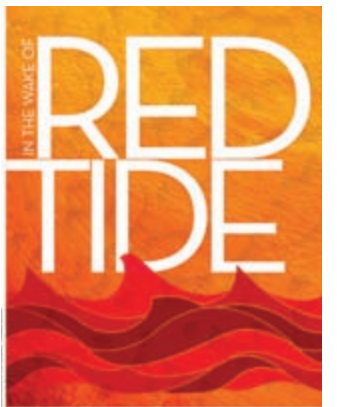
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of Florida's 730-square-mile body of water. **A14** ▶

# AROUND LAKE O



PHOTOS AND STORY BY EVAN WILLIAMS • EWILLIAMS@FLORIDAWEEKLY.COM

## It's manatee season: Slow down. Watch out. Report those in trouble

### SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

It has been a dire year for manatees in Florida.

As of Nov. 9, 741 manatees had died, an increase of almost 200 over all of last year and the highest number in the past five years. Watercraft have killed a record 107 so far this year, compared to the same number — 107 — for all of last year. That pace puts the state on a course for a third consecutive record-setting year for watercraft-related fatalities.

Also accounting for record deaths: red tide.

The red tide that bloomed from Pinellas County down to Collier County on the southwest coast left tons of dead fish, birds and manatees in its wake.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission has declared that 194 manatees were killed or are strongly suspected of being killed by red tide. That number is not final; lab work on mammals is continuing.

"The way manatees are doing in our environment population-wise really gives us an indicator of how our environment is doing as a whole," Benji Studt, with

SEE MANATEE, **A24** ▶



FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE

A manatee in the Santa Fe River rises to the top of the water to breathe.

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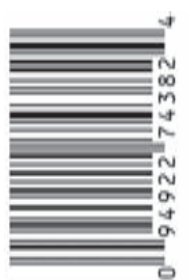
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# AROUND LAKE OKEECHOBEE

PHOTOS AND STORY BY EVAN WILLIAMS • EWILLIAMS@FLORIDAWEEKLY.COM

**I**n the second week of November as the Midterm elections roared on, I actually set out to discover and photograph Lake Okeechobee and the communities surrounding it as if it were some foreign country, a mysterious Eastern apparition instead of a Florida landmark only a little more than an hour from my home in Fort Myers — closer than my usual weekend destinations in Tampa or Miami — and one that has been in the news this year with negative coverage that, fairly and unfairly, tends to position Lake O at the epicenter of Florida's serious water problems.

**1** A fishing boat cuts a wake on the southwestern shore of the lake at dawn by Uncle Joe's Fish Camp outside Clewiston.

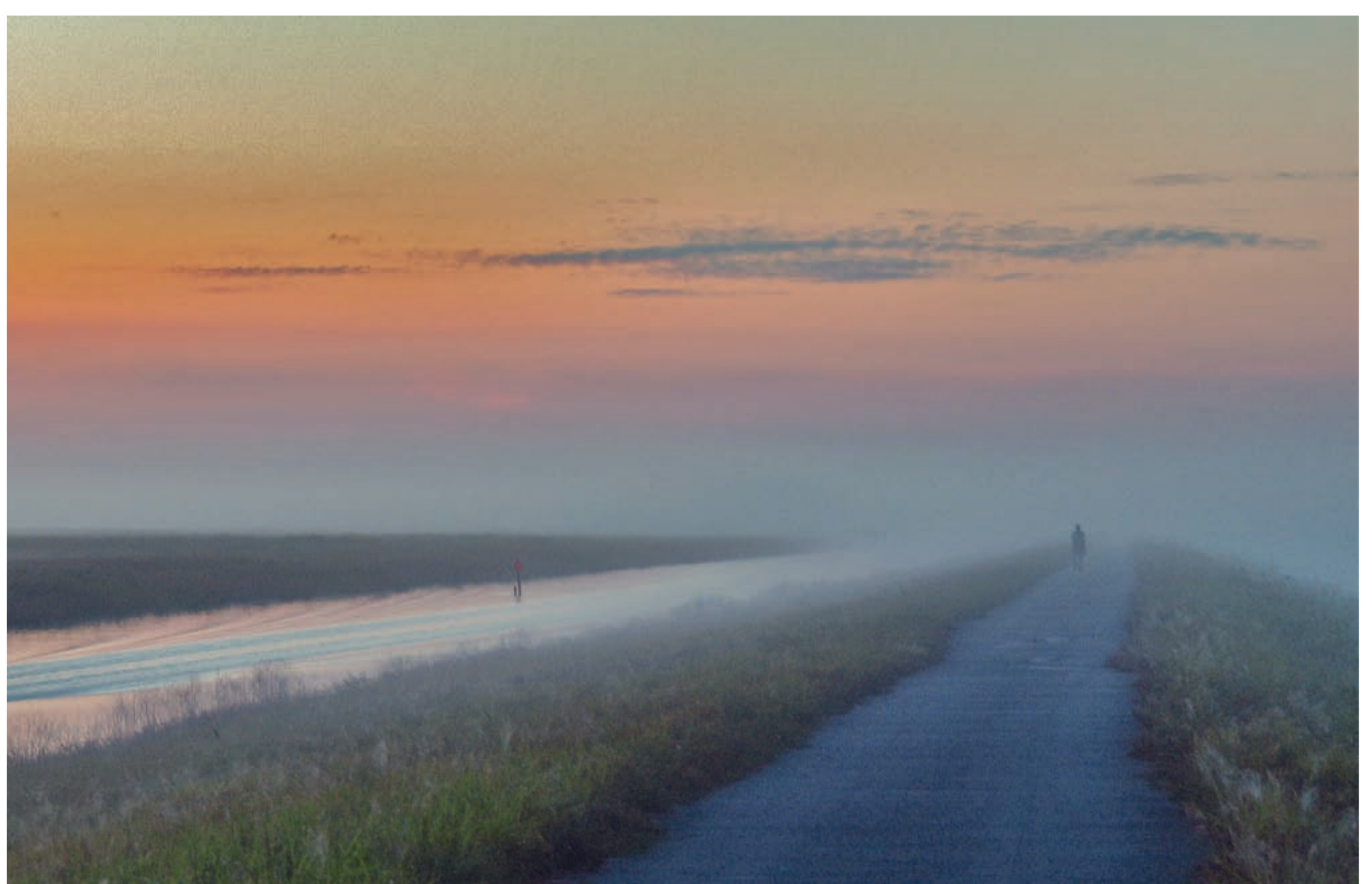
Like radio signals gradually dissipating in outer space the noise of the coast faded as I drove around the lake from the city of Okeechobee on the northern shore, which is surrounded by cattle pastures, to Uncle Joe's Fish Camp on the southwestern edge between Moore Haven and Clewiston, by sugar cane fields that stretch out for some 450,000 acres.

The 730-square-mile lake itself was to me at first, in terms of scenic beauty, a disappointment. That gave way to surprise and then appreciation. You can't see most of it from the road due to a massive

dike the Army Corps of Engineers built around it following the horrific 1928 hurricane that breached its southern levee, killing maybe 2,500 or 3,000 people. There are worries a similar catastrophe could happen today, one of the reasons the Corps must send water to the coasts if the lake gets too full.

When you do get up on the dike there often isn't a lot of lake to see; much of its outer rim is covered with scrubby green-brown marshland. There are a few points to observe vast open water from the shore — at the Marina in Pahokee (which is currently closed

for renovations) and at the Port Mayaca lock, for example. And across the entire top of the dike in a 109-mile loop there is a mostly paved hiking-biking path, the Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail (LOST), a part of the Florida National Scenic Trail that is for the most part exposed to the glaring sun. Sections along the way are now being renovated by the Corps' various projects and impassable. The towns on the southern shore of the lake are known for their impoverished populations, but they are also home to residents who would never trade their homes for the

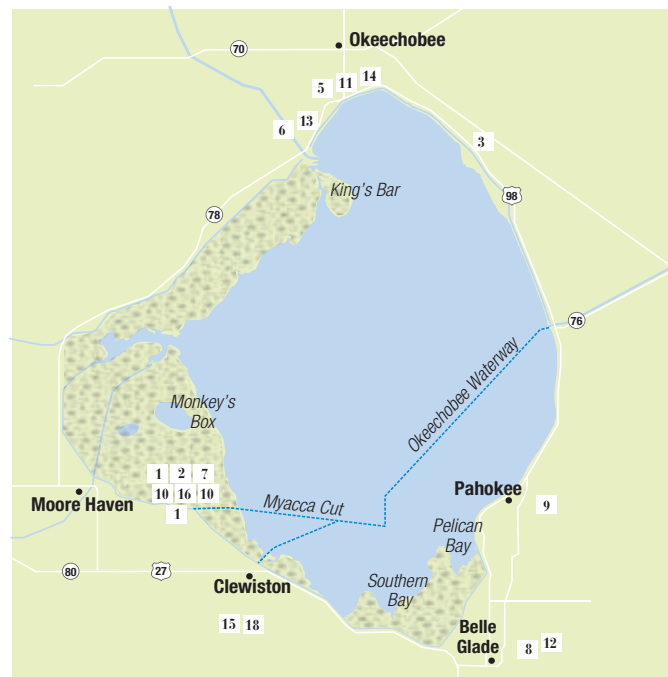


bustle of the coast. And they are rich in diversity — in other words, there are some excellent places to eat.

During an airboat ride when the captain told one of the passengers from Canada how shallow the lake is (its average depth is 9 feet) he looked visibly disappointed or perhaps just confused. What kind of lake is this anyway? Actually, it's extraordinary, unlike any other lake in the U.S. and not really a proper lake at all, at least in terms that a Midwestern transplant like myself understands. Its Seminole name means "Big Water," and it is the headwaters of a vast River of Grass, the Everglades, capturing runoff from as far north as Orlando and naturally flowing south to the ocean, or at least it used to. Human engineering and enterprise, in order to build our homes, raise cattle, grow sugar cane, and create roads (Interstate 75) across the southern rim of the lake's natural spillway has altered and damaged this ecosystem, with a footprint roughly the size of New Jersey, forever. I have seen the worst invasive species and it is us. But much of the lake and its communities stubbornly retain a feeling of times past, even if their early agricultural boom years ended in the 1970s — Joe's Fish Camp looks much as it did in the 1950s or even earlier. Much earlier.

On a typically misty Saturday morning here on the dike above Joe's on the lake, there remained a sort of prehistoric-looking beauty; the subtle gradations of color over marshland extending out beyond the visible horizon just before dawn, the sound of insects, fish rising in the water, a distant flock of birds, a heron soaring over the marsh, the hoo-ing of an owl,

the silhouette of a palm tree, the intensity of the sunlight; enduring Florida images that I embrace even and maybe especially if they are clichéd. The only sign of pre-dawn man was a small fishing boat, probably out to catch the bass the lake is famous for, along with its commercial catfish industry; and, appearing like a ghost out of the mist a LOST hiker coming closer, closer, and finally stopping where I stood: Jim Maruna, a slight 75-year-old man who had bicycled from his home in Key West to St. Augustine and now was camped at Joe's before continuing on his journey. Even though these images of Lake O and its communities are by no means comprehensive, I tried to capture some of the remaining beauty of this landscape and of those who call its vicinity home, or were, like me, just passing through. ■



**2** Uncle Joe's Fish Camp at dusk seen from the top of the Herbert Hoover Dike. Atop the dike sits the Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail (LOST), which runs for 109 miles around the lake. Uncle Joe's includes rental cabins, RV hookups, a campground, and a small store and bar. During World War II, German POWs were kept at this site, called Liberty Point. In 1948, "Uncle" Joe Griffin and his wife, Thelma, bought the property, which is now owned by Cindy Massey, 62. She and her family have run the business since 1986.

**3** West Palm Beach residents Felix Guy, 19, and Clayton Burney, 57, on Election Day, Tuesday, Nov. 6, fish in the “rim ditch,” the canal around Lake O dug out by the Army Corps to build the Herbert Hoover Dike in the 1930s. They are at the Florida Trail Henry Creek Trail Head on the northeastern shore. Mr. Burney came out to fish “because I’m tired of looking at the walls of the house.” Asked about the election, the conversation quickly turned to President Trump. “He has no respect for anybody,” Mr. Burney said, but added, “He can go ahead and build the wall.” They were fishing for crappie using minnows and plastic bait.



**4** A crop duster swoops low over a sugar cane field between Moore Haven and Clewiston off County Road 720.



**5** Okeechobee resident and air boat captain Denise Ferrell, 36, and her husband run Eagle Bay Airboat Rides, located at a produce stand on Eagle Bay on the north side of the lake off FL-78. She's also a mother of three and volunteers for the fire department. I paid \$35 for the ride along with two others about 5 p.m., near dusk. It was a beautiful night. There was a rainbow, the sun setting over cow pastures, Spanish moss dripping from trees, and birds soaring down in front of the boat as we sped along. Ms. Ferrell stopped at some of her favorite spots, including where a bald eagle nests and a Stormwater Treatment Area.

**6** I had fresh fried catfish fingers for lunch one day at Lightsey's Seafood Restaurant in Okeechobee, an excellent spot to enjoy this local staple. The fish came from just down the street and around the corner off FL-78 at Okeechobee Fish Company. Every week-day, fishermen bring in thousands of pounds of catfish. Jeannett Courson, 40, and her husband Buddy Courson, 45, both grew up here and own the company. (Mr. Courson comes from a long line of Lake O fishermen, so to speak.) At just past 10 a.m., workers here are processing catfish fresh out of the lake. They set trot lines and collect them with the fish starting before dawn.



7 Oreo, resident Great Dane at Uncle Joe's Fish Camp.



8 J.P. Sasser, 63, is the former mayor of Pahokee, the town where he grew up. We had lunch at Banyan Tree Café, a popular diner in nearby Belle Glade, where he seemed to know just about everyone. We both ordered the special: Cornish hen smothered in gravy with stuffing, lima beans, collard greens and hoe cakes, with — what else? — sweet tea. It was delicious. He now works on his “hobby,” restoring classic cars at a Belle Glade auto body shop. “Every business in the Glades is directly or indirectly connected to agriculture,” Mr. Sasser says. He grew up fishing, hunting and waterskiing on the lake, its periphery and islands, and sees these inland communities as the “real” Florida — Southern drawls and all. Mr. Sasser also was one of the first openly gay mayors in the United States, elected in his small hometown town of about 6,000 people (from 2002 to 2008 and 2010 to 2013).



9 Pahokee resident Terry Butler, 53, runs his lawncare and landscaping business and does work for the city, including here at the Pahokee Marina, which is currently closed for renovations. Mr. Butler grew up here playing football, catching fish as well as alligators. His grandparents came here from Georgia and other Southern states to harvest crops such as corn. He has six children. I asked him what the best and worst things about living here are. “The greatest thing about Pahokee, Florida, is it’s a small-town community, everybody’s in it together,” he said. “The least thing I like about Pahokee is we don’t have any growth here. We need some growth here. I’ve watched my city crumble like a war zone.”

**10** The owner of Uncle Joe's Fish Camp, Cindy Massey, 62, sits on the front steps of her home on the property. She is looking at flowers she got from her husband's funeral, a decorated Vietnam War veteran and U.S. Army Sgt. Eddie Massey. She had just replanted them the day before, a Friday, when I arrived. "That's why yesterday was kind of hard for me to talk," she explained, "it was just seven months yesterday. Still ain't easy." He often worked at Joe's from dawn until after dusk. "I learned how to keep (dinner) warm," she said.

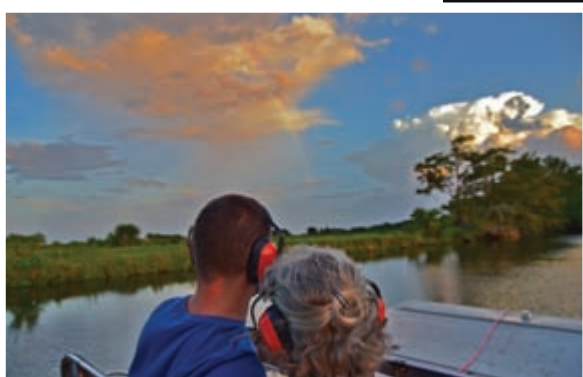


**11** Cattle graze in a pasture off Eagle Bay on the northern edge of the lake.



**12** Milton Carpenter, 89, gently helps an orchid open up at his greenhouse and home in Belle Glade, where he has lived with his wife, Nancy, for nearly 45 years. The day I stopped by unannounced, one of their daughters was visiting from Switzerland, and his roof was being repaired. But he was happy to talk and left me with a signed copy of his book, "From the Hand of God to the Miracles of Orchids," along with advice that at age 38 I should start thinking about marriage.

**13** Okeechobee resident Chris Harris, 18, unveiled the catch of the day at Okeechobee Fish Company: about 500 pounds of catfish. "It's pretty soothing," he said of fishing on the lake. "It clears your mind. It's pretty cool to watch the sunrise on the water, too."



**14** Passengers on an airboat ride in Eagle Bay look toward a rainbow at dusk.



**15** Clewiston resident Ysabel Parker, 60, is a front desk receptionist at the Clewiston Inn, a 1938 Inn on the National Register of Historic Places, built by U.S. Sugar Corp., with an old Southern plantation look and a stunning cypress wood-paneled lobby. President Herbert Hoover once stayed here. Ms. Parker and her husband moved to town a few years ago from Georgia for work. She grew up in Lima, the capital of Peru, and speaks Spanish, English, French and a little Italian.





**16** Jim Maruna, 75, about an hour after sunrise at Uncle Joe's Fish Camp. Mr. Maruna has a P.O. Box and a place in Key West, but is mostly a full-time traveler. Starting on May 1, he bicycled from the Keys all the way to St. Augustine, staying at state parks and campsites along the way for a few weeks at a time, usually riding on U.S. 27 with a backpack weighing about 70 pounds. A day of riding takes him 55 to 60 miles. He plans to be back in Key West by mid-April. "My daughter flies in from Ohio to visit for two weeks and then I start traveling again," he said. I asked him why he stays on the road and how he manages the rigor of this lifestyle at his age. "I worked in an office job my whole life," he said, an electric company in Cleveland, Ohio. "I was sitting all day. When I got out I wanted to do stuff so I used to bike a lot, cross country ski, white water kayak. So I kept active that way and now it's a way of life for me.



**17**

**Roland Martin**  
Marina in Clewiston  
at dawn.