

CARLTON RESERVE

Biking, birding and bears, off the beaten path

By **BETH DONOFRIO**
CORRESPONDENT

A mere nine miles east of the sand and Gulf blue waters of Venice Beach, and from the landscaped avenues of boutique shops and quaint restaurants, lies a completely different Florida, one just off the beaten path.

Those seeking the Florida of cowboys and cattle, palmettos and pines, biking and birding, hiking and horseback riding, can find 40 square miles of pristine nature at the Carlton Reserve, a 25,000-acre Sarasota County park.

"It's a completely different world," says off-road biker Steve Christian, 65, of Venice. "It's hard to believe that two miles down the road, the commercial and the cars and the road exist. Here, wild will always be wild. You can lose yourself in the pursuits of biking, or walking, or running."

On a recent Saturday morning, Steve and his wife, Linda, 66, pulled into the parking lot of the Carlton Reserve on their tandem bike. Before embarking on their 30-mile off-road ride through the trails of the Reserve, they stopped to talk to three women cyclists who were heading off on their own nine-mile loop.

"That's what's nice about riding here,"

Steve said. "While the Legacy Trail is wonderful, too, it is often crowded and people are going so fast they don't have time to say hello. Here, everyone is friendly."

One of the three women, Karys Mawyer, 27 of Sarasota, had brought her two friends, Beth Gray, 34, of Bradenton, and Katie Betz, 33, of Sarasota, to ride the trails in Venice. "I ride here about twice a week," said Mawyer. "I like it because it's breezy and shady, although in the rainy season, it can also be underwater."

The trails provide more than 100 miles of off-road cycling or hiking adventure. There are about 20 miles of multi-use trails, so that hikers, runners, and equestrians can all enjoy the Reserve.

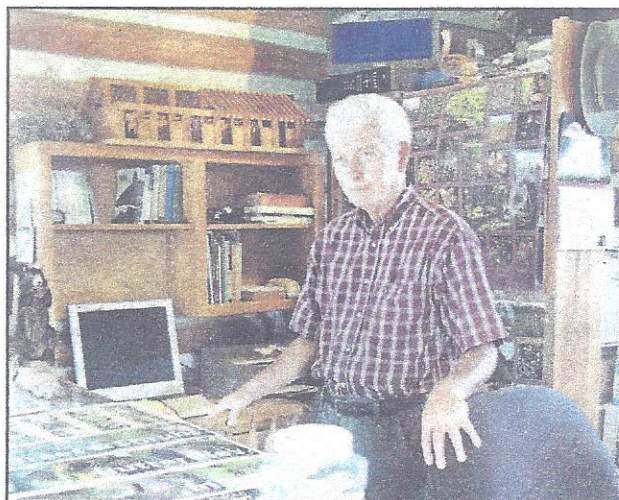


SUN PHOTOS BY BETH DONOFRIO

Steve and Linda Christian of Venice set off on a 30-mile bike ride through the Carlton Reserve.



The Turpentine Cabin serves as an information center at the Carlton Reserve.



Russ Johnson stands behind the counter and in front of a model of the 12-stall horse barn located about seven miles inside the Carlton Reserve.