

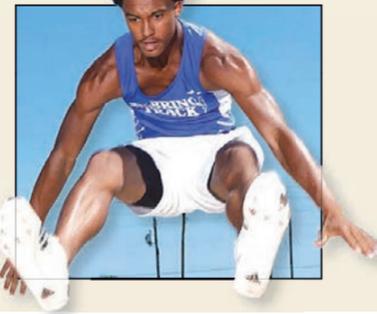
HIGHLANDS TODAY

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Smooth sailing

Sebring's Jordyn Blount set a school record in the long jump, qualified for the state finals and tops the Highlands Today 2014 All-Highlands Boys Track and Field Team.

Sports, Page 1



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THURSDAY, May 29, 2014

Bringing it Back

Effort on to preserve 'Old Florida' for eternity



BY PALLAVI AGARWAL
Highlands Today

SEBRING — When Highlands Hammock State Park acquired the 700-acre Seven Lakes Property, off C.R. 635, it was used for grazing cattle.

The open grounds, dotted with seven ponds or lakes and a mix of pines, oaks, palmettos and grasses, was overgrown but had the potential to be pristine land, said the park's assistant manager Charlie Brown.

Today, park officials are restoring the area to what "Original Florida" once was and preserving it for future generations to enjoy even as development inevitably marches on.

"We are trying, as best as we can, with what information we have, to make it look like the way it was before the European man got here," Brown said.

Park manager Brian Pinson said spread over the Seven Lakes Property, which is surrounded by homes, is an oasis of seven fragile ecosystems and some rare species, mak-



RYAN PELHAM/STAFF

Top: Park ranger Mike Sawyer talks about a scrub oak tree growing along the trail through the Seven Lakes area that belongs to Highlands Hammock State Park. Above: Wildflowers grow along the banks of a lake at the Seven Lakes area Wednesday morning.

ing it an unique piece of ecological land.

A long time ago, when the ocean levels were higher, most of peninsular Florida was under water except for a narrow, sandy ridge — called the Lake Wales Ridge.

The plants and animals that thrived on the Ridge's hardy landscape are found nowhere else in the world.

Cities and towns, such as Sebring, Lake Placid and Avon Park, are now straddling Old Florida's Ridge, edging out the

plants and animals that once called it home, except in preserved pockets such as Seven Lakes.

"We are trying to save the diversity of plants and animals," Brown said.

OLD FLORIDA, Page 8

Most local vets pleased with VA

National controversy continues over veteran health care

BY GARY PINNELL
Highlands Today

SEBRING — Despite the bad press that VA medical clinics are getting, most local veterans don't seem to share the same opinion.

The Veterans Administration Office of the Inspector General said 26 VA facilities are being investigated over whether they concealed long wait times for care by falsifying records. More than 40 veterans reportedly died and dozens more grew more ill while waiting for care in Phoenix.

If true, President Barack Obama said last week, it would be "dishonorable ... disgraceful" and bad actors would be held accountable.

The issue has been politicized, but Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki has been asked to resign by both Republicans and Democrats.

"The VA hospitals are on the leading edge on information technology," said state Rep. Cary Pigman, R-Avon

VETERANS, Page 8



RYAN PELHAM/STAFF

Vikki Brown reaches for a topping to put on a bowl of frozen yogurt at the newly opened sweetFrog Premium Frozen Yogurt in Sebring on Wednesday afternoon.

Sweet home, Highlands County

Three soft-serve ice cream, yogurt shops open within 3-mile area

BY PAUL CATALA
Highlands Today

SEBRING — It was a smorgasbord of sweet savories, a respite from the scorching sun and an oasis of refreshing tranquility, all rolled up into one for Brandon Hollywood and his daughter, Carlie.

The choices were almost overwhelming: "You want chocolate?" asked Brandon. "Or strawberries?"

"Neither," said Carlie, 4, looking over the sweet add-on condiments at the new sweetFrog frozen yogurt store in the Sebring Plaza. Instead, she reached out and got a miniature gummy-bear-covered vanilla yogurt mountain — along with a life-sized smile.

Around Sebring, as spring slithers into summer, at least three new soft-serve ice cream or yogurt shops have

ICE CREAM, Page 8

Day of Art

Students explore their creativity

Cracker Trail fifth-graders spend time at four art stations

BY MARC VALERO
Highlands Today

SEBRING — Armed with an array of colors in many forms — dyes, paint, food coloring and chalk — Cracker Trail Elementary fifth-graders created works of art big and small Wednesday during the school's Day of Art program.

About 140 fifth-graders spent about one hour at each of the four art stations — chalk art and tie dye T-shirts outside and tile painting/glazing and color wheel food coloring inside.

Teacher Ian Belanger noted that the art day is funded with money collected from the Highlands County Tax Collec-

tor's Tag Art program.

He described the chalk art project.

"They are doing five giant pieces of artwork," he explained. "They are taking something that is about 3 inches by 3 inches and making it about 3 feet by 3 feet so it is like a big mosaic."

Each student was working on recreating a section of a well-known artwork, such as an Andy Warhol-inspired Campbell's Soup can. When finished, all the sections combined represent the complete art work.

Fifth-grader Cheyenne Middleton described the tile project.

"We make tiles and just put our own designs on them and then they are going to be glazed," she said. "We are doing it for our Tag Art day so we

ART DAY, Page 8



RYAN PELHAM/STAFF

Bailey Erb works on a chalk mosaic as part of the Cracker Trail Elementary's Tag Art celebration Wednesday. Proceeds from the tax collector's Tag Art program help fund the day of art projects for the students.

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