

Paynes Prairie Wildlife Preserve and Ecopassage Project

Paynes Prairie State Preserve in Alachua County, Florida is a rich habitat for a great diversity of wildlife including wading birds, alligators, snakes, frogs, and small mammals. There are even wild horses and bison within the Preserve's boundaries. The Prairie is transected by the major highways, I-75 and U.S. 441. More than 10,000 vehicles cross the Prairie each day traveling on U.S. 441 alone. Roads are dangerous obstacles for wildlife traversing the prairie. According to the Paynes Prairie Wildlife Coalition, the two-mile portion of U.S. 441 across Paynes Prairie is the deadliest section of highway for wildlife in Florida.

Biologists with the Florida Department of



A section of U.S. 441 that runs through the preserve which has more documented roadkills than any other road segment in Florida.

Environmental Protection estimate that more than one half million animals have been killed there in the last five years.

In 1998, a system of barrier walls and underpasses called an Ecopassage, was designed to reduce wildlife mortality on the section of U.S. 441 that transects Paynes Prairie. Biologists, resource managers and transportation officials hope that the Ecopassage will significantly reduce the number of animals killed by directing them to use culverts to safely pass under they busy roadway.

If the U.S. 441 Ecopassage is effective in reducing mortality, it will serve as a model for other roads in Florida and the world.

Biologists with the U.S. Geological Survey, Florida Caribbean Science Center (FCSC) conducted a study that documented pre-construction mortality levels. Researchers found that between August 1998 and August 1999 the total number of animals killed was 3,365. This total included:

- 1,333 frogs
- 1,291 snakes
- 374 turtles
- 265 birds
- 72 mammals
- 29 alligators

The two most common species killed were the Green Treefrog (*Hyla cinerea*) (13.8 percent of sample) and the Florida Watersnake (*Nerodia fasciata*) (12.7 percent).



GreenTreefrog and Florida Watersnake

These figures probably under-represent the total number of animals killed because of the dry conditions during the sampling period. Also, the figures only include animals found during the three days per week that sampling was conducted.



Sunrise on Paynes Prairie, a large fresh-water marsh located just south of Gainesville, Florida.

The \$3.8 million Ecopassage was completed in early 2001 and is being monitored by FCSC biologists to determine its effectiveness in reducing wildlife mortality and maintaining natural wildlife movement patterns.

While scientists at the FCSC continue their research, the public can follow some basic guidelines that will facilitate the study as well as protect wildlife.

- Don't throw trash on the side of the roadway – even if it is biodegradable. Animals that are drawn to the road by food are more likely to be killed by motor vehicles.
- Never feed the wildlife. Feeding animals is not only dangerous to you, it also encourages the animals to approach humans near the roads.
- Slow down and enjoy the natural beauty. You will be less likely to hit an animal that is crossing the road.
- Do not pull off the road except in designated areas for emergencies.