

West Crystal Lake



West Crystal Lake in 2002 (USF)

This narrative is based on an interview conducted with Darrell Leidigh on January 24, 2002 at his home and on his pontoon on West Crystal Lake. Darrell is an avid naturalist and during the interview he spoke in detail about the wildlife and environment around the lake.

Personal History

Darrell Leidigh and his wife, Betty, have been living on West Crystal Lake since 1984; however, they have owned the property since 1972. Darrell is originally from Ohio, but moved to Florida in 1958 and fell in love with the marshes and wetlands. In 1964, he started building canoes and opened his own business, Mohawk Canoes, which he still runs today.

Before moving to West Crystal Lake, Darrell and Betty lived on Prairie Lake in Altamonte Springs but would come to West Crystal to go swimming. Darrell expressed the following about the lake:

“Back in the 1970s and 1980s West Crystal Lake was a mecca for people in Seminole County as a lake to swim in. The water was crystal clear, hence its name, with a white sand bottom and little aquatic vegetation.”

They decided to move to West Crystal because the area was a nice place to live and provided them the opportunity for many outdoor activities. Darrell described what the area was like during the 1970s and 1980s:

“When we built our house on West Crystal Lake in 1984, our lakefront beach was white sand, crystal clear water and we would swim using a face mask and flippers. The water was so clear we could easily see fish, turtles, etc. Now the water is cloudy and if our son jet-skis in the lake, he breaks out in a rash. Our white sand beach is now covered with a thick layer of muck. In 1984, congested, four-lane Lake Mary Boulevard was a two-lane road with little traffic. Most of the area where we used to ride dirt bikes and hike, and other people rode horses, is now developed into businesses and houses with lush landscaping. However, in the natural area left around the lake we have eagles, sandhill cranes, ospreys, wood storks and other critters.”



West Crystal Lake in 1959 (Betty Dedmon)



A sandhill crane on West Crystal (USF)

Darrell is an enthusiastic birdwatcher and living on West Crystal has provided him the opportunity to observe a variety of birds, including sandhill cranes that live on the lake year around. This sandhill crane population has attracted the attention of crane admirers from around the world. The head of the International Crane Foundation has visited the lake, as well as a photographer from the World Wildlife Fund.

History/Information



Small island on south end of the lake (USF)



Wood storks in 2000 (Leidigh)

West Crystal Lake is a 222-acre lake located in the Lake Monroe Watershed in Lake Mary, FL. The lake is shaped in such a way that the largest section narrowly branches off in the north-central area and then splits off into three smaller sections. At one point, this was called “The Narrows,” and complete navigation of the lake was possible. However, movement through “The Narrows” is no longer possible because of changes in the environment and land use. There is also a 40-acre island in the northeastern section of the lake with many live oak trees. However, much of this island is often underwater and only 5-6 acres, at most, can be seen.

According to Darrell, West Crystal and its neighboring lakes are “seepage lakes,” meaning that land is porous, allowing the water to seep down from higher ground. He said that because of this, “If you get an inch of rain, the lake comes up an inch.” During the summer of 2001, in the middle of the drought, Darrell said that much of the lake was dry. However, he and his wife took this as an opportunity to mow around the lake and pick up the trash that had accumulated.

Darrell described the lake as once being crystal clear with a white sand bottom. However, he stated that in the early 1990s, the water quality and vegetation began changing. He explained the changes he has seen:

“In the early 1990s that began to change with the water becoming less clear year by year and the water and lake shore becoming filled with exotic and invasive vegetation such as torpedo grass, cattails, water lilies, submerged weeds and algae in the form of green scum. When the lake level decreases, what used to be exposed white sand bars are now covered with inches of black muck.”

Darrell further stated about the situation:

“More nutrients in the lake obviously support more fish, birds and other wildlife, but make the lake unsuitable for swimming and other water sports. However, I feel the present state of the lake is not sustainable and the continuous flow of nutrients to the lake from fertilizer from the surrounding areas will continue to enrich the lake until the increasing algae deplete the amount of oxygen in the water and causes fish kills. Also, the increased build-up of muck might turn the lake into a marsh that may completely dry up in time of drought.”

Although Darrell worries about the changes in the lake’s health, he understands that the aquatic plants are one of the main factors in attracting wildlife to West Crystal. He explained the situation:

“We didn’t used to have sandhill cranes and ducks or much wildlife because there wasn’t enough food growing in there. You have a lot more wildlife.”

The first sandhill crane appeared on West Crystal in 1991. Darrell told the following story about their arrival:

“1991 was when the first sandhill crane came. The water was down and there was a sandbar out there, which is a muck bar now, and sandhill cranes roost in water about 12 inches deep. There were five of them. The next spring one pair drove the rest of them off...When you’ve got nutrients in the lake you can raise more fish...The one pair that started nesting here in ’91...I think they raised about 15-16 chicks. They’ve been pretty successful. It was about three years ago when they had young chicks on the other side...Since then another pair moved in.”

In addition to sandhill cranes, the birds that call West Crystal home include wood storks, purple martins, tree swallows, ospreys, eagles, red-shouldered hawks, barred owls, crows and egrets. According to Darrell, the small island in the middle of the lake often attracts roosting egrets and ospreys. Darrell continues to spot small mammals such as raccoons, armadillos, opossums and foxes around the lake.



West Crystal Lake at sunset in 2000 (Leidigh)



Shoreline of West Crystal in 2002 (USF)

Development

The area around West Crystal Lake, from Darrell's understanding, was used historically for growing citrus and raising cassava. He also stated that turpentine production was once popular in the area. Citrus production continued up until the early 1980s when the freezes of 1981 and 1983 killed many of the trees in the area. Much of this land that was once used for citrus has been turned into housing developments. Darrell expressed the following about development in the area:

"In the 1970s, the area to the north and west were orange groves with wide strips of vegetation between the groves and the lake. However, the hard freeze of December 1981 and January 1983 killed the orange trees and this bare, treeless land was developed into housing and a golf course."

In terms of residential development, there are currently over 30 homes on the largest segment of West Crystal. These houses have been built over the span of many years and range widely in age. However, the northern sections of the lake that are connected through "The Narrows" now fall into the Timucuan subdivision, which includes houses and a golf course. This area was developed during the 1990s.

Recently, Darrell and his wife purchased 40 acres of property on the northwestern shore of West Crystal Lake. They have donated this land to the City of Lake Mary to be used for water conservation and as a wildlife refuge. One factor motivating this purchase was to ensure the future protection of the natural environment around the lake.

The Future

West Crystal Lake has gone through many changes since Darrell first moved there in 1984. However, even with these changes, Darrell described West Crystal as "a nice place to live." When asked about the future of the lake, he stated his fear that the lake might one day turn into a marsh. Although Darrell appreciates the wildlife that now live in the lake because of increased aquatic vegetation, he wonders how to stop the situation from degrading. On the positive side, Darrell said that he and most of his neighbors on the lake have stopped using fertilizers and pesticides on their lawns because they now understand the negative effects that this can have on the water and environment. Furthermore, there is now protected land on the lake which can never be developed. Although there is not an active homeowners' association on the lake, Darrell said that the neighbors have worked together in the past to deal with specific issues. If there are any problems in the future, it is hopeful that the neighbors will again work together to solve them.

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