

## *Serendipity*: An unsought, unintended, or unexpected discovery



Photo by Nadine Myers

Looking at the seemingly barren landscape at Robinson Preserve, one might wonder where the restoration work has occurred. The answer to this question is that the lifeless landscape is, in fact, a habitat success story!

These apparently empty wastelands are, in reality, **salterns**, rare habitats. These special spots require a delicate balance of salt water, sand, and a very specific ground elevation in order to thrive. Salterns (also called salinas, salt flats, and salt barrens) are open areas where tidal waters pool and salt is concentrated through evaporation. While the Tampa Bay area has lost over 60% of these habitats since 1950, the Robinson Preserve Project has created an additional 10 acres of this valuable landscape.

The photograph above shows how incredible and dynamic this landscape can be. Taken in the fall, the explosion of colored glasswort plants are Florida's true fall colors. As with maple trees that lose their leaves come winter, many of these annual plants will die off in the colder months. They'll be seen growing again with bright spring greens as Florida's weather warms. In areas where the soil is overly salty, there may be few plants but the system still thrives and is yet another example of a unique wetland.



Photo by Heike DeWolf

Much like the desolate America deserts, things in the salt barrens are not always what they seem. Amongst the stunted plant growth are thousands of small holes, home to miniature **fiddler crabs**. These creatures play a vital role in this system, sifting through the sands to feed, filtering and cleaning the sand as they roll it into tiny balls.



Photo by John Hazard

A flash of pink denotes the presence of a roseate spoonbill, a visitor whose rarity matches the saltern habitat itself. These shy filter feeders use their spoon-shaped bill to dip into the water and collect their food. Higher on the food chain than the fiddler crabs, these birds wade through the water and leave their tracks in the barren sand.



Salterns have become one of our rarest landscapes in the Tampa Bay Area. Restoring and protecting salt barrens is a goal for Manatee County Conservation Lands Management Department, and its partners Tampa Bay Estuary Program and Gulf of Mexico Foundation.