.1. Look Up/Look Down. Don’t just look ahead as you walk these trails. Look closely beneath you: soft sand and mud are good places to observe signs that animals and birds have been here. Large animals like panther, bobcat, coyote and bear sometimes roam these trails. The common tracks are left by raccoon, opossum, wild hogs, armadillo, wild turkey and white tailed deer. Look up too - you may see wood storks, swallow-tailed kites, vultures or red shouldered hawks soaring high above.
2. **Pine Flatwoods.** This vegetative zone is dominated by tall, straight, needle-leafed Slash Pine, with an understory of smaller “scrub” including saw palmetto and cabbage palms. This is the highest and driest wildlife habitat found at CREW. The trees get their name from the early settlers who “slashed” the bark of the pines and collected its sap to make turpentine and rosins. Pine flatwoods have adapted and actually need frequent fire to be successful. However, development has prevented the occurrence of fire through the area and changed how the flatwoods mature. To try and correct this, prescribed burns are done at CREW to manage this ecosystem. Regular fires open up space for plants and wildlife, return nutrients to the soil and help prevent destructive wildfires.

3. **Depression Marsh.** During the dry season, if you look closely, you will notice that the land dips slightly and a field of grass and wildflowers can be seen. During the rainy season this depression fills with rain water and becomes a pond. This is an important breeding area for amphibians like frogs as there are no predatory fish that can survive the dry season. Notice how the pine trees and saw palmettoes don’t live in the depression marsh. That’s because they can’t tolerate wet roots for long.

4. **Cypress Dome.** You are standing next to one of the two Cypress Domes on these trails. The cypress is the most flood tolerant tree in Florida and can grow in areas covered in water most of the year. These areas can have two feet or more of standing water at the height of the rainy season, and even in the driest season the dark, rich soil is mucky or damp. The understory here consists of thick patches of ferns and other ground cover, and air plants and orchids cling to the rough barked trees. Cypress trees are deciduous, meaning they lose their leaves in fall/winter.

5. **Medicinal Plants.** At this intersection where the Green Loop meets one of the service roads, take a quick detour down the service road to the edge of this depression marsh. You will notice willow trees here – a sure sign that the ground is usually damp. This tree was called the “toothache tree” by Native Americans. The leaves contain the active ingredient in aspirin. If they had a headache, toothache or other malady, a Native
American or early settler would take a leaf, roll it up, put it between their back teeth and gently chew on this very bitter, pain relieving leaf. Go back the way you came to return to the Green Loop.

6. **Caracara Prairie Preserve Trail.** The red markers here lead you across the ditch (yes, you can walk through the water to get there) to the Caracara Prairie Preserve. It is co-owned by the CREW Trust and Collier County’s Conservation 20/20 program and offers hikers three miles of trails to explore. These trails traverse through an active cattle ranch, so if you hike them watch your step and keep an eye out for cows and calves.

7. **Hands of Man.** As you continue east on the White Loop, you will see benches placed along the trail. These were done as an Eagle Scout project. At this bench, you can sit and look across the trail at a canal covered over by water lettuce or other aquatic plants. This canal was dug to create the road bed on the opposite side of the canal and for drainage out of the nearby agricultural areas. Take a moment of quiet here. You may hear what sounds like birds chirping – but more likely you are hearing tree frogs. Also, carefully scan the water lettuce and you might see something peering back. Young alligators often use the thick vegetation as cover.

8. **Snags.** Here you may see tall dead pines and other trees. Dead trees are referred to as snags. They may have died but are NOT barren. Look closely and you will see numerous large holes in them. These holes were made by woodpeckers chipping away with their thick strong beaks and often become nesting sites for owls, other birds or small mammals looking for protection from predators.

9. **Wild Coffee Trail.** You are at the southern entrance to the Wild Coffee Trail which winds through pine forest, oak hammock and into a seasonally wet ecosystem called a popash slough (you may get your feet wet!). Be observant here – there is so much to see and hear: barred owls, water moccasins, swallow-tailed kites, ferns, mosses, oaks, graceful palms, and amazing mushrooms. Take your time to enjoy the remoteness, silence, and natural beauty along this part of the trail.

10. **Pop Ash Slough.** Here, you are in the middle of a low-lying area between marshes called the Pop Ash Slough. A Slough is a shallow, forested “river.” During the rainy season, this portion of the trail will be very wet and during the dry season, still damp and mucky. The Pop Ash tree, like the oaks, provides a great environment for air plants, bromeliads, and orchids – all epiphytes that use their roots to hold on to trees but don’t hurt them. They absorb all the moisture and nutrition they need from the air. Like cypress trees, popash trees are also deciduous (lose their leaves in fall/winter).
.11. Mushrooms. Remember to look down along the trail – particularly in areas where branches have broken off and lie along the trail, or where a dead tree has fallen over. You might see brightly colored mushrooms popping up. Mushrooms are the visible sign or “fruit” of the very important network of fungal “threads” that lace through the forest floor and act as nature’s recyclers – best known for breaking down dead wood. This fungus also connects with roots of living plants and trees and helps them absorb moisture and nutrients while in return it receiving photosynthetic nutrients from the plants which allows the fungus to survive. Plants and fungi need each other to have a healthy, fully functional existence.

.12. Succession. Looking south across the Green Loop where it intersects with the White Loop here, you will see a lot of young oak trees. If Pine Flatwoods don’t burn often enough, oaks and other hardwood trees will sprout and eventually take over – or succeed. This changes the habitat and impacts the kind of wildlife that lives here. This change over time is called succession and is a naturally occurring process in the absence of fire or other disturbance.

.13. Blue Shortcuts and Wildflowers. This blue marker post indicates a shortcut or connector trail. This trail leads back to the Cypress Domes at number 4. It is low and therefore often wet. In the springtime this trail is a riot of blooming wildflowers like butterweed, Baldwin’s milkwort, water pimpernel and marsh pinks.

.14. Game Trails. You may not see many animals here, but if you look closely, you will see small, low foot paths cutting through the shrubs/understory on each side of the trail. These are game trails made by animals using the same path day after day. Most animals are crepuscular – active primarily at dusk or dawn, or nocturnal – active at night. Predators would have an advantage in daylight and the mid-day heat keeps most animals under cover mid-day.

.15. Wildflowers. April is peak wildflower season at CREW but something is blooming most times of the year. You can find wildflowers all along the trail. Look for colorful blooms such as petunias, black-eyed susans, marsh pinks, sneezeweed and many others along the way. If you’re lucky you may find the beautiful grass pink orchid in bloom. A field guide for flowers is a good idea. Many wildflowers and other native plants at CREW are host plants for butterflies like the zebra longwing (Florida’s state butterfly), gulf fritillary, queen and viceroy. Various milkweeds are also found here and these host the popular Monarch butterfly.
16. **Oak Hammock.** The word Hammock is a Native American term meaning “shady place” or “resting place.” It represents a fertile area that is easily distinguishable from the surrounding Pine Flatwoods and is characterized by broadleafed trees (here, primarily Laurel and Live Oaks) and often cabbage palms and vines.

17. **Good neighbors.** Our neighbors to the north at the Bar None Ranch are excellent land managers, removing all invasive exotic plants from their property. That helps keep harmful exotics off of CREW lands. The combination of nearby open pasture on the ranch and oaks here at CREW make this area good wild turkey habitat. Watch for turkeys on the trail or roosting in nearby trees.

18. **Likin’ Lichen.** Here take notice of the white or pink patches of lichen on the older, bigger oak trees. Lichen are composite organisms of fungus and algae that grow together in a symbiotic relationship. Lichens are long-lived, but are very vulnerable to atmospheric pollution, so are good indicators of healthy air quality.

19. **Birds.** CREW is home to some amazing birds. Listen for the sweet trill of Carolina wrens, cardinals, and white-eyed vireos. Vultures, hawks and swallow-tailed kites can often be seen circling overhead looking for their next meal. Winter brings lots of cool migrating warblers and kestrels.

20. **Rest and Enjoy.** You may want to sit quietly on the bench here and make your own observations and tell yourself the story of what you have experienced. It’s not just the physical act of hiking that’s important. Your trip is unique and your observations are what matters. As you finish the trail, think about the importance of keeping wild lands wild. It’s important for people, plants and animals. This area helps maintain a clean water supply and provides food and shelter for birds and wildlife. Now more than ever areas like this need strong stewardship like CREW provides here.