

# Manatees Rescued from Bell Springs

April 15, 2009

On April 14, I received a call from Fanning Springs State Park. I was told that for the last several days local residents have been calling the park and other state agencies to report that up to four manatees were trapped in Bell Springs in Gilchrist County. After several hours of observation, I determined that there were five animals trapped in the spring run. None showed any sign of distress but all displayed frustration or fear. The area in which they were trapped was a half of a mile from the springhead and it was doubtful that the 50-acre area had any SAV (Submerged Aquatic Vegetation) due to the algae that has killed the SAV in the last thirty-five miles of the Suwannee River. I recognized four of the manatees as belonging to the Suwannee River herd. I recognized a cow with a calf by the prop scar that ran diagonally across her tail from left to right. She was one of 11 cows that gave birth in the Fanning Springs pasture area last November. I also saw two other herd members. One, whose name I do not have off hand, is distinguished by her tail, a third of which is missing on the right side. The other animal I recognized was Slot Tail. He has a 11-inch-deep by 6-inch-wide rectangular slot in the center of the end of his tail. I could not get close enough to the fifth manatee to clearly see any identifying markings in the dark brown water. Four large trees had fallen across Bell Springs Run in a heap, overlapping and interlacing the tops of each tree and making passage to the river impossible for the manatees. This area of the spring run is 17 feet deep and the tree tops extended from the bottom to fifteen feet above the water line. Although it was a low tide, the water was rising due to the flood. The crest is predicted to bring two to four more feet of water. The manatees would need

fifteen feet of more water in order to escape this trap. A small crowd had gathered, and people were coming and going with many showing no concern about the trapped manatees other than to ask a question or to try to tell a manatee story. All they were interested in was seeing the rising water. Very few showed genuine concern about the trapped animals. One of these was Doyle Frierson of Gulf Coast Utility Service of Cross City in Dixie County. He was on his way home but stopped to see what was going on. I showed him the manatees, the blockage in the run and explained the seriousness of the situation. Both of us agreed that, because of the rising water, something needed to be done quickly while there was still daylight and access to the blockage. After a short discussion, I told him I planned to put on my wet suit, launch my boat and, using my emergency folding tree saw and ax, try to clear a path for the manatees to escape. He told me to wait until he got back in about 20 minutes and drove off. Just as I was gearing up to launch my boat, Frierson returned with his son, Matt, and one of his crew, Michael Perez. They brought with them a Kubota 4X4 front end loader, a skiff with a 20-horsepower Honda, a chainsaw, and plenty of rope and chain. We quickly got to work. As we were dragging the first of the tree tops toward land, two Iron Workers – brothers Jeremy and Justin Purcell, who are working on the power plant in Levy County – were returning home to Gilchrist County. They stopped, and after I explained the situation, they pitched in unbidden to help. Although the tide was going out, the river was still rising due to the flood. Everyone was wading the rising water, sometimes chest deep, but they stayed until the job was done. After four hours of hard work and unparalleled silent cooperation – the kind only possible between men who know how to work – a passageway large enough for the boat to pass through was cut and cleared. That would be ample for manatee passage. Doyle and I believed that had we been one day later, the water would have been too high to attempt this rescue. A visit to the

area the next morning proved that to be true. That evening, six men discovered five trapped manatees and rescued them from the flooding Suwannee River. They used their own equipment on their own time and risking their lives by their own choosing. Each of these individuals saw their duty, took the responsibility on their own accord and preformed in a manner that some would call heroic. In the Tri-Counties of the Lower Suwannee River, rugged individualism is still a way of life for some of us. There is nothing heroic about doing your duty. And for the majority of those who walked away or drove by without care or concern, you have my sympathy for holding your manhood so cheaply.

*/\*Potestas Vigeo Per Adversum\*/*

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