

GOLDEN RIDGE PARTNERS

FREE GUIDE

The Highlands County Field Guide

The attractions, the landmarks, the fun facts, and an honest look at why people are buying land in the middle of Florida.

BY JULIANA SCOLARI

SEBRING · LAKE PLACID · AVON PARK

Most People Drive Right Past This County

They're headed to Orlando. Or the beaches. Or down to Miami. They blow through the middle of Florida at 78 miles an hour and never stop.

Which means Highlands County has spent about a hundred years quietly collecting an absurd number of interesting things while nobody was watching. A racetrack that's been running the same endurance race since 1952. A state park older than most of the state's development. A lake bigger than Manhattan. A town covered in 47 murals. A biological research station studying species that exist **nowhere else on the planet**.

I sell undeveloped land here. So yes, I have a bias. But I also wrote this guide with real, checkable facts and zero exaggeration, because the county genuinely doesn't need me to oversell it.

Read it. Visit. Then decide for yourself.

Juliana Scolari

Golden Ridge Partners

PART ONE

Ten Things Worth Seeing

Ranked loosely by how much they'll surprise someone who's never been here.

01 Sebring International Raceway

SEBRING · RACING SINCE 1952

The **12 Hours of Sebring** is the oldest sports car endurance race in the Americas, running every year since 1952. It's also one of the oldest continuously operating road courses in the United States.

Race weekend, usually in March, turns a quiet town into one of the loudest places in Florida. Teams fly in from around the world. Then everyone leaves and Sebring goes right back to being peaceful, like nothing happened. Even if you don't care about motorsport, go once for the sound.

02

Highlands Hammock State Park

SEBRING · ~9,000 ACRES · OPENED 1931

One of Florida's **first state parks**, developed with Civilian Conservation Corps labor during the Great Depression. Nine trails run through ancient hammock, cypress swamp, pine flatwoods and scrub.

The elevated boardwalk over the cypress swamp is the signature walk. Alligators below, old-growth trees above, and more than 120 recorded bird species around you. Entry is a few dollars per vehicle, which may be the best value in the state.

03

Lake Placid, the Town of Murals

DOWNTOWN LAKE PLACID · 47+ MURALS

Lake Placid is internationally known as the Town of Murals, with **over 47 large-scale murals** across the downtown district. Some have sound. Most have hidden objects to find.

And it doesn't stop at murals. There are **17 one-of-a-kind trash containers** built as companion pieces, **45 bird plaques**, over **27 clown cut-outs**, and a life-size bronze Florida black bear. Bring visitors here. They will not see it coming.

04

Lake Istokpoga

EASTERN HIGHLANDS COUNTY · ~28,000 ACRES · FLORIDA'S 5TH LARGEST LAKE

Nationally known for **trophy largemouth bass**. Anglers drive in from across the Southeast, and the lake is big enough that you can still fish for hours without seeing another boat.

For scale: Manhattan is roughly 14,600 acres. This lake is **nearly twice the size of Manhattan**. Try dropping that at a dinner party and watch someone pull out their phone to check.

05

Downtown Sebring Circle

SEBRING · NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Sebring's downtown was built around an actual **circle**, which gives it a character no grid-planned downtown can replicate. The historic district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Local shops, restaurants, and the Sebring Historical Society Museum are all right here. It's walkable, it's genuine, and nobody manufactured it for a brochure.

06

Archbold Biological Station

VENUS · SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS COUNTY

An internationally recognized field research station on the Lake Wales Ridge. Scientists come from around the world to study the ancient scrub ecosystem here, and much of what's known about Florida scrub ecology came out of this station.

Public access varies, so check before you go. But it's worth knowing that a globally significant research institution sits quietly in the south end of this county.

07

Arbuckle Creek Paddling Route

LAKE ARBUCKLE TO LAKE ISTOKPOGA · KAYAK OR CANOE

One of the better paddling runs in Central Florida. The creek winds through cypress swamp, grass prairie, ranchland and oak hammock — genuinely varied habitat in a single trip.

If you'd rather go loud and fast, airboat tours operate on Arbuckle Creek and Lake Istokpoga too.

08

The Caladium Fields

LAKE PLACID · CALADIUM CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Lake Placid grows most of the world's caladium bulbs. Not most of Florida's. Most of the **world's**. Caladiums are those tropical plants with huge colorful heart-shaped leaves, and the fields in full summer color are genuinely striking.

There's an annual Caladium Festival and a Caladium Arts and Crafts Co-op downtown. I did not know competitive caladium culture existed before I started working here. I'm now fully on board.

09

Route 621 Scenic Drive

AROUND THE EAST AND SOUTH SHORES OF LAKE ISTOKPOGA

Narrow, winding, and beautiful. It arcs around the lake and drops you into open countryside with occasional side roads leading to waterfront fish camps.

Drive it during citrus bloom and the smell of orange blossoms through the groves is something you will remember longer than you expect.

There's a community in Highlands County called **Lorida**. Stand next to the sign, add an F, and you've invented a new state. People do this. It's a whole thing. It costs nothing and it's genuinely funny.

Not every landmark needs to be a state park.

PART TWO

Entertainment & Everyday Fun

What people here actually do with their weekends.

On the Water

Highlands County has close to **100 freshwater lakes**. That's the headline. Bass fishing is the main event — largemouth bass, black crappie (speckled perch locally), bluegill, redear sunfish, and channel catfish. Winter through early spring is prime bass season, roughly December to April, when the big fish move shallow.

A Florida freshwater fishing license is required and easy to get online or at Walmart and Tractor Supply. Residents 65 and over and kids under 16 are exempt.

- **Lake Jackson** (Sebring) — has an actual swimming beach, which not every Florida lake can claim.
- **Lake June-in-Winter** (Lake Placid) — clear water, good mixed-species fishing.
- **Lake Istokpoga** — the big one. Fishing piers at Istokpoga Park and Windy Point Park.
- **Fish camps** around Istokpoga have been serving anglers for generations.

Parks & Trails

- **Sun 'n Lake Preserve** — pine flatwoods and wetland walking trails.
- **H.L. Bishop Park** (Lake Placid) — boat ramps, fishing pier, boardwalk, courts, grills.
- **Lake June-in-Winter Scrub State Park** — rare scrub habitat with lake views. Good scrub-jay territory.

- **Lake Wales Ridge WEA** — FWC-managed conservation tracts with hiking and wildlife viewing.
- **Lake Olivia** — a mile and a half sidewalk loop with a boat ramp.

Golf, Museums & Small Town Stuff

- Multiple well-regarded golf courses including Placid Lakes and Sun 'n Lake.
- **Lake Placid Tower** — observation views across the lakes region.
- **Sebring Historical Society Museum** — small, well done, genuinely interesting.
- **Historic Lorida Train Depot** — a preserved piece of local rail history.
- Three historic downtowns (Sebring, Lake Placid, Avon Park) with local restaurants and shops.

WORTH THE SHORT DRIVE

Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park is a designated Dark Sky Park with some of the darkest night skies in Florida. Astronomers travel specifically to be there. If you've never seen a genuinely dark sky, it will reset your expectations of what "stars" means.

FROM JULIANA

Here's my low-effort perfect day. Morning walk at Highlands Hammock, because the early light through the cypress is unreasonably good. Lunch on the Sebring circle. Afternoon hunting murals in Lake Placid. Sunset drive on Route 621 around Istokpoga.

Total cost: lunch, plus a few dollars for park admission. Total experience: pretty much the entire reason people end up buying here.

PART THREE

Fifteen Facts You'll Repeat at Parties

Every one of these is true and checkable. Use them freely.

1921

Highlands County was created from part of the original DeSoto County, and named for its **high terrain** — a genuinely funny thing to name something in the flattest state in America.

2×

Lake Istokpoga is **nearly twice the size of Manhattan**. About 28,000 acres versus Manhattan's roughly 14,600.

1931

Highlands Hammock State Park opened in 1931, making it one of Florida's first state parks — about **40 years before Disney World**.

1952

The 12 Hours of Sebring has run every year since 1952, making it the **oldest sports car endurance race in the Americas**.

Only

The **Florida scrub-jay** is the only bird species found exclusively in Florida, and this county holds one of the largest remaining populations on earth.

47+

Lake Placid has over 47 murals, 17 custom trash containers, 45 bird plaques, 27+ clown cut-outs, and a life-size bronze black bear. In one small downtown.

350+

A single **gopher tortoise burrow** shelters over 350 other species. That's why they're called a keystone species.

56

Roughly 56 arthropod species are endemic to peninsular Florida scrub — spiders, beetles, grasshoppers and ants found nowhere else.

1

The **Highlands tiger beetle** exists only on the Lake Wales Ridge. It is named after this county and lives nowhere else on the planet.

World

Lake Placid produces most of the **world's** caladium bulbs. Not most of Florida's. Most of the world's.

Ancient

The Lake Wales Ridge is made of **ancient sand dunes** from when sea levels were higher and these ridges were islands. It's the oldest such system in Florida.

1,000s

Some **saw palmetto clones** are estimated to be thousands of years old. That unremarkable palmetto may predate the Roman Empire.

120+

More than 120 bird species have been recorded at Highlands Hammock State Park alone.

Aquifer

Rain filters through the Ridge's sandy soil to recharge the **Floridan aquifer** — the principal drinking water source for the entire state.

2 + 1

Highlands County contains two cities, one town, and **13 unincorporated communities** – including Lorida, of road sign fame.

Lichen

Florida perforate cladonia is a **federally endangered lichen** that grows on this ridge. Most people go a whole life without reading that sentence.

PART FOUR

How to Think About Land Value Here

An honest framework. Not a promise, not a projection, and definitely not a guarantee.

LET'S BE STRAIGHT WITH EACH OTHER

I am a land seller, not a financial advisor. I am not going to print a return percentage in a free PDF and pretend I can predict what your parcel will be worth in ten years. **Nobody can do that honestly.** Anyone who shows you a confident appreciation number for undeveloped rural land is selling you a feeling, not a fact.

What I can do is walk you through the actual factors that drive land value in this county, so you can make your own call. That's more useful than a made-up number anyway.

The Five Factors That Actually Matter

1. Statewide Growth Pressure

Florida has been adding population at a pace of roughly a thousand new residents a day for several years running. Those people need somewhere to be. Coastal and metro markets have absorbed enormous demand already, and prices there show it. When the affordable inventory near the coasts runs thin, demand pushes inland. Highlands County sits in that inland path, roughly 90 minutes from either coast.

2. Carry Cost (This Is the Underrated One)

Property taxes on undeveloped land in Highlands County are low. There's no roof to replace, no tenant to manage, no HVAC to service, no landscaping contract. The annual cost of simply owning a raw parcel

here is small enough that holding it for a long time isn't financially painful. **Low carry cost is what makes patience affordable**, and patience is the entire strategy with land.

3. Supply Is Genuinely Finite

Large portions of the Lake Wales Ridge are in permanent conservation — state parks, FWC wildlife and environmental areas, national wildlife refuge land, and research station holdings. That land will never be developed, by design. Meanwhile agricultural land, citrus groves and cattle operations occupy a lot of the rest. The pool of buildable private parcels isn't expanding.

4. Existing Infrastructure

This one separates Highlands County from genuinely remote speculation land. There are **two hospitals** with 24/7 emergency rooms. A regional airport. A state college. Big-box retail, grocery, hardware. Paved county roads and the US-27 corridor. Land in a place that already works is a fundamentally different proposition than land in a place that might work someday.

5. What You Personally Do With It

Land value isn't only market value. A parcel you clear, fence, and eventually build on is worth more than an untouched one. Improvements, legal access, and utility availability all move the number. The most reliable way to increase what your land is worth is to actually do something with it.

THE HONEST RISK COLUMN

Land is illiquid. It does not sell in a weekend. If you need cash quickly, raw land is the wrong place for it. Plan on a long hold.

Value is not guaranteed. Markets move both directions. Rural land can sit flat for years.

Parcel specifics matter enormously. Access, zoning, elevation, wetland presence, and protected species habitat all affect what you can do and what it's worth. Two parcels a mile apart are not the same asset.

I would rather you know all of this before you buy than discover it after.

Building: The Part People Underestimate

A lot of buyers here purchase with a build in mind — someday, not tomorrow. Two things are genuinely favorable in Highlands County:

- **Construction costs are lower than metro areas.** Labor and services are less expensive in rural Florida than in Tampa or Orlando. This is straightforward economics, not a secret.

- **Permitting is reasonable.** The county has clear guidelines for rural land and a workable process. You're not looking at an eight-month bureaucratic marathon.

There is also no rule requiring you to build immediately. Buy while it's affordable, plan at your own pace, build when you're ready. The land is extremely patient. It's land.

FROM JULIANA

My actual advice, for whatever it's worth: don't buy land expecting to get rich. Buy land because you want to own a piece of somewhere real, and because the cost of holding it while Florida keeps growing is genuinely low.

If it appreciates well, that's a good outcome. If it just sits there being yours for a decade while you plan something, that's also a good outcome. The people I see happiest with their purchase are the ones who wanted the land itself, not just the number.

PART FIVE

Useful Things to Know

Quick reference for anyone visiting, buying, or just curious.

The Basics

ITEM	DETAIL
County seat	Sebring
Main towns	Sebring, Lake Placid, Avon Park
Approx. population	~100,000
County size	~1,028 sq miles
Distance to either coast	~90 minutes
Distance to Orlando	~90 min – 2 hrs
USDA growing zone	9b (25–30°F min)
Freshwater lakes	Close to 100

ITEM	DETAIL
Hospitals with 24/7 ER	2

What Grows Here (Zone 9b Highlights)

Zone 9b is a strong growing zone – subtropical capability with just enough winter chill for fruit trees that need it. Freezes happen, but they're brief and infrequent.

- **Citrus** – oranges, grapefruit, lemons, limes, tangerines. This is citrus country for a reason.
- **Reliable fruit trees** – fig, loquat, pomegranate, Asian persimmon, jujube, mulberry.
- **Low-chill peaches** – University of Florida has bred varieties specifically for Florida's low chill hours.
- **Vegetables** – sweet potato, okra, southern peas, collards, kale, peppers, eggplant.

THE MISTAKE EVERY TRANSPLANT MAKES

Planting on a northern schedule. In Florida, **fall is your main planting season**, not spring. Tomatoes and peppers go in late August through early September for fall harvest. Trees and shrubs go in October through November. Late May through early July is the dead zone – too hot, too wet, too much transplant shock.

Also: sandy scrub soil drains beautifully and holds almost nothing. Amend it with organic matter or you'll be watering forever.

Wildlife You'll Meet

- **Florida scrub-jay** – federally threatened, and the only bird species found exclusively in Florida. Blue and gray, bold, and remarkable. Protected – enjoy them, don't feed them.
- **Gopher tortoise** – state threatened, and so are their burrows. If you have burrows on a parcel and plan to build, contact FWC early. The process is manageable, but it has to be done right.
- **Florida black bear** – present in the wilder areas. Generally shy. Bear issues in Florida are almost always a garbage-management problem, not an aggression problem.
- **American alligator** – in and around every lake. Standard rules: never feed them, keep pets away from shorelines, don't swim unmarked water at dusk.
- **Also common** – bald eagle, osprey, sandhill crane, white-tailed deer, wild turkey, bobcat, river otter, armadillo.

FWC Wildlife Alert — 1-888-404-3922. Nuisance gator, injured animal, or something on a property you're unsure about. They'd rather answer a question than clean up a problem.

Florida 811 — dial 811. Free, legally required, two business days notice before *any* digging. Hitting a buried line is expensive, dangerous, and a miserable story to tell.

The Seasons, Honestly

- **December–February** — the payoff. Highs often in the 70s, low humidity, cool nights. Best months for everything outdoors.
- **March–May** — warming but not oppressive. Orange blossom season. Race weekend in March.
- **June–September** — hot and humid, highs in the low 90s. Trade-off: near-daily afternoon thunderstorms that drop the temperature 15 degrees and usually end in a rainbow. Everything is aggressively green.
- **October–November** — arguably the best stretch. Humidity breaks, temperatures moderate, everything still green from summer.
- **Hurricane season (June 1–Nov 30)** — being inland means **no storm surge exposure**, which is the most destructive element of a hurricane. Wind and rain still happen. Have a plan.

PART SIX

If You Want to See It for Yourself

No pressure, no countdown timers, no fake scarcity. Just land.

I sell undeveloped land in Highlands County with **owner financing**. That means no banks, no credit checks, and no interest. A manageable amount down, affordable monthly payments, and the land is yours free and clear when it's paid off.

I do it this way because banks won't write loans on small land purchases — the amounts are too low for them to bother with. That locks out exactly the people who most want to own something real. So I cut the bank out entirely and finance it myself.

Every lot on our site has real photos and real pricing. What you see is what you get. And if you buy a parcel and it doesn't feel right, our **100 Day Love It or Swap It guarantee** means I'll move you into a

different one.

FREE • NO SPAM

Join the VIP List

Early access to new Highlands County lots before they go public, plus a credit toward your first purchase — and the full VIP Landowner's Guide.

goldenrp.land/become-vip

What VIP Members Also Get

The complete **Highlands County Landowner's Guide** — a much deeper reference than this one, covering:

- Full utility, emergency, and county office contact directory
- Internet and cell coverage breakdown by provider
- Garbage, recycling, and landfill details
- Complete Zone 9b planting calendar
- Native and endemic species field reference
- Practical notes on taxes, access, boundaries, and building

Or just reach out directly. I answer emails and I pick up the phone. That's not a marketing line — it's genuinely how this works.

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Come see it. That's really all I'm asking.

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Information verified at time of publication. Details, providers, fees and regulations change — confirm directly before relying on anything here for an important decision. This guide is a courtesy resource and is not legal, financial, tax, engineering or construction advice. Nothing in this guide is a projection, guarantee or representation of investment returns. Land values can rise or fall. For questions about a specific parcel — zoning, permitting, access, boundaries or protected species — consult the appropriate county office or a licensed professional.

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