

GOLDEN RIDGE PARTNERS



The Highlands County *Landowner's Guide*

*Everything you actually need to know about owning
land in Highlands County, Florida. Contacts, critters,
plants, places, and a few things that will surprise you.*

WRITTEN BY JULIANA SCOLARI

GOLDEN RIDGE PARTNERS

SEBRING · LAKE PLACID · AVON PARK

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Skip around. Use what you need. Nobody's grading you on this.

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Welcome to *Highlands County*

Where the terrain is high, the lakes are enormous, and nobody is in a hurry.

First things first: congratulations. You now own land in one of the most interesting and least understood counties in Florida. That's not a sales line. I'm done selling to you. You already bought. Now I just want you to actually enjoy it.

Here's the thing about Highlands County that took me a while to fully appreciate. Most people drive right past it on their way somewhere else. They're headed to the beaches, or to Orlando, or down to Miami, and they blow through the middle of the state without stopping. Which means this county has spent decades quietly accumulating an almost ridiculous number of interesting things while nobody was paying attention.

A racetrack that's been running the same endurance race since 1952. A state park that opened in 1931. A lake that's bigger than Manhattan. An internationally recognized biological research station studying species that exist literally nowhere else on the planet. A town covered in 47 murals. Another town with a downtown circle listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

And now, a piece of it belongs to you.

JULIANA SAYS

I put this guide together because I kept getting the same questions after people bought. "Who do I call for power?" "What can I plant?" "Is that a scrub jay or just a regular blue bird?" (It's probably a scrub jay. More on that later.)

Rather than answer these one at a time forever, I wrote it all down. Everything in here is real, verified, and useful. If something changes, email me and I'll fix it in the next version.

Use this guide however you want. Read it cover to cover. Skip to the wildlife section because you saw something weird in your yard. Print the emergency numbers and stick them on your fridge. It's yours now. Same as the land.

SECTION TWO

Emergency *Numbers*

Put these in your phone before you need them. That's the entire point of emergency numbers.

Life-Threatening Emergency

911

Fire, medical emergency, crime in progress, car accident with injuries. Works everywhere in Highlands County. If you're on rural land and don't have a street address yet, give them your GPS coordinates or the nearest cross streets and describe landmarks. Dispatchers here are used to rural calls and they are genuinely good at finding people.

Non-Emergency & Support Lines

SERVICE	NUMBER	NOTES
Highlands County Sheriff's Office	(863) 402-7200	Non-emergency dispatch, reports, questions
Sebring Police Department	(863) 471-5108	City of Sebring, non-emergency
Avon Park Police Department	(863) 453-4444	City of Avon Park, non-emergency
Lake Placid Police Department	(863) 699-3757	Town of Lake Placid, non-emergency

SERVICE	NUMBER	NOTES
Florida Highway Patrol	*FHP (*347)	<i>From cell phone, highway incidents</i>
Poison Control (National)	1-800-222-1222	<i>24/7, free, staffed by pharmacists and nurses</i>
FWC Wildlife Alert Hotline	1-888-404-3922	<i>Nuisance gators, injured wildlife, poaching</i>
Florida 811 (Call Before You Dig)	811	<i>Free. Required by law. Call 2 business days ahead.</i>
Highlands County Emergency Management	(863) 385-1112	<i>Hurricane info, shelters, evacuation</i>

THE ONE NUMBER EVERYONE FORGETS

811. If you are going to dig on your property for literally any reason, call 811 first. It's free, it's the law in Florida, and they will come mark any buried utility lines. Two business days notice. Hitting a buried line is expensive, dangerous, and deeply embarrassing to explain at dinner parties.

SECTION THREE

Utilities: *Power, Water, Gas*

Who serves your land depends on exactly where it sits. Here's the full rundown.

Electric Providers

Highlands County is served by three main electric providers, and which one covers your parcel depends entirely on location. Sometimes it changes on the same road. This is normal and not a conspiracy.

PROVIDER	NUMBER	COVERAGE
Duke Energy Florida	1-800-700-8744	Largest provider in the county
Glades Electric Cooperative	(863) 946-6200	Member-owned co-op, rural southern areas
Florida Power & Light (FPL)	1-888-488-7703	Serves portions of the county

JULIANA SAYS

Don't guess which provider you have. Call one, give them your parcel address or ID, and if it's not them, they'll tell you who it is. They deal with this constantly and nobody gets annoyed about it.

Water & Sewer

Municipal water is available inside city and town limits. If your land is outside those limits, you'll be looking at a well and septic system. That's completely normal in rural Highlands County and there are plenty of local contractors who do this work regularly.

PROVIDER	NUMBER	COVERAGE
City of Sebring Utilities	(863) 471-5112	Water & sewer within Sebring city limits
City of Avon Park Water Dept.	(863) 452-4433	Water within Avon Park
Town of Lake Placid	(863) 699-3747	Water within Lake Placid town limits
Highlands County Health Dept.	(863) 386-6040	Septic permits & well water testing

Natural Gas

PROVIDER	NUMBER	COVERAGE
Sebring Gas System	(863) 385-0194	Serves Sebring, Avon Park, and Lake Placid

Natural gas service is limited to areas with existing gas lines, which generally means in and around the three towns. Rural properties typically use propane, and there are several propane suppliers operating in the county who will deliver and install tanks.

TIMING TIP

If you're setting up utilities for a build, start the conversation **two to three weeks before** you actually need service. Rural connections sometimes require line extensions, which takes longer than flipping a switch in a subdivision. Nobody is being slow on purpose. There are just more feet of wire involved.

SECTION FOUR

Internet & Connectivity

The single most common question I get from remote workers. Short answer: yes, it works.

Rural internet in Florida has improved dramatically in recent years, and Highlands County has more options than most people expect. Availability varies significantly by exact street address, so check each provider individually rather than assuming.

Fiber & Cable

Best speeds where available

Conexon Connect — Fiber, speeds up to 2,000 Mbps in served areas. Rural fiber expansion is ongoing.

CenturyLink / Brightspeed — Fiber and DSL, up to 200 Mbps depending on infrastructure.

Comcast Xfinity — Cable service in and around town limits.

Wireless & Satellite

Works almost anywhere

T-Mobile Home Internet — Fixed wireless, up to 100 Mbps. Very popular in rural Florida.

Verizon 5G Home — Fixed wireless, up to 300 Mbps in coverage areas.

Starlink — Satellite. Works essentially anywhere with sky view. Higher upfront hardware cost.

If your land is genuinely remote and you need reliable internet for work, Starlink is the answer that solves it every time. It costs more upfront but it does not care how far you are from a fiber line. I know several people out here running full-time remote jobs on it without issue.

Cell Service

Coverage from the major carriers (Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile) is generally good along the US-27 corridor and in and around the three towns. It thins out in the more rural eastern and southern parts of the county, particularly around the Lake Wales Ridge conservation areas and out toward Lorida and Venus. If cell service matters for your specific parcel, test it in person before assuming.

SECTION FIVE

Garbage, Recycling & *the Landfill*

I promise this section is more interesting than the title suggests. Slightly.

Who Handles What

Highlands County contracts curbside residential collection through a private hauler. The county operates the landfill and recycling facilities directly. If your land doesn't have an active residence yet, you'll be hauling debris to the landfill yourself, which is easy and inexpensive.

SERVICE	NUMBER	NOTES
Curbside Hauler (Florida Waste Solutions)	(863) 655-0005	<i>Missed pickups, cart repair/replacement, white goods & tires</i>
Highlands County Solid Waste	(863) 402-6505	<i>County department, service questions</i>

SERVICE	NUMBER	NOTES
Highlands County Landfill	(863) 402-7780	12700 Arbuckle Creek Road, Sebring FL 33870
Recycling Questions	(863) 402-7786	Landfill office recycling line
City of Sebring Special Pickups	(863) 471-5115	Bulk/extraordinary waste inside city limits

The Landfill (Actually Worth Knowing About)

The Highlands County Solid Waste Management Center sits on a 98-acre site on Arbuckle Creek Road, surrounded by hayfields and grazing cattle. It handles household trash, yard debris, construction and demolition debris, tires, metal, and agricultural plastics. There's also a landfill gas recovery facility on site.

The **Skipper Road Recycling Center in Sebring** is where you take the stuff you can't put in a regular bin: used oil, gas, chemicals, pesticides, paint, antifreeze, and electronic waste. This is a free service for county residents and it's the correct place for that half-empty can of deck stain that's been in your shed since the Obama administration.

FUN FACT

The landfill's Class I disposal area uses a **double synthetic lined system** and covers 35 acres of a 147-acre total disposal footprint. It also captures methane through a gas recovery facility. This is genuinely modern infrastructure. Not what most people picture when they hear "county landfill."

CURBSIDE BASICS (IF YOU BUILD)

Carts out by **7:00 AM** on collection day. Collection happens between 7 AM and 9 PM and times vary week to week. Everything must be in the provided cart — bags outside the cart don't get picked up by the mechanical arm. Bulk items max 6 feet long, bundles under 50 pounds, 2 cubic yards per week. Mattresses must be wrapped in plastic. White goods and tires require a separate call.

Healthcare & *Hospitals*

Two full hospitals with 24/7 emergency rooms. In a county of about 100,000 people. That's better coverage than a lot of places twice this size.

AdventHealth Sebring

4200 Sun 'n Lake Blvd, Sebring FL 33872 • (863) 314-4466

A 171-bed nonprofit hospital that has been serving Highlands County since 1948. It's a teaching hospital, a burn center, and a primary stroke center. The emergency department runs 24/7 and was the first hospital in Highlands County to earn silver-level Geriatric Emergency Department Accreditation from the American College of Emergency Physicians.

AdventHealth also operates emergency care locations in **Lake Placid** and **Wauchula** (just over the line in Hardee County), so there's coverage across the region.

HCA Florida Highlands Hospital

Sebring, FL • Joint Commission accredited

A 126-bed acute care facility serving Sebring since 1965. Offers 24/7 emergency care including a dedicated Senior ER with rooms specifically designed for older patients, equipped with hearing amplifiers and optical enhancement devices. Also provides women's care, minimally invasive surgery, orthopedic and spine surgery, general surgery, and cardiac care.

Other Health Resources

- ♦ **Florida Department of Health in Highlands County** — (863) 386-6040. Immunizations, environmental health, septic permits, well water testing, vital records.
- ♦ **Urgent care clinics** — Multiple walk-in clinics operate in Sebring and Lake Placid for non-emergency issues. Worth locating one near you before you need it.
- ♦ **Pharmacies** — Walgreens, CVS, Walmart Pharmacy, and independent pharmacies operate across all

three towns.

JULIANA SAYS

Something people don't think about until they need it: because Highlands County has a large retiree population, the medical infrastructure here is genuinely strong for a rural county. Two hospitals, specialty care, cardiac services, cancer treatment. You are not driving to Tampa for routine care.

SECTION SEVEN

Shopping & *Everyday Life*

Where to get groceries, hardware, and everything else you're going to need.

Groceries

- ♦ **Publix** — Locations in Sebring, Avon Park, and Lake Placid. The deli counter situation is exactly as good as everyone in Florida claims.
- ♦ **Walmart Supercenter** — Sebring. Full grocery, pharmacy, garden center, auto.
- ♦ **Winn-Dixie** — Regional grocery presence in the county.
- ♦ **Aldi** — Sebring. For when you want groceries and also a quarter you'll never see again.
- ♦ **Local produce stands & citrus stands** — Scattered throughout the county, especially along the highways. Worth stopping. Some have been operating for generations.

Hardware, Home & Farm Supply

- ♦ **Home Depot** and **Lowe's** — Sebring. Everything for building, fencing, landscaping, and the tools you'll convince yourself you need.
- ♦ **Tractor Supply Co.** — Sebring. Fencing, gates, land maintenance equipment, work clothes, and inexplicably good prices on things you didn't know you wanted.

- ♦ **Local hardware stores** — Several independents in all three towns. Frequently faster and more helpful than the big boxes for small jobs.

Everything Else

- ♦ **Lakeshore Mall** — Sebring. The county's main indoor shopping center.
- ♦ **Downtown Sebring Circle** — Historic district with local shops, restaurants, and small businesses. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- ♦ **Downtown Lake Placid** — Local shops and the Caladium Arts and Crafts Co-op.
- ♦ **Downtown Avon Park** — Historic main street with local businesses.

NEAREST BIG CITY SHOPPING

If you need something the county doesn't have: **Lakeland** is about an hour north, **Fort Myers** about 90 minutes southwest, **Orlando** about 90 minutes to two hours northeast. But honestly, between Walmart, Home Depot, Lowe's, Tractor Supply, and Amazon delivering out here, most people rarely need to leave the county.

SECTION EIGHT

County Offices & *Permits*

The people you'll deal with for taxes, permits, and paperwork. All in Sebring.

OFFICE	NUMBER	WHAT THEY HANDLE
Highlands County Property Appraiser	(863) 402-6659	Parcel info, assessed values, exemptions, maps
Highlands County Tax Collector	(863) 402-6685	Property tax payments, tags, licenses

OFFICE	NUMBER	WHAT THEY HANDLE
Clerk of Courts	(863) 402-6565	Deed recording, official records searches
Development Services / Building	(863) 402-6643	Building permits, zoning, land development
Board of County Commissioners	(863) 402-6500	General county government
UF/IFAS Highlands County Extension	(863) 402-6540	Free ag & horticulture advice, soil testing

JULIANA SAYS

Two offices worth knowing about specifically:

***The Property Appraiser** has an excellent online parcel search. You can pull up your own land, see the boundaries on a map, check the assessed value, and confirm everything is recorded correctly. Free, public, and genuinely useful.*

***UF/IFAS Extension** is one of the best-kept secrets in Florida. It's a free service through the University of Florida. They'll answer questions about soil, plants, pests, and land management. They do soil testing. They have Master Gardener volunteers who will help you figure out what to plant. It costs nothing and almost nobody uses it.*

SECTION NINE

The Ground *You're Standing On*

Your land has a geological backstory that's older than most mountain ranges.

Highlands County sits on and around the **Lake Wales Ridge**, and this is the single most interesting thing about the ground here.

The Lake Wales Ridge is what's left of ancient beach and sand dune systems. During earlier geological periods when sea levels were much higher, most of peninsular Florida was underwater

and these ridges were islands. As the seas receded, the ridges stayed. The Lake Wales Ridge is the **oldest of these systems in Florida**, running southward from Orange County down through southern Highlands County.

That means when you're standing on scrub land in Highlands County, you may literally be standing on an ancient beach. The white sand under your feet isn't ordinary Florida dirt. It's dune sand that's been sitting there since before the peninsula fully existed in its current form.

WHY THIS MATTERS PRACTICALLY

The ridge's thick sandy soils are how rainfall recharges the **Floridan aquifer**, which is the principal source of drinking water for the entire state. Water percolates down through this sand. The ridge is also dotted with sinkhole lakes, which is the visible evidence of that groundwater connection. Your land is part of a filtration system that supplies water to millions of people.

What This Means for Your Property

- ♦ **Drainage is excellent.** Sandy soil drains fast. This is genuinely good news in a state that gets 50+ inches of rain a year.
- ♦ **Water retention is poor.** The flip side. If you're gardening, you'll need to amend soil with organic matter or you'll be watering constantly.
- ♦ **Nutrients are low.** Scrub soils are naturally nutrient-poor. Plants that evolved here are adapted to it. Plants from your garden center may not be.
- ♦ **The terrain rolls.** Highlands County was named for its high terrain, and it's noticeably more elevated and rolling than most of Florida. Elevations here reach among the highest in peninsular Florida.

SECTION TEN

What Grows Here: *Zone 9b Guide*

Highlands County sits in USDA Hardiness Zone 9b. Average annual minimum temperature: 25 to

30°F.

Zone 9b is a genuinely excellent growing zone. You get subtropical capability with just enough winter chill for fruit trees that need it. Freezes happen but they're brief and infrequent, typically a few nights per year at most.

Fruit Trees That Thrive Here

- ♦ **Citrus** — Oranges, grapefruit, lemons, limes, tangerines. This is citrus country. Highlands County has commercial groves for a reason.
- ♦ **Loquat** — Reliable, productive, and beautiful. Fruits in late winter.
- ♦ **Fig** — Very productive in Zone 9b. 'Celeste' and 'Brown Turkey' varieties do well.
- ♦ **Pomegranate** — Drought-tolerant once established. Loves the sandy soil.
- ♦ **Asian persimmon** — Excellent Zone 9b performer. Fruits in fall.
- ♦ **Jujube** — Extremely tough, tolerates poor soil, produces heavily.
- ♦ **Low-chill peaches** — University of Florida has bred varieties specifically for Florida's low chill hours. Look for UF releases like 'UFBest' or 'Flordaprince'.
- ♦ **Avocado** — Possible with cold-hardy Mexican-type varieties in protected microclimates. Riskier than the others but worth trying.
- ♦ **Pineapple guava (feijoa)** — Handles Zone 9b well and needs some chill to flower properly.
- ♦ **Mulberry** — Grows fast, produces heavily, birds will fight you for it.

The Planting Calendar (This Part Is Important)

LATE AUGUST - EARLY SEPTEMBER

Plant tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant **now**, not in spring. This is counterintuitive if you're from up north. Spring-planted tomatoes in Florida hit peak fruit set right when June humidity triggers fungal blight. Fall crops mature in cooler, drier air and do dramatically better.

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER

Best window for planting evergreen trees and shrubs, including citrus. This gives roots several months to establish before summer heat stress arrives. Also the season for cool-weather vegetables: kale, collards, mustard greens, lettuce, broccoli, cabbage.

DECEMBER - JANUARY

Plant bare-root and dormant deciduous trees: figs, peaches, persimmons, mulberries, oaks, hickories. Also a good time for strawberries, which do well in Florida's mild winters.

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER

Bulbs and perennials go in now. Dutch iris, rain lilies (Zephyranthes), amaryllis. Avoid spring bulb planting — summer rains rot them before roots establish.

LATE MAY - EARLY JULY: THE DEAD ZONE

Don't plant anything you care about during this window. It's too hot, the rains are too intense, and transplant shock is brutal. Use this time to plan, prep beds, and stay inside with air conditioning like a reasonable person.

JULIANA SAYS

The single biggest mistake people make moving to Florida from anywhere else: planting on a northern schedule. Spring planting is a northern habit. Down here, fall is your main planting season and summer is the season you survive rather than garden through.

Also: amend your soil. Sandy scrub soil drains beautifully and holds nothing. Compost, mulch, and organic matter are not optional if you want a productive garden. UF/IFAS Extension will test your soil for you and tell you exactly what it needs.

Other Things That Do Well

- ♦ **Vegetables:** Sweet potatoes, okra, southern peas, collards, mustard, kale, peppers, eggplant, green beans, squash
- ♦ **Herbs:** Rosemary, basil, oregano, thyme, mint (contain it or it takes over), Mexican tarragon, culantro

- ♦ **Flowering plants:** Firebush, plumbago, bougainvillea, hibiscus, lantana, blanketflower, coreopsis (Florida's state wildflower)
- ♦ **Grasses:** Bahiagrass handles sandy soil and drought better than St. Augustine and needs far less water

SECTION ELEVEN

Native Plants *of the Ridge*

Some of these grow nowhere else on the planet. Not "nowhere else in Florida." Nowhere else on earth.

The Lake Wales Ridge scrub is one of the oldest plant communities in North America, and it contains one of the highest concentrations of rare and endemic species in the United States. Of the plant species that are considered Lake Wales Ridge endemics, many depend on this ridge for the overwhelming majority of their entire global population.

Roughly **45 scrub-associated plant species** are federally listed as endangered or threatened, most of them concentrated on the central Florida ridges.

The Common Scrub Community

These are the plants that define the landscape. If you have scrub habitat on your property, you'll recognize these:

Florida Rosemary *Ceratiola ericoides*

A needle-leaved evergreen shrub, not related to culinary rosemary. Forms distinctive rounded mounds in white sand scrub. Releases chemicals that prevent other plants from growing nearby, which is why you'll see bare sand patches around them.

Sand Pine *Pinus clausa*

Short-needled pine adapted to dry, sterile sand. Its cones often stay sealed until fire opens them, which is how the species regenerates after burns.

Scrub Oaks *Quercus inopina*, *Q. myrtifolia*, *Q. geminata*

Three species of evergreen oaks that stay short and shrubby rather than growing into trees. Scrub oak (*Q. inopina*) has its largest populations on the Lake Wales Ridge.

Saw Palmetto *Serenoa repens*

The classic Florida understory plant. Extremely long-lived — some individual clones are estimated to be thousands of years old. Yes, really.

Scrub Palmetto *Sabal etonia*

A small palm with most of its trunk underground. Nearly endemic to Florida scrub.

Scrub Hickory *Carya floridana*

A Florida endemic hickory adapted to dry scrub. Characteristic of the "yellow sand scrub" found on the southern end of the ridge.

The Rare and Endemic Ones

These are the species that make botanists drive across the country. Several are found only on the Lake Wales Ridge, and a few are essentially found only in Highlands and Polk counties.

- ♦ **Scrub blazing star** (*Liatris ohlingerae*) — Endangered. Endemic to Polk and Highlands counties. Purple flower spikes.
- ♦ **Pygmy fringe-tree** (*Chionanthus pygmaeus*) — Endangered. Grows only in Central Florida.
- ♦ **Garrett's mint** (*Dicerandra christmanii*) — Extremely rare. Found in the yellow sand scrub of the ridge.
- ♦ **Scrub mint** (*Dicerandra frutescens*) — Federally endangered. Highly aromatic.
- ♦ **Avon Park harebells** (*Crotalaria avonensis*) — Named for the town. Federally endangered.
- ♦ **Florida ziziphus** (*Ziziphus celata*) — Once thought extinct. Rediscovered on the ridge.

- ♦ **Scrub plum** (*Prunus geniculata*) — Endangered.
- ♦ **Scrub lupine, scrub buckwheat, wireweed, pigeon wings, papery whitlow-wort** — All rare ridge specialists.
- ♦ **Florida perforate cladonia** — A federally endangered *lichen*. Yes, an endangered lichen. It grows on open sand in rosemary scrub.

IMPORTANT IF YOU'RE CLEARING LAND

If your property contains intact scrub habitat, there's a real chance some of these federally protected species are present. Before doing significant clearing, it's worth a call to **UF/IFAS Extension** or the **Highlands County Development Services** office. This isn't me trying to scare you. Most parcels have no issue at all. But knowing before you clear is a lot easier than finding out after.

FUN FACT

Peninsular Florida scrub supports **56 endemic arthropod species** — spiders, grasshoppers, beetles, millipedes, and ants that exist nowhere else. One of them, the **Highlands tiger beetle** (*Cicindela highlandensis*), is confined entirely to the Lake Wales Ridge. It's named after this county. You live in the only place on earth that beetle exists.

SECTION TWELVE

Wildlife *You'll Actually Meet*

Who else lives here, what's protected, and what to do when you see something with teeth.

The Celebrities

Florida Scrub-Jay

Apelocoma coerulefens · Federally Threatened · Florida's ONLY endemic bird species

This is the big one. The Florida scrub-jay is the only bird species found exclusively in Florida and nowhere else on earth. And **Highlands County holds one of the largest remaining populations**, particularly near Sebring, Lake Placid, and Venus.

They're blue and gray, roughly robin-sized, and famously bold. They live in family groups where offspring stay and help raise the next generation's young, which is unusual behavior for birds. If you have scrub habitat, you may well have scrub-jays.

They are federally protected. Do not feed them, harass them, or disturb their habitat. Just enjoy them. They're remarkable.

Gopher Tortoise

Gopherus polyphemus · State Threatened · Keystone Species

You will see these. They're large land tortoises that dig deep burrows in sandy soil, and those burrows are used by **over 350 other species** for shelter — snakes, frogs, insects, mice, even burrowing owls. That's why they're called a keystone species. Remove the tortoise and the whole neighborhood collapses.

They are state protected, and so are their burrows. You cannot legally disturb or destroy an active burrow without a permit from FWC. If you have burrows on your land and plan to build, contact FWC early. Relocation permits exist and the process is manageable, but it has to be done properly.

Florida Black Bear

Ursus americanus floridanus

Yes, there are bears. They live in Highlands Hammock State Park and in the wilder parts of the county. They are generally shy and want nothing to do with you. Bear encounters in Florida are overwhelmingly a garbage management problem, not an aggression problem. Secure your trash, don't leave pet food out, and you will likely never have an issue.

Also Living Here

- ♦ **American alligator** — In and around every lake and creek. Standard Florida rules apply: don't swim at dusk or dawn in unmarked water, never feed them (it's illegal and it's how gators become dangerous), keep pets away from shorelines.
- ♦ **Eastern indigo snake** — Federally threatened. Large, glossy blue-black, completely non-venomous, and beneficial. They eat rattlesnakes. Leave them alone and be glad they're there.
- ♦ **Osprey** — One of the largest nesting concentrations is at Istokpoga Park on the north shore of Lake Istokpoga.
- ♦ **Bald eagle** — Florida has one of the highest bald eagle populations in the lower 48. You'll see them around the lakes.
- ♦ **Sandhill crane** — Tall gray birds with red foreheads. Loud. They mate for life and will absolutely stand in the middle of the road while making eye contact with you.
- ♦ **Wood stork, crested caracara, snail kite, grasshopper sparrow, red-cockaded woodpecker** — All present in the region and all species of conservation concern.
- ♦ **Florida mouse** (*Podomys floridanus*) — Florida's only endemic mammal species. Lives in gopher tortoise burrows.
- ♦ **Short-tailed snake** (*Stilosoma extenuatum*) — A rare Florida endemic that specializes in eating other snakes.
- ♦ **Red widow spider** — A scrub endemic. Related to black widows. Rare and rarely encountered. Just don't reach blindly into palmetto fronds.
- ♦ **White-tailed deer, wild turkey, bobcat, river otter, armadillo, raccoon, opossum** — All common.

JULIANA SAYS

*The single most useful number for wildlife situations: **FWC Wildlife Alert at 1-888-404-3922.***

Nuisance alligator? Call it. Injured animal? Call it. Something on your property you're not sure about? Call it. They're helpful, they're responsive, and they'd much rather answer a question than clean up a problem later.

FUN FACT

Highlands Hammock State Park has recorded **more than 120 bird species**. If you're even mildly interested in birding, this county will convert you. The combination of scrub, hammock, wetland, prairie, and lake habitats in a small geographic area creates an unusual amount of species diversity.

SECTION THIRTEEN

Water: Lakes, *Fishing & Paddling*

Highlands County has close to 100 freshwater lakes. Here's where to start.

Lake Istokpoga

~28,000 acres · Florida's 5th largest lake · Eastern Highlands County

This is the headliner. Roughly 28,000 acres of shallow, fertile water that is nationally known for **trophy largemouth bass**. Anglers drive here from across the Southeast. Despite its reputation, it's large enough and uncrowded enough that you can fish for hours without another boat nearby.

For scale: the entire island of Manhattan is about 14,600 acres. This lake is nearly twice that size.

Access: Lake Istokpoga Park (off US-98 past Spring Lake) has fishing piers and is genuinely peaceful. Windy Point Park is another access option. Istokpoga Park on the north shore has a boat launch and a short nature walk, and it's one of the best osprey-watching spots in the region.

Lake Jackson

Sebring

Sebring's centerpiece lake. Has a swimming beach, which not every Florida lake can say. Popular for boating, fishing, and lakefront walking. The city has developed public access points around it.

Lake June-in-Winter

Lake Placid area · Adjacent to Lake June-in-Winter Scrub State Park

Clear water, good fishing for largemouth bass, bluegill, and catfish. The adjacent state park protects rare scrub habitat and offers hiking with lake views.

Arbuckle Creek

Paddling route from Lake Arbuckle to Lake Istokpoga

One of the best paddling experiences in Central Florida. The creek winds through cypress swamp, grass prairie, ranchland, and oak hammock. Genuinely diverse habitat in a single trip. Kayak or canoe only — this is not a motorboat route.

Fishing Notes

- ♦ **Florida fishing license required** for freshwater fishing. Available online through FWC or at Walmart, Tractor Supply, and bait shops. Residents 65+ and children under 16 are exempt.
- ♦ **Primary species:** Largemouth bass (the main draw), black crappie (speckled perch), bluegill, redear sunfish (shellcracker), channel catfish.
- ♦ **Best bass season:** Winter and early spring, roughly December through April, when the big females move shallow to spawn.
- ♦ **Fish camps:** Several operate around Lake Istokpoga, including Henderson's, which has been serving anglers with what they describe as country hospitality for a long time.
- ♦ **Airboat tours** operate on Arbuckle Creek and Lake Istokpoga if you want the loud, fast version of nature.

FUN FACT

Lake Istokpoga shares **2.7 miles of shoreline** with the Royce Unit of the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area. So you can be fishing one of Florida's biggest lakes while directly adjacent to protected habitat containing species found nowhere else on earth. That's a fairly specific kind of good day.

SECTION FOURTEEN

Parks & *Preserves*

Where to go when you want to be outside but not necessarily on your own land.

Highlands Hammock State Park

Sebring · ~9,000 acres · Established 1931 · One of Florida's first state parks

This park opened in **1931**, which makes it one of the original Florida state parks and older than most of the state's development. It was developed with work by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression.

Nine trails wind through ancient hammock, cypress swamp, pine flatwoods, and scrub. The elevated boardwalk through the cypress swamp is the signature experience — you're walking above a working swamp ecosystem with alligators below and 120+ bird species around you. The old-growth trees in here have been standing for centuries.

The park has a campground with full facilities including showers, electricity, and water hookups. There's also a nature center, picnic facilities, and a paved loop road that's popular for cycling.

Entrance fee is a few dollars per vehicle. It is the best value in the county and possibly the state.

Lake June-in-Winter Scrub State Park

Lake Placid

Protects rare Lake Wales Ridge scrub habitat with lake frontage. Good hiking, excellent for spotting scrub-jays and rare scrub plants. Less developed than Highlands Hammock, which is part of its appeal.

Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area

Multiple units across Highlands & Polk counties · Managed by FWC

A network of conservation tracts protecting the ridge's endemic species. Hiking, wildlife viewing, and in some units, seasonal hunting. This is where a lot of the serious scrub-jay and rare plant conservation work happens.

Archbold Biological Station

Venus, FL · Southern Highlands County

An internationally recognized field research station studying the Lake Wales Ridge ecosystem. Scientists come here from around the world. The station has been a major contributor to what we know about Florida scrub ecology, scrub-jay behavior, and rare plant conservation.

Public access varies — check ahead before visiting. But knowing this exists in your county is worth something. It's a globally significant research institution sitting quietly in south Highlands County.

County Parks

- ♦ **Sun 'n Lake Preserve** — Pine flatwoods and wetlands with walking trails.
- ♦ **Lake Istokpoga Park** — Fishing piers, quiet, described by the county itself as a hidden gem.
- ♦ **H.L. Bishop Park** (Lake Placid) — Boat ramps, fishing pier, boardwalk, basketball courts, picnic areas with grills.
- ♦ **Windy Point Park** — Lake access.
- ♦ **Carver Park** — Neighborhood park with lighted ball field, playground, exercise stations, basketball.

- ♦ **DeSoto City Park** — Green space, softball field, picnic facilities.
- ♦ **Lake Olivia** — About a mile and a half sidewalk loop around the lake with boat ramp.
- ♦ **Highlands County Multi Sports Complex** — Organized sports facilities.

Nearby (Worth the Drive)

- ♦ **Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park** — One of the darkest night skies in Florida. Designated Dark Sky Park. Astronomers travel here specifically.
- ♦ **Lake Wales Ridge State Forest** — Large forest tract with trails.
- ♦ **Lake Jackson Mounds Archaeological State Park** — Prehistoric mounds site.
- ♦ **Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge** — The northern origin of the Everglades system.

SECTION FIFTEEN

Attractions & *Entertainment*

The stuff you'll take visitors to see so they finally understand why you bought here.

Sebring International Raceway

Sebring · Home of the 12 Hours of Sebring since 1952

One of the oldest continuously operating road racing circuits in the United States, and the **12 Hours of Sebring is the oldest sports car endurance race in the Americas**, running every year since 1952.

Race weekend (typically March) transforms the town completely. Teams from around the world, tens of thousands of spectators, and an atmosphere that's part motorsport event, part enormous outdoor party. The rest of the year, the track hosts other events, testing, and driving experiences. Even if you don't care about racing, go once. The sound alone is worth it.

Lake Placid: The Town of Murals

Downtown Lake Placid · 47+ murals and counting

Lake Placid is internationally known as the "Town of Murals" and has **over 47 large-scale murals** painted throughout the downtown district. These aren't decorative afterthoughts — they're commissioned works telling the story of the region.

And it goes deeper than the murals themselves. The town also features **17 unique one-of-a-kind trash containers** designed as companion pieces to the murals, **45 bird plaques**, **over 27 clown cut-outs**, and a **life-size bronze Florida black bear**. Some murals even have sound. Most have hidden items you can hunt for.

You can spend a genuinely enjoyable half-day doing this. Bring visitors. They will not expect it.

Caladium Fields & the Caladium Festival

Lake Placid · Caladium Capital of the World

Lake Placid produces the vast majority of the world's caladium bulbs. Caladiums are tropical plants with large, colorful, heart-shaped leaves, and the fields around Lake Placid are genuinely striking when they're in full color in summer.

The annual **Caladium Festival** draws visitors from around the country. There's also the **Caladium Arts and Crafts Co-op** downtown.

Downtown Sebring Historic District

Sebring · Listed on the National Register of Historic Places

Sebring's downtown was built around a **circle**, which is unusual and gives the district a genuinely distinctive character. The historic district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Local shops, restaurants, and the Sebring Historical Society Museum are all here.

More to Explore

- ♦ **Lake Placid Tower** — Observation tower with views across the lakes region.
- ♦ **Sebring Historical Society Museum** — Local history, well curated.
- ♦ **Historic Lorida Train Depot** — Small piece of preserved rail history.

- ♦ **Golf courses** — Highlands County has multiple well-regarded courses including Placid Lakes Golf Course and Sun 'n Lake.
- ♦ **Route 621 scenic drive** — Arcs around the eastern and southern shores of Lake Istokpoga. Narrow, winding, and beautiful. In citrus season the smell of orange blossoms along this road is genuinely remarkable.
- ♦ **Airboat tours** — Arbuckle Creek and Lake Istokpoga operators run wildlife tours.
- ♦ **Local restaurants** — Sebring and Lake Placid both have genuinely good local spots. There's a well-known tiki-hut restaurant serving surf and turf and alligator, a garden-setting restaurant in downtown Sebring with craft beer and creative menus, and an 80-year-old citrus stand turned country store. Ask around. Locals will tell you.

JULIANA SAYS

Here's a low-effort perfect day in Highlands County: morning walk at Highlands Hammock (get there early, the light through the cypress is unreal), lunch in downtown Sebring on the circle, afternoon driving the murals in Lake Placid, then a sunset drive on Route 621 around Istokpoga.

Total cost: whatever lunch runs you plus a few dollars in park admission. Total experience: the reason people move here.

SECTION SIXTEEN

Fun Facts to *Annoy Your Friends With*

Every one of these is true. Use them liberally.

-
- ♦ **Highlands County was created in 1921** from a portion of the original DeSoto County. It was named for the county's high terrain, which is a genuinely funny thing to name something in the flattest state in America.
 - ♦ **Lake Istokpoga is bigger than Manhattan.** Roughly 28,000 acres versus Manhattan's approximately 14,600. Nearly twice the size of one of the most famous islands on the planet.

- ♦ **Highlands Hammock State Park opened in 1931**, making it one of Florida's first state parks. It predates Disney World by about 40 years and Walt Disney World's entire existence by a comfortable margin.
- ♦ **The Florida scrub-jay is the only bird species found exclusively in Florida**, and Highlands County has one of the largest remaining populations in existence.
- ♦ **The Highlands tiger beetle exists nowhere else on earth** except the Lake Wales Ridge. It's named after this county.
- ♦ **The 12 Hours of Sebring has run every year since 1952**, making it the oldest sports car endurance race in the Americas.
- ♦ **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.
- ♦ **Lake Placid produces most of the world's caladium bulbs**. Not most of Florida's. Most of the world's.
- ♦ **Downtown Sebring was built around a circle** and the historic district is on the National Register of Historic Places.
- ♦ **The Lake Wales Ridge is made of ancient sand dunes** from periods when sea levels were much higher and these ridges were islands. It's the oldest such system in Florida.
- ♦ **The scrubs of the Lake Wales Ridge are among the oldest plant communities in North America**.
- ♦ **Roughly 56 arthropod species are endemic to peninsular Florida scrub** — spiders, beetles, grasshoppers, ants, and more that exist nowhere else.
- ♦ **Gopher tortoise burrows shelter over 350 other species**, which is why they're classified as a keystone species.
- ♦ **Saw palmetto clones can be thousands of years old**. That unremarkable-looking palmetto might predate the Roman Empire.
- ♦ **There's an unincorporated community called Lorida** in Highlands County. If you stand next to the road sign and add an F, you've created a new state. People do this. It is a whole thing.
- ♦ **The Lake Wales Ridge recharges the Floridan aquifer**, the principal drinking water source for the entire state.
- ♦ **Highlands County has two cities, one town, and 13 unincorporated communities**.
- ♦ **Florida perforate cladonia is a federally endangered lichen** that lives on this ridge. An endangered lichen. That's a sentence most people go their whole lives without reading.

SECTION SEVENTEEN

The Seasons, *Honestly*

No brochure language. Here's what each part of the year actually feels like.

DECEMBER - FEBRUARY • THE PAYOFF

This is why people move to Florida. Daytime highs commonly in the 70s. Low humidity. Cool nights. You'll want a jacket in the morning and you'll take it off by 10 AM. Occasional cold snaps drop into the 30s for a night or two, which is enough to worry citrus growers and confuse everyone from up north who packed shorts.

Best months for hiking, fishing, camping, working outside, and remembering why you did this.

MARCH - MAY • THE GOOD STRETCH

Warming up but not yet oppressive. Orange blossoms bloom, and if you drive Route 621 around Lake Istokpoga during citrus bloom, the smell is genuinely extraordinary. Race weekend hits in March. Spring wildflowers appear in the scrub. Rainfall is relatively low.

By late May things start turning. That's your signal to get outdoor projects finished.

JUNE - SEPTEMBER • SUMMER, FOR REAL

Hot and humid. Highs in the low 90s, but the humidity is the actual story. Your sunglasses will fog when you step outside. Your car seat will become a hazard between noon and 4 PM.

But here's the trade: nearly every afternoon around 3 or 4 PM, the sky goes dark, a thunderstorm rolls through, temperatures drop 15 degrees, the air smells like wet earth and ozone, and 45 minutes later it's sunny with a rainbow. This happens almost daily. It's a free show.

Everything is aggressively green. The caladium fields in Lake Placid peak. Work outside early morning or evening. Hydrate. Wear bug spray. Accept what humidity does to your hair.

HURRICANE SEASON • JUNE 1 - NOVEMBER 30

Real talk: Highlands County is inland, roughly 90 minutes from either coast, which means it does not get storm surge. That's the single most destructive element of a hurricane and you're not exposed to it here. What you do get is wind and rain from systems crossing the peninsula.

Have a plan. Know your evacuation zone if you build. Keep **Highlands County Emergency Management at (863) 385-1112** saved. Have water, batteries, and a way to charge your phone. Most seasons pass without incident, but preparation is cheap and panic is expensive.

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER • THE REWARD

Humidity breaks. Temperatures moderate. This is arguably the best time of year in Highlands County — warm days, comfortable nights, low rain, and everything still green from summer. Prime planting season for trees and shrubs. Prime everything season, honestly.

SECTION EIGHTEEN

Owning Land: *Practical Notes*

The unglamorous stuff that actually matters.

Property Taxes

Property taxes on undeveloped land in Highlands County are low. Genuinely low. Your annual bill will likely be less than what many people spend on subscriptions they've forgotten about. Tax bills are mailed in November and are payable through March, with discounts for early payment (4% in November, decreasing 1% per month).

Highlands County Tax Collector: (863) 402-6685

Know Your Boundaries

Before you clear, fence, or build anything, be certain about where your property lines actually are. The Property Appraiser's online parcel map is free and shows recorded boundaries. For anything

permanent, having a professional confirm boundaries is money well spent. Fence disputes with neighbors are a miserable way to start a relationship.

Access

Confirm how you legally access your parcel. Some rural lots front directly on a county-maintained road. Others are accessed via easements or private roads. This matters for building permits, utility connections, and delivery of anything larger than a mailbox. If you're unclear, the Development Services office can help you understand what you have.

Vegetation Management

Florida vegetation grows fast, especially in summer. If you're not building right away, you'll still want to keep the parcel from becoming impenetrable. Options range from hiring a local company to bush hog it a couple times a year, to periodic mowing, to leaving it natural if the parcel is genuinely wild scrub (which may actually be the ecologically correct choice).

Check with the county on any local requirements for lot maintenance, especially if your parcel is in or near a platted subdivision area.

Before You Build

- ♦ **Call the Development Services office** — (863) 402-6643. Confirm zoning, setbacks, and what's permitted on your specific parcel before you spend money on plans.
- ♦ **Septic and well** — If you're outside municipal service, contact the Health Department at (863) 386-6040 about septic permitting and well requirements.
- ♦ **Call 811 before any digging.** Free, required, and two business days notice.
- ♦ **Check for protected species** — Particularly gopher tortoise burrows and scrub habitat. FWC and UF/IFAS can help you assess this.
- ♦ **Get multiple local quotes** — Building costs in Highlands County are meaningfully lower than metro areas, but only if you use local contractors. Metro builders bring metro pricing.

*One more thing, and this is the most useful advice in this entire booklet: **go stand on your land.***

Not once. Multiple times. Different times of day. Different seasons. You'll notice things you can't see in photos — where the sun falls, how the water moves after rain, where the breeze comes from, which corner has the best view. People who spend time on their property before building make much better decisions than people who plan everything from a laptop three states away.

Also it's just nice out here. That's reason enough.

SECTION NINETEEN

Staying *in Touch*

The relationship doesn't end at closing. That would be a weird way to run a business.

If you have questions about your property, about the county, about who to call for something, or about anything in this guide — reach out. I answer emails. I pick up the phone. That's not a marketing line, it's just how I operate.

If you're thinking about a second parcel, or you know someone who's been priced out of land ownership everywhere else, send them my way. My whole model exists because the traditional banking system doesn't finance small land purchases, which locks out exactly the people who most want to own something.

Owner financing 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. That's the whole model. It's not complicated because it doesn't need to be.

Let's Talk

Questions about your land, the county, or anything in this guide.

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goldenrp.land

Welcome to Highlands County. I hope you love it out here as much as I do.

Golden Ridge Partners

The Highlands County Landowner's Guide

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All information in this guide was verified at the time of publication. Phone numbers, service providers, hours, fees, and regulations can change. Always confirm directly with the provider or agency before relying on any detail for an important decision. This guide is provided as a courtesy resource and does not constitute legal, financial, tax, engineering, or construction advice. For questions about permitting, zoning, protected species, boundaries, or construction on your specific parcel, consult the appropriate county office or a licensed professional.

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