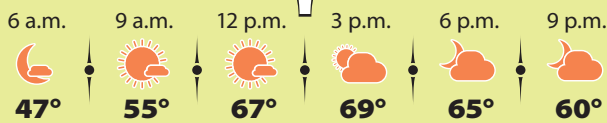




#### BEFORE THEY WERE VILLAGERS | C5

Fritz Neal belonged in the air, so he became a pilot first in the Air Force then commercially.



#### RYAN WEISS ON NFL | B1

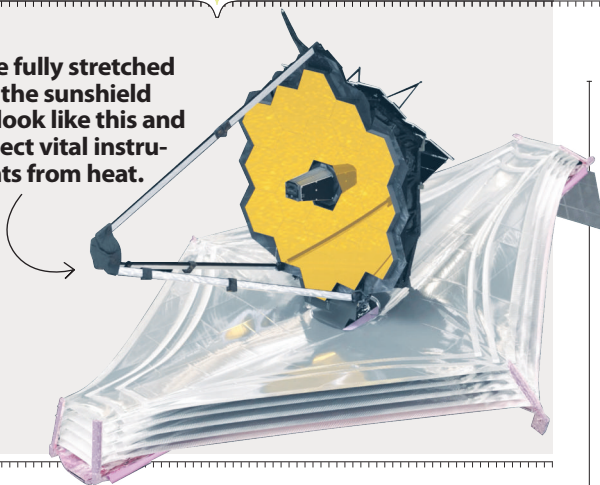
Weiss breaks down his top picks for this year's NFL awards as the season comes to a close.



## TELESCOPE IS 'HUNKY-DORY,' A14

NASA's new telescope, the James Webb Space Telescope, is almost done with the riskiest part of its mission: unfurling a tennis-court sized sunshield and stretching it tight. The process is expected to be completed by Wednesday.

Once fully stretched out, the sunshield will look like this and protect vital instruments from heat.



## Omicron's Spread Triggers Long Lines At Testing Sites

### CONFRONTING VIRUS CHALLENGES

The number of Florida hospital patients with COVID-19 has more than doubled during the past week.

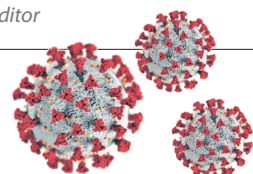
By CURT HILLS | Daily Sun Managing Editor

The risk of catching COVID-19 is high everywhere in the nation currently, evident locally by longer lines at testing sites and strains on the medical profession.

The national COVID data tracker usually displays its four varying levels of virus transmission risk, but Monday the Centers for Disease Control colored the whole U.S. map in red — indicating a high risk everywhere.

It comes as no surprise given that researchers warned that Omicron, the latest variant of coronavirus, spreads easily.

The public is lining up for testing in droves to see if COVID is responsible for their symptoms:



Florida officials are seeing coronavirus case numbers going up, but most of them are not being hospitalized with severe symptoms.

Please See COVID, A10

#### OUR TOWN | ECONOMIC IMPACT OF LEISURE ACTIVITIES

## Outdoor Recreation Still a Popular Choice



Rachel Stuart | Daily Sun

While visiting from Michigan, 14-year-old Alex Mauck, left, and his 11-year-old brother, Parker Mauck, spend time fishing at Lake Griffin State Park.

Traditional experiences, such as fishing and camping, accounted for a greater share of the Florida economy in 2020.

By MICHAEL SALERNO | Daily Sun Senior Writer

Nationwide and in Florida, green space often leads to greenbacks. Outdoor recreation activities accounted for about 3% of Florida's gross domestic product in 2020, above the just under 2% for the U.S. overall, according to recent Bureau of Economic Analysis data on the economic impact of the outdoors. Indications also show that the outdoors remained a popular choice into 2021. Activities classified as conventional outdoor recreation, like boating, fishing, RVing, hiking and wildlife viewing, remained steady in 2020 despite the industry challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. "We do know that places that were open (in 2020) like parks, they experienced tremendous growth that would not be seen in an economic analysis," said Taylor Stein, a professor with

Please See RECREATION, A12

#### ONLY IN THE VILLAGES

By Jeff Shain

It was 14 years ago that Bob Interdonato first shot his age on the golf course — a 77 at age 77. "The guys I was with said if I went to the office, they'd get my name in the paper," the Village of Poinciana resident recalled. "So from that day on, I've always put it in."

Not all that often at first, but more frequently with each passing year. After a while, Interdonato's name was appearing three and four times in a week. At one point, he compiled a four-year streak of at least 100

Please See GOLF, A13

#### THE TRAP, SKEET, SPORTING CLAYS CLUB HAS GROWN OVER 21 YEARS

Starting as a small group of friends around a kitchen table, the club now boasts more than 200 members of all levels of experience. Many of the members have an interest stemming from their childhood while others are new. C3

ALSO

#### GOVERNMENT GRANTS HELP BOLSTER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Funding from government agencies and businesses goes directly toward helping students learn. C10

ALSO

#### LOCAL MUSICIAN FOLLOWS LIFELONG DREAM OF PERFORMING

Charity Cox took inspiration from her favorite performers, but found strength in herself to take the plunge. D2

## STATE & REGION

#### FLORIDA NEWS

### No Beach Weather: Florida Panhandle Gets Snow Dusting

Parts of the Florida Panhandle got a dusting of snow early Monday after temperatures dropped dramatically from the previous day when the thermometer was at typical beach weather. The Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office posted video a deputy captured on patrol showing falling snowflakes bathed in the light of a lamppost in a store's parking lot. Only 12 hours earlier, the temperature had been 75 degree Fahrenheit, the post said.

— The Associated Press

#### Did the uncommon weather cause any problems?

Michele Nicholson, a spokeswoman for the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, said the snow didn't stick so it didn't cause problems. The county has two popular beaches, Fort Walton Beach and Destin.

#### When was the last time Florida got snow?

The last time the Panhandle had any significant winter weather was in January 2018 when a storm dumped snow in Tallahassee for the first time in three decades and forced schools, businesses and a highway to close.



Well how's this for a temperature change? From 75 degrees at 3 in the afternoon to snow at 3 a.m. Bundle up out there!"

OKALOOSA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

#### Was it in the weather forecast?

The National Weather Service in Mobile, Alabama, whose territory includes the Panhandle, warned Monday that it was going to be unusually cold and would feel colder than the actual temperature.



Entertainment news today, D2

In recreation centers today, D4-5

Happening on the squares today, D3

What to watch on TV today, D10



6 90548 00001 5



from the front page

COVID

Continued from A1

■ Walgreens reports it's seeing "unprecedented demand" for related testing and vaccine services.

■ Traffic to a drive-up testing site on County Road 466 backed up onto a westbound lane Monday morning.

■ Citing limited test kits, The Villages Health encourages patients to seek out major pharmacy providers like Walgreens and CVS, if a test is necessary.

■ CVS reports it's keeping up with demand and working around the clock to try to get more at-home test kits into local stores.

■ Paramount Urgent Care Clinic's parking lot in Lady Lake was full of people standing or sitting in vehicles waiting to be tested.

The state health department published a report Friday that showed 298,455 new coronavirus cases were recorded in the week that ended Dec. 30. The total more than doubled from the previous week, when the health department reported 128,186 cases. Additional data from the CDC was not available as of press time.

The number of Florida hospital patients with COVID-19 also has more than doubled during the past week, according to data posted Monday by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The agency reported that 5,700 inpatients had COVID-19, up from 2,406 a week earlier.

Locally, 40 were hospitalized locally Monday, 19 at UF Health Leesburg Hospital and 21 at UF Health The Villages Hospital, according to hospital officials.

"Three of these patients are in the intensive care unit, including one ventilated patient," said Heather Long, chief operating officer for UF Health Central Florida. "This increase in cases represents a new COVID-19 surge that is projected to create



Arianna Bennett | Daily Sun

People wait in the drive through line off County Road 466 to take a rapid or expedited COVID test provided by Covid Test Express.

a large volume of patients presenting to us for care in the ER's at UF Health The Villages Hospital and UF Health Leesburg Hospital. Although these cases may be less severe than those associated with the delta variant, the sheer volume of patients will be substantial. However, we expect admission rates to be significantly lower than with the delta variant and are equipped to treat patients presenting to our hospitals for care, including in our intensive care units."

Dr. Jeffrey Lowenkron, the chief medical officer for The Villages Health, concurs that the global snapshot that the Omicron variant is more mild than Delta variant, is holding true.

"The numbers are going up, but a lot of them are not being admitted," he said of overall cases.

He said the unvaccinated account for the majority of the hospitalized and those vaccinated with breakthrough cases are experiencing less severe cases.

This spike has also challenged staffing levels.

"We have staff out," Lowenkron said of the primary care centers. "So our patients need to recognize that and be patient."

But he said The Villages Health remains committed to caring for all of its patients.

Lowenkron said heavy media attention has contributed to more people wanting to get tested.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and his Surgeon General, Dr. Joseph Ladapo, said some of that rush to get tested may be frivolous.

Ladapo indicated the state Department of Health would issue guidance that would "unwind the testing psychology" of the federal government.

"We need to unwind this ... planning and living one's life around testing," Ladapo said during a news conference at Broward Health Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale on Monday. "Without it, we're going to be sort of stuck in the same cycle. So, it's really time for people to be living, to make the decisions they want regarding vaccination, to enjoy the fact that many people have natural immunity. And to unwind this

sort of preoccupation with only COVID as determining the boundaries and constraints and possibilities of life."

DeSantis pointed to what he characterized as frivolous testing for COVID-19.

"What you are seeing is there are people going to the drug stores, buying all these tests. They'll go multiple times per week to the sites and test, without symptoms. That is just going to contribute to some of the crunch that you are seeing," DeSantis said.

Walgreens corporate officials say they've administered more than 22 million COVID-19 tests already, but now with unprecedented demand, the availability of testing appointments fluctuates daily and some stores may have temporary shortages.

A spokeswoman with CVS told the Daily Sun the Florida-based pharmacy chain has provided 41 million tests already, and thus far, is meeting the growing demand for on-site testing requests.

Both pharmacy chains offer two types of tests. A Covid-19 PCR test typically produces results from a third-party lab in

24 to 48 hours. A rapid test, with a little less reliability, can provide results in less than 24 hours.

Walgreens customers can visit [walgreens.com/Covid19Testing](https://www.walgreens.com/Covid19Testing) and CVS customers can log onto [CVS.com](https://www.cvs.com) or on the CVS app for appointment information.

Both CVS and Walgreens are trying to keep at-home test kits in stock, but both have placed limit restrictions on how many kits a customer may purchase at once.

The drive-up testing site along County Road 466 is operated by Genesis Reference Laboratories in a partnership with Dr. David Kuhn, Covid Test Express.

Ladapo acknowledged the rapid rise in cases but said omicron symptoms are generally less severe than previous variants.

"Everyone knows omicron is spreading extremely rapidly," Ladapo said. "The good news is that it appears to be less virulent, and the hospitalizations are not increasing nearly at the rate that the cases (are) ... it's not close. There's a very big difference between the change in cases and the change in hospitalizations."

Ladapo said Florida's upcoming shift in the approach to testing would put an emphasis on higher-risk people, though he did not give specifics of the plan. He suggested that the new guidance "doesn't restrict access to testing, but reduces the use of low-value testing and prioritizes high-value testing."

Lowenkron echoed his long repeated message that becoming fully vaccinated with a booster dose, social distancing and hand-washing can go a long way in being the best measured responses to COVID-19.

"We're still going to see

more cases because we're still going up," he forecast. "So it will increase some more, then plateau and then drop. If you're asking me for a time frame, I would say two to four weeks, but take that with a grain of salt."

Long agreed.

"To slow this trend, it is critical that we all remain diligent in our effort to eradicate this virus by continuing to adhere to the guidelines established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Florida Department of Health," she said. "Among them are getting vaccinated — including receiving a booster if eligible, wearing a mask, staying six feet away from others, avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces, and washing your hands frequently."

CVS and Walgreens both offer appointments for vaccines.

The Villages Health, which operates seven primary care centers, offers first and second doses of the Moderna vaccine for its patients and those in the community. Initial vaccinations are available on a walk-in basis on Monday-Friday from 1-3 p.m. at those primary care centers.

The Villages Health also offers a Moderna booster dose, by appointment, for its established patients by calling 844-TVH-WELL (844-884-9355).

Lowenkron also encouraged residents to make sure they get a flu vaccine as well, noting that influenza cases are starting to emerge as well.

The Associated Press and Florida News Service contributed to this report. Curt Hills can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5287 or [curt.hills@thevillagesmedia.com](mailto:curt.hills@thevillagesmedia.com).

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