

## **Segment 22**

### **Space Coast**

**Emergency contact info:**

911

Brevard County Sheriff's Office: 321-264-5100, 321-633-7162

Volusia County Sheriff's Office: 386-423-3888

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

**Begin:** Front Street Park in Melbourne

**End:** Smyrna Dunes Park

**Distance:** 81-82 miles

**Duration:** 5-6 days

**Special Considerations:** Boat traffic can be heavy along the Intracoastal Waterway, especially on weekends and holidays. Paddling along the high energy East Coast shoreline is not recommended due to safety considerations. While some calm periods may make it suitable for paddling the coastal shoreline, conditions can change abruptly and there are few inlets to allow paddlers to move to more sheltered waters.

This is an area where large populations of manatees congregate. Manatees can become skittish at times, especially in dark water, throwing up a large amount of water and having the rare potential of capsizing a kayak.

### **Introduction**

This segment continues along the Indian River Lagoon, considered to be North America's most diverse estuary. Overlapping boundaries of tropical and subtropical climates have helped to create a system that supports 4,300 plants and animals, 72 of which are endangered or threatened. Paddlers are almost guaranteed to spot sea turtles, manatees, dolphins and a wide variety of bird life, from roseate spoonbills to bald eagles, depending on the season.

A highlight of the segment will likely be the Mosquito Lagoon, an inviting place of unspoiled islands and a labyrinth of tidal creeks that is sheltered from the Atlantic by Cape Canaveral and Merritt Island. This estuary is a vital nursery for fish, oysters, clams, shrimp and other sea life and, not surprisingly, it's one of Florida's most famous fishing grounds.

The abundant life of the Indian River and Mosquito Lagoon estuaries have attracted people for thousands of years. Timucuan Indians annually migrated to these shores from inland areas to gather clams, oysters and to catch fish. They left behind giant shell mounds, two of which can be seen today—Seminole Rest and Turtle Mound, both of which are managed by the Canaveral National Seashore. To learn more, log onto <http://www.nps.gov/cana/>.

The adjacent Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, like the national seashore, was established as a buffer zone for nearby National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) activities. It covers 140,000 scenic acres of brackish estuaries, marshes, coastal dunes, scrub oaks, pine forests and flatwoods, and palm and oak hammocks. To learn more, log onto: <http://merrittisland.fws.gov/>.

This segment covers two aquatic preserves, Banana River and Mosquito Lagoon. An optional route through the wildlife rich Banana River is highly recommended. The preserves help to maintain and restore water quality along with mangrove marshes and seagrass beds that act as nursery grounds for recreationally and commercially important species such as snook, grouper, snapper, seatrout, tarpon, and lobster. Also, many species of migratory waterfowl winter in the Indian River and Mosquito lagoons. To learn more, log onto: <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/indianrivernorth/info.htm>.

This guide primarily covers the western shore of the Indian River Lagoon as it offers more parks and boat ramps that can be used as rest areas and water stops. Plus, between Cocoa and Titusville, much of the western shore is a shallow manatee protection zone where boaters must observe slow speeds.

Leave No Trace principles should be utilized for any primitive camping outlined in this guide. To learn more about Leave No Trace principles, log onto: <http://www.lnt.org/>.

## **1. Front Street Park in Melbourne to Island #35, 18 miles**

Front Street Park has a boat ramp, restrooms and water and is a good launch site for this segment. Proceed north along the Indian River Lagoon. Bear in mind that although this stretch involves paddling in a relatively straight and wide water body, this is an estuary teeming with life. You may want to hug the shore to see more bird life and to view original Victorian homes, especially in Rockledge, an enclave founded in 1867.

Island #35 is one of numerous spoil islands created from the dredging of the Intracoastal Waterway in the 1950s. Primitive camping is allowed. No amenities are provided. Other islands have been designated for educational purposes and a few are designated as conservation, generally because they are active bird rookeries. Paddlers should keep at least 100 yards from the shore of conservation islands and observe birds quietly.

Island #35 is located 500 yards east of channel marker 80, a mile and half south of the Highway 520 Bridge. Access is on the east side.

Alternate Route: Paddlers can enter the Banana River Aquatic Preserve just past the Highway 518 Bridge in Melbourne. The Banana River has many notable features. Almost every East Coast manatee comes through the river due to its abundant sea grasses. Not surprisingly, the river is the site of the largest manatee aggregation ever documented outside of a warm water site (700). It boasts one of three diamondback terrapin sites on the East Coast, counting the Keys. It has the largest known brown pelican rookery, a large great blue heron rookery, and it is a major place for dolphins. Just north of Port Canaveral, a manatee protection zone exists where no motorized watercraft are allowed.

To break up this stretch, the 53-acre Samsons Island is available for camping in the southern end of the Banana River near Satellite Beach. It lies about 6.5 miles from the launch in Melbourne. Free permits must be obtained from the city prior to camping, either in person or by fax. Contact info: City of Satellite Beach, 1089 South Patrick Drive, Satellite Beach, FL 32937 (321) 773-6458; Fax: (321) 779-1388. There are fire pits, grills and a port-a-let on the island, but no water or other facilities. Campers are advised to pack it in and pack it out. The permit holder must be 18 years old or older and must remain on the island for the duration of the permit.

The next campsite is on Ski Island near Port Canaveral. Ski Island is about 23.5 miles from Front Street Park in Melbourne, or about 17 miles from Samsons Island. From Ski Island, you may want to spend a day exploring the no-motor zone of the Banana River north of the power lines. Thousands of alligators and other wildlife frequent this area. Canine companions should be left at home as they will attract alligators. Fishing is considered excellent. Port Canaveral offers numerous restaurants and opportunities to view manatees, dolphins and large fish going through the locks. Past the locks, there is a full-service campground at Jetty Park—(321) 783-7111.

Sykes Creek, between Banana River and Indian River Lagoon, is a popular waterway for day kayak trips. Sykes Creek can also be used as an alternate route in windy conditions, although camping options are limited.

From Ski Island, head east on the barge canal to reenter the Indian River Lagoon. It is about 13 miles from Ski Island to Manatee Hammock Campground.

## **2. Island #35 to Manatee Hammock Campground, 13.5 miles**

In proceeding north, you can land at Lee Wenner Park at the Highway 520 Bridge after about two miles. Restrooms and water are available and several restaurants and shops are easily accessible just to the west in historic Cocoa Village.

The Port St. John Boat Ramp is the only other public landing spot to the north. This is about two miles before the campground. A city park with restrooms and water is a hundred yards north, but you may want to walk there as landing is difficult. Across the highway are several restaurants. A supermarket is one half mile north on U.S. 1.

The Manatee Hammock Campground, managed by Brevard County, offers shaded sites, water, showers, a swimming pool, a Laundromat, volleyball and shuffleboard courts, and horseshoes. A supermarket is 1.3 miles south on U.S. 1. The park has a narrow landing for small boats south of the fishing pier. You may want to reserve tent sites 163 through 168 as these are closest to the water. Call 321 264-5083 for more information and to make reservations, or log onto <http://www.nbbd.com/godo/prec/ManateeCamp/index.html>. Note: the campground fills up very quickly around a day where there is a planned shuttle launch.

### **3. Manatee Hammock Campground to Titusville railroad bridge, 10.5 miles**

Make sure to stock up on fresh water in Titusville, either at Kennedy Point Park or at the Highway 172 bridge boat ramp, as there may not be another opportunity until late the next day. Camping is on one of two spoil islands just north of the Titusville railroad bridge. NOAA charts may indicate more islands, but some have since disappeared. Do not proceed any farther as the spoil islands that are in a direct line to the Haulover Canal are managed by the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and are off limits to camping. Refuge lands also extend into Mosquito Lagoon. Camping is prohibited on all islands and shoreline to marker 19 in the Intracoastal Waterway.

### **4. Titusville Railroad Bridge to Shipyard Island, 26 miles**

In this section, you will proceed toward the Haulover Canal. Before the canal was dug, fishermen used to haul their boats over this short spit of land to the Mosquito Lagoon, thus the name. Two of the spoil islands before the canal have since become bird rookeries. Keep your distance as you observe these active bird colonies. Adult birds will be tending young, defending territories, and retrieving food and nest materials.

In the canal, be sure to pull into the little cove for the Bair's Cove Boat Ramp. Manatees frequent this spot along with other parts of the canal.

Once in the Mosquito Lagoon, proceed north along a series of spoil islands. You can stay on the west side of the islands to keep out of boat traffic if you wish. Next available water stop is at Lefils Fish Camp near the end of the day. Islands managed by the Canaveral National Seashore that are available for camping begin about two miles south of Lefils Fish Camp, but a permit must first be obtained from the ranger's station on AIA near New Smyrna Beach. For long distance paddlers, this will not be feasible.

Be sure to stop at the Seminole Rest Mound, one of the few remaining shell mounds along the Atlantic Coast. Two pioneer houses stand atop the mound. The Snyder family protected this Timucuan built mound early in the last century, while a nearby mound suffered the fate of most ancient shell mounds—it was hauled away for fill material. There is a restaurant about a quarter mile north of the mound.

A good rest stop is River Breeze Park, operated by Volusia County. The park offers shaded picnic tables, water and a short hiking trail. It is the site of a Colonial-era

plantation. According to the West Volusia Audubon Society, the park and its environs are great for birdwatching. This is from their website: “Here, up close on a sandbar, Marbled Godwits doze and preen and luxuriate in the sunshine, shoulder to shoulder with handsome Black Skimmers. In the brackish waters of the lagoon, the birder may spot a wintering American White Pelican or a Common Loon. Reddish Egrets and Red-breasted, Common and Hooded Mergansers visit this spot and you may see American Oystercatchers. Check the area for migrating warblers before you leave.”

In order to more fully explore the unique and scenic Mosquito Lagoon area, proceed west from River Breeze Park along Slippery Creek, paddling around several islands. Once along the main peninsula of the Canaveral National Seashore, you can dock and stroll around the historic two-story house visible from the water. This is the restored Eldora Statehouse, a vestige of a waterway community that once thrived on these shores. When location of the Intracoastal Waterway shifted, and a railroad was built on the mainland, Eldora slowly declined. You can hike a short nature trail through the scenic Eldora Hammock.

From Eldora, cruise about a mile along the peninsula to the ranger station. This is where you can obtain a permit to camp in one of three sites that are on your way north: site 2 (Shipyard); site 3 (Headwinds); or site 4 (Government Cut). For site 1 (Orange Island), you’ll need to backtrack about a mile. These four sites are generally reserved for paddlers, but boaters can take them if not used. You can reserve a campsite up to seven days in advance by calling (386) 428-3384. There are also picnic tables at the ranger station and you can obtain water.

Just after the ranger station, be sure to visit Turtle Mound, a huge midden built by Timucuan Indians for more than 600 years. These early people would visit coastal lagoons every winter to harvest abundant marine resources, staying in camps of one or more families—25-30 people. Don’t miss the panoramic view of the lagoon and coast from atop the 50-foot mound.

Just past Turtle Mound, you can take a scenic paddling trail to campsites 2 and 3, which are on the west side of Shipyard Island. Obtain a map at the ranger station.

## **5. Shipyard Island to Smyrna Dunes Park, 13-14 miles**

This will be a very scenic paddle through the upper half of Mosquito Lagoon, winding around several uninhabited islands that provide numerous opportunities for rest breaks. You can take an old channel just west of the Intracoastal Waterway for most of the way (see map). Callalisa Creek is also a scenic option, passable by kayak. This winding route may add a mile or so to your day.

Smyrna Dunes Park, operated by Volusia County, is a coastal treasure. You can land near the park entrance where the Intracoastal Waterway veers northwest and hike on a long boardwalk that spans a pristine dunes ecosystem. You can view the scenic Ponce Inlet and access some fine beaches along the Atlantic Ocean. If you paddle Ponce Inlet, proceed with caution as currents are heavy and breakers will likely be encountered as you near the Atlantic.

Camping is on spoil islands just north of the park. These will be described in segment 23.