Office of Greenways & Trails

Segment 5

Crooked River/St. Marks Refuge

Emergency contact information:

911

Franklin County Sheriff's Office: 850-670-8500

Wakulla County Sheriff's Office: 850-745-7100

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

Begin: St. George Island State Park

End: Aucilla River launch

Distance: 100-103 miles

Duration: 8-9 days

Special Considerations: Extreme caution is advised in paddling open water areas from St. George Island to Carrabelle and in paddling across Ochlockonee Bay.

Introduction

From traditional fishing communities to wild stretches of shoreline, tidal creeks and rivers, this segment is one where paddlers can steep themselves in "Old Florida." This is also the only segment where paddlers can follow two scenic rivers for a significant distance: the Crooked and Ochlockonee rivers. The Crooked River is the only area along the trail where paddlers have a good chance of spotting a Florida black bear. Several hundred black bears roam the Tate's Hell/Apalachicola National Forest area, one of six major black bear havens in the state. Florida black bears are protected under Florida law. Keep food and garbage tightly packed and hanging in a bag from a tree branch at least ten feet off the ground.

In paddling the Crooked River paddlers will enjoy a slice of the untrammeled 200,000-plus-acre Tate's Hell State Forest. This scenic route also features Ochlockonee River State Park where there is a full-service campground a short distance from the water. For camping reservations, visit Reserve America or call (800) 326-3521.

Along the coast, paddlers can observe a major geologic change. St. George and Dog islands mark the end of a chain of barrier islands that have been formed by sediments deposited by the Apalachicola and Ochlockonee rivers. The numerous wild islands east of Ochlockonee Bay are chunks of land that have been isolated by a millennia of rising sea levels, thus the reason why their shapes are not as elongated.

Dr. Julian Bruce, St. George Island State Park and Bald Point State Park are natural highlights along the coast. Paddlers can enjoy camping in both of these premier parks and explore wild coves and shoreline. In the case of Bald Point, miles of winding tidal creeks lead to unspoiled lakes and ponds which must be accessed on a rising tide. Both parks also offer excellent fishing, wildlife viewing and hiking opportunities. Other public lands include a scenic county park at Mashes Sands along the east side of Ochlockonee Bay, and state lands along Dickerson Bay near Panacea that have been purchased under the Florida Forever program.

The last stretch of the trail, including three campsites, is part of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Permits must be obtained for camping and these may only be used by long distance paddlers traversing the entire refuge portion of this segment. A nominal one dollar per person per day fee is charged, the same fee charged for long distance Florida Trail hikers. Bear in mind that no camping is allowed other than at the designated sites. Click here for permit information or call (850) 925-6121. Obtain your permit at least two weeks prior to your arrival; you can change your date of arrival by phone later than that if you are unexpectedly delayed. The refuge needs to know the location of anyone camping on the refuge so they can safely plan management activities such as prescribed burning. The almost 70,000-acre refuge was established in 1931 to provide wintering habitat for migratory birds. Numerous small streams that wind through unspoiled expanses of marsh and coastal forests in the refuge offer countless hours of paddling enjoyment.

A good day trip off the main route of this segment is the Alligator Harbor Aquatic Preserve, which is enclosed by the Alligator Point sand spit. This area is a pristine coastal water body and its seagrass beds and salt marshes serve as important nursery grounds and refuges for a variety of sea life. There are also several clam leases in the preserve marked by PVC poles.

This segment complements the Apalachee Bay Maritime Heritage Paddling Trails, a network of ten coastal paddling trails through the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and Bald Point State Park.

For kayak rentals, shuttle support and other services, check Journeys of St. George Island, The Wilderness Way and St. Marks Outfitters who also offers on-the-water boat support.

Leave No Trace principles should be followed in camping at designated primitive sites in order to keep them open for paddlers.

1. Gap Point Campsite to Oxbow Campsite, 16.5 miles.

From the Gap Point Campsite, you can proceed northeast to the end of St. George Island before paddling diagonally across the bay towards Carrabelle. Along the mainland, you can take a rest break at the Carrabelle Beach Park, where there is fresh water, restrooms and picnic shelters (see map). Continue on the Crooked River about 3 miles past the US 98 Bridge to the shady Oxbow campsite on a small bluff overlooking a bend in the river. Make a reservation early as this is a popular site.

If a motel is desired, there are several places to stay in Carrabelle. Visit the Chamber of Commerce website here.

Carrabelle is a good supply stop where you can easily access a medium-sized supermarket, post office and a library from the city ramp along the Carrabelle River.

Campsites along the Crooked River are $10 per night and can be reserved by phone up to six months in advance, but you must pay by mailing a check, by paying in person, or by dropping money into an iron ranger at the Carrabelle office after hours or on weekends. For west-bound paddlers, you can use the iron ranger at the Womack Creek campsite. Keep the pay stub with you.

The address of the forest headquarters just south of Carrabelle is: 290 Airport Road, Carrabelle, FL 32322. Make check payable to D.O.A.C.S. and write your driver's license # on the check. The phone # is: 850-697-3734 or 850-681-5950 (for reservations). By kayak, you can land at the Timber Island public ramp near Carrabelle and walk a little

more than a mile to the headquarters. When you reach Highway 98, veer left and you'll see Airport Road on your right and a sign for the headquarters. Paying by mail will alleviate this hike.

The Crooked River is aptly named, with numerous twists and turns. After Carrabelle, most of the river is completely undeveloped. Note that during high water it may be difficult to go under the CR 67 Bridge, so portaging may be necessary.

2. Oxbow Campsite to Crooked River #1, 12.5 miles

Bear in mind that campsites at Warren Bluff, Sunday Rollaway and Loop Road are also hunt campsites that are occupied from mid-November through early February. Campsites at Rock Landing, Crooked River #1, Crooked River #2 and Womack Creek are mixed-use campsites that are available during the hunting season, so you should have better luck at reserving them at any time. Rock Landing has three sites in a row, good for groups, and Womack Creek Campsite has 13 sites, good for very large groups. Additionally, Womack Creek is the only camping area in Tate's Hell State Forest with restrooms that include hot showers. Showers can also be used by non-campers if paddlers pay the day use fee.

3. Crooked River #1 to Ochlockonee River State Park, 17 miles

From Crooked River Campsite #1, you have the option of a shorter day by camping at Rock Landing Campsite, about 7.5 miles, or paddling another 2 miles to Loop Road Campsite. If paddling to the Ochlockonee River State Park, leave the Crooked River and head down the Ochlockonee River past the exposed pilings of an old railroad bridge. The state park is on the northern shore. You can land near the park boat ramp and access the main campground by walking about a quarter of a mile.

As an option to staying at the state park, you can proceed north about two miles from the Crooked River junction to Tate's Hell State Forest Womack Creek campsite. This is a more developed first-come, first-serve campground featuring hot showers.

If you are in a group, another option is to utilize the isolated youth camp on the shore of the Dead River just off the Ochlockonee River. It is available to adult groups of six or more on a first-come, first-serve basis, or you can make advanced reservations for

organized youth groups. Call the park at 850-962-2771 for more information and to check on availability. Be sure to hike the park's scenic nature trail through open pine flatwoods. Scan the mature pines for cavities of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, the only native woodpecker that nests in living trees. You might also glimpse some of the park's unusual white squirrels.

4. Ochlockonee River State Park to Chaires Creek Campsite at Bald Point State Park, 11 miles

Head south on the ever-widening Ochlockonee River to the bay. One option for camping is the Holiday Campground just before the bay bridge on the left. The campground offers a bathhouse, laundromat, pool and recreation room. To make reservations, call (850) 984-5757. On the east side of the bridge is a small convenience store and several restaurants. Local taxi service is available for a ride into Panacea to pick up supplies at a supermarket: (850) 984-4991.

From the bridge area, cross the bay and hug the southern shore a little less than 2 miles to Chaires Creek in Bald Point State Park. Proceed up the creek about a mile to the primitive campsite on your left. A second campsite is less than a mile away near a small bridge along a western branch of the creek. Call the park headquarters at 850-349-9146 if you plan to use either of these two sites.

For side trips, you can follow Chaires Creek all the way to Tucker Lake if the tide is high, or take more narrow creeks to small ponds. Part of the beauty of this marshy wilderness is the lack of human-made noises. Jet and highway noises are generally absent. Only occasional boats can be heard.

From the campsite, you can link up with the park's many miles of scenic hiking trails and unpaved roads. More than 500 different plant species and over 230 different animal species have been documented in the park. More species will likely flourish here as restoration of former slash pine timber plantations continues. With luck, you may glimpse one of the area's Florida black bears. In autumn, monarch butterflies often pause here before their bold migration across the Gulf of Mexico.

For birdwatchers, Bald Point is an exciting place to explore. According to the Great Florida Birding Trail guide, raptors such as peregrine falcons and harriers migrate along

the shore in October. Black-bellied plovers and dunlins are seen in winter, and springtime often heralds colorful indigo buntings and other songbirds. Year-round residents include brown-headed nuthatches in the piney woods and clapper rails in the extensive marshlands.

5. Bald Point State Park to Spring Creek, 12-15 miles.

From Chaires Creek, be watchful of high winds as you cross the wide Ochlockonee Bay. Mashes Sands County Park, at the head of the bay on the east side, offers a good rest stop with picnic tables and restrooms. You can then wind around the islands of scenic Dickerson Bay with the option of stopping on a small beach in order to visit Gulf Specimen Marine Lab and Aquarium (small entrance fee required) just across the road. The aquarium features marine exhibits and touch tanks, focusing more on smaller marine life such as seahorses, rays, starfish, urchins, crabs, anemones, octopuses, jellyfish, spiny boxfish, sea turtles, small sharks, eels and a variety of fish. No leaping dolphin acts. You can picnic here or stop at a city park just to the east, where you can land along a tiny creek near a fishing pier. A blue crab festival occurs here during the first weekend in May. Both of these Panacea access points are marked on the map. Numerous restaurants and a grocery store are within easy walking distance.

Another access point and kayak launch marked on the map is the Wakulla County Visitor's Center, where you can use restrooms and learn more about the area. Across the road is the Panacea Mineral Springs Park, site of an old motel that once housed visitors seeking the healing qualities of this natural sulfur springs. A seafood retailer aptly named Mineral Springs Seafood on US 98 at east end of town offers excellent fresh and smoked fare, an excellent opportunity to sample a local favorite, smoked mullet.

Paddling into Dickerson Bay and stopping at Panacea will add two to three miles to your day. From Panacea, you can cruise on the inside of Piney Island and traverse Oyster Bay. You can take a short cut to Spring Creek via a small creek, or you can round the point near Shell Point and take Spring Creek north. At the town of Spring Creek, tent camping for a small fee is at a small RV camp at a boat landing. An abandoned white building that once served as a crab processing house borders one side of the camp. Restrooms are available, but no showers. A nearby restaurant is open for dinner.

Curator of the site is Lee Spears. His mobile home is across from the ramp and you'll need to pay a small camping fee in cash.

Spring Creek is a traditional fishing community that is under tremendous development pressure as coastal land prices soar and historic fishing activities fade due to changes in net regulations. For now, you can enjoy a taste of Old Florida by viewing historic tin-roofed buildings, old docks, and derelict fishing vessels. More importantly, several residents are fifth-generation commercial fishermen who often regale visitors with tales of fishing on the open water and in the areas tidal creeks and bays.

Take time to explore around Spring Creek by kayak as several high magnitude springs can be seen in and around the camp and along small inlets. Researchers believe that these springs connect with Wakulla Springs to the north, although water discharge has mysteriously diminished, beginning in 2006.

From the campground, you can paddle up palm-lined Spring Creek about two miles until it narrows and becomes impassable with fallen trees. In spring, look for blooming purple flag irises, clusters of yellow senecio flowers, and the white blooms of duck potato. Bald eagles are commonly seen in cool months, and on warm sunny days, alligators often sun themselves along the shore and on fallen logs. As you travel inland, look for freshwater-loving cypress, live oak and bay trees. The brown tint of the water is generally due to harmless tannins released by fallen leaves and other decomposing vegetation from swamps that feed the stream. Most of this stretch falls under the protected auspices of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

6. Spring Creek to Apalachee Point campsite, 10 miles

As you journey down Spring Creek toward the Gulf, you can deviate from the marked serpentine channel if the tide has covered the numerous oyster bars, one advantage of a shallow-water kayak. You can take a break at the Shell Point Beach, a public park, where there are picnic tables and restrooms.

From Shell Point and Live Oak Island, paddle towards the St. Marks Lighthouse, visible along the eastern horizon in good weather conditions. In choppy conditions, you may want to hug the shoreline, although this will add more miles. A primitive campsite is on a spoil island near the mouth of the St. Marks River about two miles from the lighthouse. In

the 1700s, the Spanish called this the Apalachee River after the local Native American tribe. The campsite has a small rise that provides for an excellent view of the area and it's a good spot to catch a breeze.

A good access point for this area is Wakulla Beach, a small sand landing and beach that is an ideal access point for kayaks, although it is not advisable to leave vehicles parked overnight and low tide can make access challenging. It is the terminus of Wakulla Beach Road off Highway 98. Tidal creeks in the area make for great side trips through more wild lands of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

Note: There is no available fresh water until Econfina River State Park. Plan on leaving Spring Creek with one gallon per person per day for 4 days.

7. Apalachee Point Campsite to Ring Dike Campsite, 9.5 miles

A good rest stop is the St Marks Lighthouse, a national historic site. First built in 1829, but rebuilt more solidly two years later and then again in 1842 and 1866, the lighthouse has withstood many severe hurricanes and storms. One 1843 storm washed away every building except for the tower, killing several people in the area except for the lighthouse keeper's family, who clung to the garret floor near the top of the tower. Various lighthouse keepers lived at the site with their families until the light became fully automated in 1960. The lighthouse is only open to the public on rare occasions. There is no museum.

East of the lighthouse, you'll paddle an open stretch of water along an untrammeled shoreline of trees and marsh. The Ring Dike Campsite is a mile up Deep Creek from the Gulf. The campsite is distinguishable from the open marsh habitat by a ring of large live oaks. With open views in all directions, this campsite is one of the most scenic on the trail. Florida Trail hikers who are traversing the refuge also use this campsite. Click here for permit information or call (850) 925-6121. Obtain your permit at least two weeks prior to your arrival; you can change your date of arrival by phone later than that if you are unexpectedly delayed.

8. Ring Dike Campsite to Pinhook River Campsite, 8.5 miles

After cruising along a true Gulf Coast wilderness, you'll paddle approximately three miles up the Pinhook River. Keep to your left at both forks in the river. At the wooden bridge, there is a small beach on the northeast side where you can land. The campsite is approximately a hundred yards on the northwest side of the bridge along an unpaved road, then follow the blue blazes a short distance. This is also a Florida Trail campsite. You should be able to paddle the ditch alongside the road during high tide for closer access by boat.

9. Pinhook River Campsite to lower Aucilla River launch, 7 miles

After returning to the Gulf, you'll have more seemingly endless vistas of marsh and palm hammocks as you paddle to the mouth of the Aucilla River. Paddle upstream to the landing on the east bank if you are ending your trip here.

If you are on an extended trip, you may skip the Aucilla River launch and paddle directly to the Econfina River campsite, about 11.5 miles. See segment 6 for maps, text description and permit information.