

Segment 7

Nature Coast

Emergency contact information:

911

Levy County Sheriff's Office: 352-486-5111

Citrus County Sheriff's Office: 352-794-4120

Pasco County Sheriff's Office: 727-847-5878

Hernando County Sheriff's office 352-754-6850

U S Coast Guard Station Yankeetown 352-447-6900 (North of Hernando Beach)

U S Coast Guard Station Sand Key 727-596-8721 (South of Hernando Beach)

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

Begin: Cross Florida Greenway spoil island near Yankeetown

End: Anclote Key State Park

Distance: 89 miles

Duration: 5-6 days

Special Considerations: Much of this segment is remote, where cell phone coverage can be spotty. Being properly equipped and prepared and leaving a float plan is very important. The coast here is shallow in places and low tides can present a problem for navigation and when seeking to land or launch. Keep a tide chart to help plan your trip. A GPS is necessary, especially when paddling the winding route between Crystal River and Chassahowitzka. There are also four straight days that require paddling more than 15 miles a day, so long distance paddlers attempting this segment should be experienced and fit.

Open water stretches around the Crystal River power plants and Anclote Key will prove challenging in high winds. Be sure to check the weather forecast before attempting to paddle these sections.

Introduction

Whether it is paddling through miles of winding tidal creeks or along unmarred beaches, or stopping at small coastal towns, this segment has much to offer the nature lover. Plus, wildlife abounds. Constant temperatures in the spring-fed Crystal and Homosassa rivers provide a winter refuge for numerous manatees. White pelicans, wading birds and a glimpse of endangered whooping cranes also add excitement to any excursion.

For cultural breaks, friendly trail towns spaced a day or two apart offer museums, restaurants, grocery stores, motels and campgrounds. Information on many of the local communities along the trail can be obtained by logging onto www.purewaterwilderness.com, <http://www.visitnaturecoast.com/>, <http://www.visitcitrus.com/> and <http://www.naturallyhernando.org/>.

Extensive public lands are the key to keeping the Nature Coast natural. Three coastal state parks are featured: Crystal River Preserve, Werner-Boyce Salt Springs and Anclote Key. To learn more, log onto www.floridastateparks.org. In addition, the Crystal River and Chassahowitzka national wildlife refuges protect thousands of acres. To learn more, log onto <http://www.fws.gov/chassahowitzka/>.

The Chassahowitzka Wildlife Management Area is another large tract of public land just above Weeki Wachi, totaling nearly 34,000 acres. For more information, log onto <http://www.floridaconservation.org/recreation/chassahowitzka/Default.asp>.

This segment includes the 23,000-acre St. Martin's Marsh Aquatic Preserve, which helps to protect the marshy wilderness between Crystal River and Homosassa. To learn more, log onto <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/stmartins/>.

Near Inglis, paddlers will pass the outlet of one of Florida's largest public works projects—the Cross Florida Barge Canal. Before completion, this massive shipping channel was halted by President Nixon in 1971 and deauthorized by Congress in 1990. Now, the former canal lands constitute a world-class 110-mile recreational greenway, named after one of the major barge canal opponents, Marjorie Harris Carr. To learn more, log onto <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/cfg/default.htm>.

Leave No Trace principles should be followed in camping at designated primitive sites in order to keep them open for paddlers. To learn more about Leave No Trace principles, log onto <http://www.lnt.org/>.

1. Cross Florida Greenway spoil island campsite to Uncle Tom's Island campsite, 17 miles

To begin this segment, you can launch at the mouth of the Withlacoochee River near Yankeetown, at the end of Highway 40, and proceed a couple of miles to a spoil island that was created by dredging a channel for the now defunct Cross Florida Barge Canal (see map). Primitive camping is on a first-come, first-serve basis. You can also launch along the Cross Florida Greenway itself, either at the Highway 19 ramp or at various pullovers along the unpaved road leading along the canal to the Gulf.

After the campsite, you'll need to follow a GPS point on the map to a point where you can either cross (at high tide) or make a short portage over the jetty bordering a cooling canal for the Crystal River coal and nuclear power plants. This is about two miles from the campsite and more than three miles from the mainland. The jetty is wide and vegetated before this point and posted with no trespassing signs. If you want to see pods of manatees in the winter, you can paddle on the north side of the jetty towards the mainland where warm water is released from the power plants.

After crossing the jetty, you can aim for the mouth of Crystal River and pick up the channel markers. A straight shot is about five miles. Many boaters camp on the privately-owned Shell Island at the river mouth. Proceed up the river until you reach Pine Island and the mouth of the Salt River to the south, where you'll begin paddling the established 17-mile Nature Coast Paddling Trail, managed by Citrus County. This is a scenic and winding route along the Salt River and other waterways that requires a GPS and close attention to the maps. Signs along the route may aid navigation.

If you continue up the Crystal River into King's Bay, you'll have a good chance of encountering manatees. While some manatees live in the bay year-round, hundreds frequent the waters in winter as they are dependent upon the constant 72-degree temperatures of the springs. These manatees represent approximately 20 percent of the manatee population in the Gulf of Mexico. Please keep in mind that it is unlawful to chase or harass these gentle giants or to enter established manatee sanctuary areas. Some manatees may be curious enough to seek your company. Numerous motels and restaurants are accessible from the water in the town of Crystal River. The Crystal River Archeological State Park, which features a museum and various Native American mound structures, is not accessible from the water. The closest access point is the Crystal River State Park Preserve ramp, where you will have to hike about two miles.

Along the Salt River, closely follow GPS points as you paddle through Dixie Bay and "The Narrows." About a half mile past "The Narrows" you'll see the north entrance to Salt Creek. Uncle Tom's Island is a remote tree island surrounded by marsh about a mile up Salt Creek on the left. You'll need to follow your GPS to find it. This campsite is ideally suited for a maximum of 8 people or 4 small tents and is available free of charge on a first come-first serve basis.

2. Uncle Tom's Island campsite to Chassahowitzka River Campground, 19 miles

From the campsite, you can exit Salt Creek at the south entrance (see map). Continue along the scenic Salt River where you can stop for a rest break at John Brown Park, just past the Highway 494 Bridge. You'll then proceed through Greenleaf Bay and Shivers Bay where you'll see numerous opportunities for rest stops.

When you reach the Homosassa River, proceed up the river less than half a mile before turning south into Battle Creek. Be wary of boat traffic and fast moving airboats in this area, especially near the entrance of Battle Creek. For a lunch break, you can travel up the Homosassa River a little over a mile to a restaurant on the southern shore adjacent to a public landing.

As you proceed into the 31,000-acre Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge through Porpoise Bay—where porpoises are frequently seen—follow your GPS to the entrance of Seven Cabbage Creek. This creek entrance is narrow and vegetated and can easily be missed. More than one paddler has mistakenly paddled up Rose Creek—very scenic, but there is no outlet. If you stay in the main channel of Seven Cabbage Creek, you should be fine, although a winter low tide can be problematic. To the north, down a side creek, is an area marked by the refuge as off limits. This is where young whooping cranes are roosting for the winter and should not be disturbed. You might be lucky enough to spot one of these large white birds as they often range a short distance from their roosting area until they are ready to migrate north.

Leaving Seven Cabbage Creek, proceed up the Chassahowitzka River. A good spot for a break is the Dog Island Rest Area about 2.5 miles upriver along the northern bank. Managed by the refuge, this spot has a low dock, composting toilet, picnic tables and a pavilion. No camping is allowed in the refuge. The public ramp along the river is another 3.5 miles upriver. The river becomes increasingly shallow and clear as you proceed upstream. You'll pass several houses and fish camps that are only accessible by water. Numerous springs, often found along the many side streams, feed this scenic river. Just past the ramp, you can paddle through the small town of Chassahowitzka, which has a

classic Old Florida look. About a mile past the public ramp, you can also paddle to a fish camp that offers cabins for rent and a restaurant.

You'll need to secure your kayak near the rental boats at the ramp and walk a quarter mile to the county campground. Call 352-382-2200 or log onto www.CitrusCountyFl.org for more information. You'll find a snack bar and small store at the public ramp. Although out of the way, this is a scenic and interesting stop.

A primitive campsite along Ryle Creek (see map) in the Chassahowitzka Wildlife Management Area is available to paddlers in case of an emergency such as foul weather or injury. This campsite is remote and unimproved and is about a mile in from the creek mouth on the left side. Leave No Trace guidelines should apply. Access may be difficult during extreme low tide.

3. Chassahowitzka River Campground to Mary's Fish Camp, 20.5 miles

By following the suggested route through the refuge from the Chassahowitzka River and leading out South Blind Creek, you'll save some distance and there is a good channel, even at low tide. Otherwise, you may have to paddle a mile or so past the mouth of the Chassahowitzka River before you can proceed to the south. For several miles through the refuge, there are few if any accessible areas of dry land suitable for a rest break, so this will be one of the more challenging segments of the trail. Pine Island Park, with its water, restrooms and picnic area, will likely be a welcome sight.

You can take another rest break after about three miles at the Bayport fishing dock or nearby ramp as you proceed up the Weeki Wachee River and turn into the Mud River. Mary's Fish Camp, which rents cabins, is along the headwaters of Mud River (352-596-2359). Another option is the Riverpoint Landing Motel (352-597-4424) at the end of the Mud River along a canal about two miles from the Bayport dock. If the motel is full, there is a possibility that paddlers can camp on a spit of land near the motel and use

outside restrooms and laundry facilities. The Mud River is a tidal river with a mild current compared with the swift-flowing Weeki Wachee River.

Other overnight opportunities in the area include the Hernando Beach Motel, about three quarters of a mile in from the coast in Hernando Beach, 352-596-2527. Advanced reservations are recommended. Restaurants are within easy walking distance of all the overnight stops. For a more detailed map of the area that shows various amenities such as restaurants and stores, log onto:

http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/paddling/Segments/Segment7/PDF/HernandoCountyPaddler_Attractions.pdf. For more info about Hernando County, log onto

<http://www.naturallyhernando.org/>.

4. Mary's Fish Camp to Hudson, 16.5 miles

A good rest break is Norfleet's Fish Camp in the Old Florida town of Aripeka, after about 9 miles. Water, restrooms and snacks are available. Camping is possible on an emergency basis.

Hudson is a larger town where you can land at the city boat ramp just past the park (paddle around point and a short distance up canal) and access restaurants, water, restrooms and showers. Across the street from the park is the Inn on the Gulf, where you can rent a motel room. Call 727-868-5623 for rates and reservations.

5. Hudson to Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park campsite, 4.5 miles

Another overnight option is a primitive campsite at Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park, less than a half mile up Hope Bayou. A recent addition to the state park system, this scenic park primarily consists of open marsh and tidal creeks, protecting four miles of

coastline. Be wary of airboats as they also use the park. Call the park at 727-816-1890 if you plan to use this campsite. There is no charge.

6. Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park campsite to Anclote Key State Park, 11.5 miles

After a couple of miles, you can take a rest break at Brasher Park, which has restrooms and water. Here, you have a choice of hugging the coast and accessing other public parks such as Rees Park and Anclote Beach Park before paddling to Anclote Key, or making a straight beeline across open water to the island. Weather will certainly be a determining factor. The closest point to the northern end of Anclote Key from the mainland is 4 miles, near the town of Tarpon Springs. Crossing at this point could add a couple of miles to your day's total. The famous sponge fishing town of Tarpon Springs is not very accessible by kayak, but you can paddle up the Anclote River to view it from the water or hike about 3 miles by road from the Anclote River Park. The town features a free museum, numerous restaurants and gift shops.

At Anclote Key, camping is allowed on the north end of the island. A series of hiking trails and a sandy beach offers great opportunities to explore this 3-mile long undeveloped island. Kayaking along the mangrove-lined bay side is inviting as well. The south end has picnic shelters, grill and a composting toilet for day users, while the north end has no facilities. At the south end, a 19th century lighthouse is still operational. Due to bird nesting, dogs are not allowed on the island.

Camping is free on Anclote Key, but you must first check in by calling 727-469-5942. Be wary of crossing open water stretches to and from the island as winds can cause dangerous paddling conditions.