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FOURTEEN REASONS WE LOVE FLORIDA'S STATE PARKS

~DEP highlights 14 reasons to love state parks this Valentine's Day~

TALLAHASSEE – From mermaids to music festivals, and America's best beach, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is highlighting 14 reasons to fall in love with Florida's state parks this Valentine's Day. State parks offer affordable, fun and close-to-home activities, any budget will love.

"With 160 parks offering access to history, camping, hiking and biking, what's not to love about Florida's state parks," said DEP's Florida Park Service Director Mike Bullock. "Whether it's learning about lost treasures at Sebastian Inlet State Park's McLarty Treasure Museum or standing under the wedding tree at Eden Gardens State Park, Florida's residents and visitors alike enjoy the countless things to see and do at state parks."

Fourteen reasons we love state parks, include:

- 1) **Weddings** – Florida's State Parks are home to many popular sites for weddings and vow renewals, on Valentine's Day and year round. Popular wedding parks include: Eden Gardens State Park in Santa Rosa Beach, Honeymoon Island State Park in Dunedin, Fort George Island Cultural State Park in Jacksonville, Ravine Gardens State Park in Palatka and Maclay Gardens State Park in Tallahassee.
- 2) **America's Best Beach** – As one of few natural islands along Florida's Gulf Coast, Caladesi Island State Park's white sand shores have been rated the nation's best by Dr. Beach. This island park, accessible by ferry only, is a must-see regardless of the season. The cooler weather is perfect for guided walks and wildlife watching, while the warmer months are a great time to cool off by the shore.
- 3) **Lovers Key** – Lovers Key State Park in Fort Myers was originally only accessible by boat and rumored to attract lovers to the island to enjoy its remote and solitary beach, hence its name. Today, the park is accessible by boardwalk or tram and is popular for shelling, swimming, picnicking

and sunbathing, as well as the Black Island Trail and ranger guided estuary tours.

- 4) **Mermaids** – The mermaids at Weeki Wachee Springs have delighted visitors since 1947. Today Weeki Wachee Springs, located in Spring Hill, is Florida’s oldest roadside attraction, newest state park and one of the most affordable theme parks in the state. Visitors can watch a live mermaid show in the 400-seat underwater theatre, take a river boat cruise, canoe or kayak on the Weeki Wachee River. Opening March 28, visitors can also splash around in Buccaneer Bay, the park’s waterslide amusement attraction.
- 5) **Pancakes at DeLeon Springs** – In the early 1800s, settlers built sugar and cotton plantations near the springs that were sacked by Seminole Indians during the Second Seminole War. Today, DeLeon Springs State Park in Volusia County is home to the Old Spanish Sugar Mill Restaurant, where guests can make their own pancakes at their table.
- 6) **Hippos, wolves and panthers!** – Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park, located 75 miles north of Tampa, is home to Don Juan the famous Florida Panther, Lu, Florida’s only resident hippopotamus, Maygar, a Western Cougar, three red wolf pups and other wildlife. At \$9.00 per person, this park is a bargain and a great way to encounter native and not-so-native, Florida wildlife.
- 7) **Cave Exploration** – Florida Caverns State Park in Marianna is the only state park in Florida that offers cave tours. Guests can see stalactites, stalagmites and a variety of other underground novelties. Cave tours last 45 minutes and are available daily, except Tuesday and Wednesday.
- 8) **The Florida Folk Festival** – Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park in White Springs is home to the annual Florida Folk Festival. Since 1953, folk artists have come together for one of the oldest state folk festivals in America. Attendees can camp out for the event, which takes place during Memorial Day weekend, and experience folk art demonstrations and workshops, watch living history and jam with folk artists.
- 9) **River Tubing** – Tubing is a popular activity at state parks during the spring and summer months. Blackwater River State Park in Santa Rosa County, Ichetucknee Springs State Park, north of Gainesville and Rainbow Springs State Park, south of Gainesville, all offer tube rentals in the warmer months.

- 10) **Kayak Tours** – Guests to Faver-Dykes State Park located in St. Augustine, can immerse themselves in natural Florida by joining a guided kayak tour. Explore Pellicer Creek Aquatic Preserve or Princes Place Preserve and see an abundance of both fresh and saltwater species including dolphins, otters, manatees and birds.

- 11) **Historic Homes** – Several of Florida State Parks are the site of historic homes that are open for visitor tours. These parks include: The Barnacle Historic State Park, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings State Park, Blue Springs State Park, Gamble Plantation Historic State Parks and Hugh Taylor Birch State Park.

- 12) **Horseback riding at Amelia Island** – An easy drive from Jacksonville, Amelia Island State Park is home to beautiful beaches, salt marshes and coastal maritime forests that provide a glimpse of natural Florida. Amelia Island is the only state park that offers horseback riding on the beach.

- 13) **Campgrounds Galore** – More than 50 state parks offer camping opportunities throughout nearly every region in the state. From full-facility RV camping to primitive or cabin camping, what better way to connect with nature. A complete list of parks with campground facilities can be found at:
<http://www.floridastateparks.org/CampCabinLodge.cfm>.

- 14) **Bison and Wild Horses** – At Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, south of Gainesville, guests can observe panoramic views of bison and wild horses on the 21,000 acre preserve from the 50 foot observation tower. The park was Florida’s first state preserve in 1971 and is now designated as a National Natural Landmark. Eight trails and full-facility campsites also provide countless activities for park visitors.

For even more reasons to fall in love with Florida’s state parks, visit www.floridastateparks.org.