PADDLE #12

ATSENA OTIE

Saltwater paddle from beach to historic island town and cemetery.

Length: 2.8 miles or 3.3 miles depending upon paddling around or through the island.

Time: 1-1.5 hours depending upon paddling through or around the island. Paddler should add an additional hour to explore the island, but NOTE bring insect repellant – mosquitoes are fierce!

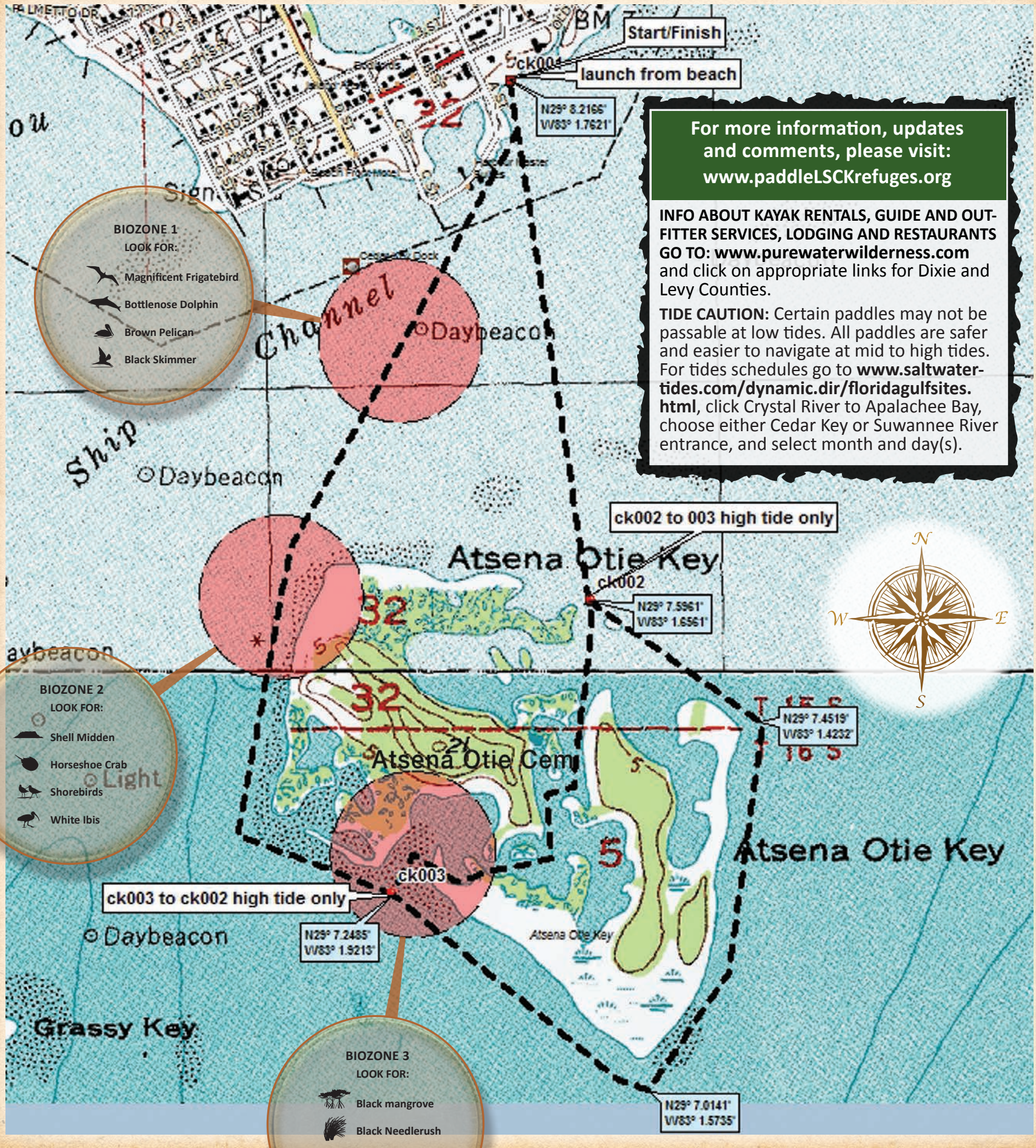
Skill Level: If wind conditions are less than 5 mph, paddle is suitable for beginner or inexperienced paddler. Basic navigational skills are required to navigate thru the island.

CAUTIONS: At low or mid tides, oyster bars prohibit passage thru the island. Navigation thru the island should only be attempted during and around high tide. Paddle should not be undertaken in winds greater than 15 mph.

DIRECTIONS TO LAUNCH SITE:

From US 19 south of Chiefland at Otter Creek, take SR 24 SW, approximately 21.5 miles into Cedar Key.

Turn left on 2nd Street and continue 3 blocks to city park on the Gulf. Launch at designated area from the beach.



For more information, updates and comments, please visit: www.paddleLSCKrefuges.org

INFO ABOUT KAYAK RENTALS, GUIDE AND OUTFITTER SERVICES, LODGING AND RESTAURANTS GO TO: www.purewaterwilderness.com and click on appropriate links for Dixie and Levy Counties.

TIDE CAUTION: Certain paddles may not be passable at low tides. All paddles are safer and easier to navigate at mid to high tides. For tides schedules go to **www.saltwater-tides.com/dynamic.dir/floridagulfsites.html**, click Crystal River to Apalachee Bay, choose either Cedar Key or Suwannee River entrance, and select month and day(s).

NOTE TO USERS: Great care has been taken to ensure this guide's accuracy, but tides, weather, depth and other conditions can change rapidly and create potentially hazardous conditions. Users should have proper safety equipment and check conditions prior to departure.

Created by Friends of the Lower Suwannee & Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges;
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Atsena Otie Paddle

Atsena Otie Key is nearly due south from the launch site at Cedar Key's city-nourished beach. Sand is steadily eroding from the northern and western margins of Atsena Otie and at least some of it is being deposited on the southwest. Uplands on the northwest and southeast parts of the island are forested, while the sheltered shallow cut separating them is covered mostly by black needlerush and here and there dotted with black mangrove trees (see Spyglass below). A trail leading from the pier on the western side of the island leads inland to the cut.

Google Earth image of Atsena Otie Key. The cemetery is misplaced in this image and on standard topographic maps. It's actual location is on the southern edge of the northwestern landmass.

Biozone 1. Suwannee Sound and Atsena Otie Key

The Cedar Keys are more open to the Gulf than most nearshore islands in Suwannee Sound, and paddlers cross a 15 food deep shipping channel on the way from Cedar Key to Atsena Otie. The greater distance from the mouth of the Suwannee and greater mixing mean that the water is more salty and less variable than in small creeks and enclosed areas. Algae (note the cloudy water) or submerged vegetation on shallow "grass flats" are the greatest contributors to biological productivity. Clam farming around the Cedar Keys is testimony to the contribution of this microscopic base of the highly productive food chain. A varied underwater landscape and long and diverse food chains support a variety of predatory fishes and good recreational fishing.

Biozone 2. The Beach on Atsena Otie Key

Sand beaches result from wave action, and wet sand has qualities that make it essential for certain animals. Particles of rock tossing in the surf are ground smaller and smaller until, as sand grains, capillary action causes water to completely surround each grain. The water-filled spaces between sand grains provide secure habitats for the microscopic eggs and larvae of species such horseshoe crabs, which inhabit wet sand for months. Note the snags at upper end of the beach, where erosion has removed sand from the tree roots and the meter- high prehistoric shell midden.

Biozone 3. The Cut

The shallow channel cutting Atsena Otie in two presents a far different aspect from the beaches that partially surround the island. Sheltered and too shallow to traverse at low tide, the cut is a patchwork of marsh, barren-looking mud banks, oyster bars, and mangroves (see Spyglass below). The relatively quiet environment of the cut supports robust populations of salt marsh mosquitos, which feed ravenously on any available warm-blooded prey, including people. Paddlers who leave their boats at the beach, brave the mosquitos, and follow the half-mile long trail to the cemetery will be able to see the cut at low tide, viewing oyster beds, mud flats, and mangrove trees that provide feeding opportunities for fiddler crabs and herons, egrets, and shorebirds.

Bottlenose dolphins are often seen foraging between Cedar Key and Atsena Otie, and occasionally adults and young can be seen swimming together.

Spyglass: Mangroves

Mangrove trees are mostly tropical, are damaged by frosts, and killed by severe freezes. Most seen in the Cedar Keys are the relatively cold-tolerant black mangroves. The Cedar Keys are the northernmost outpost where good stands of mangroves persist. To the south, they are increasingly dominant, becoming forest-like and replacing salt marsh. Like marshes, mangrove forests create a complex environment. They do so by sending up projections (called pneumatophores) that help carry oxygen to their roots. These shelter some invertebrates and the young of some fishes. The trees are live-bearers; seeds are fully germinated when released. They float to new sites, where they take root.

Mud flats, oyster bar, salt marsh, and scattered black mangrove trees in the cut. The mud flats are important for foraging shorebirds.