

PADDLE #1

FISHBONE CREEK

A tidal creek, through salt marsh to hammock on the Gulf of Mexico.

Length: It is 3 miles from ramp and observation deck, through salt marsh and open water to a grassy shore of hammock island on the Gulf of Mexico. The paddle can be extended an additional 2.3 miles along the Marsh loop segment (orange dash route). If tides are high, take alternative bay route (yellow dash route).

Time: 1.5 hours to paddle out and back (no marsh loop) plus time spent exploring or picnicking.

Skill Level: Safe for all levels if wind is less than 5 mph. If stronger winds occur, beginner paddlers should be accompanied by experienced paddler. Basic use of GPS and/or compass is required.

CAUTIONS: Watch out for oyster beds and sand bars at low tide. If low water requires portage, exit kayak carefully – the oysters can easily cut through unprotected hands/feet, or even shoes.

Marsh Loop: Examination of aerial photos confirms that a northern loop through the salt marsh exists. However, paddling this loop is not recommended to any paddlers without advanced navigational skills and a strong spirit of adventure. Attempts at low or mid-tides will require extensive portage. Only attempt to navigate through the marsh loop at high tide – 3' or higher!

DIRECTIONS TO LAUNCH SITE:

From US 19 in Cross City, take CR 351 south approximately 7.9 miles to Intersection of CR 357 (look for signs to Shired Island).

Turn left and go south on CR 357, approximately 8.3 miles to dirt road on the right, look for small Fishbone Creek sign on right.

Turn right at Fishbone Creek and follow dirt road to observation deck and launch site.



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

INFO ABOUT KAYAK RENTALS, GUIDE & 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.saltwatertides.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.

Fishbone Creek

The northernmost route on the refuges, Fishbone Creek seems least influenced by the Suwannee. Technically Suwannee Sound extends northward from the Cedar Keys to Horseshoe Beach. Close to this northern terminus, Fishbone Creek receives relatively little freshwater from the river mouth, nearly 10 miles to the south. Nor has it received much of the sand that over millenia has washed down the Suwannee and created a delta and complexes of nearshore islands closer to the river mouth.

Biozone 1 and 2. Florida Scrub

The access road crosses a patch of sandy upland dominated by vegetation known simply as "scrub." Scattered slash pines are outnumbered by stunted-looking oaks, including myrtle oak, sand live oak, and Chapman's oak. The sandy soil supports occasional southern redcedars, yaupon holly, greenbriers, and prickly pear cactuses. Scrub supports many kinds of wildlife, including songbirds, small mammals, and reptiles. If not too small, patches such as this one might support Florida scrub jays, gopher tortoises, and the mole skink. Ospreys and other birds that feed in the marshes may use the taller trees for nesting. Also, they may be used by birds returning in the spring from cross-Gulf migrations. In Biozone 2 scrub transitions to brackish marsh.



Fishbone Creek from the refuge observation platform.

Biozone 3. The Transition

A relatively short distance from the launch site the influence of freshwater flowing in from the creek diminishes rapidly. Brackish marsh, indicated by black needlerush transitions abruptly and gives way to the more salt-loving smooth cordgrass.



Gopher tortoise in scrub.

Biozone 4. Salt Marsh and Oyster Reefs

True salt marsh makes up most of the lower reaches of Fishbone Creek, with extensive oyster reefs on the relatively hard creek bottoms. Birdlife is abundant here, with great and snowy egrets, great blue herons, kingfishers, ospreys, northern harriers, and many kinds of shorebirds seen on the reefs.



Through the salt marsh, with a hammock in the background.

Biozone 5. The Hammock

At the terminus of the paddle one arrives at an upland surrounded by a narrow fringe of smooth cordgrass. Exposed to the open waters of the Gulf, the hammock is buffeted by wave action and lacks the broad expanses of marsh that fringe islands in more protected locations. It supports cabbage palms, southern redcedars, and also tall oaks and slash pines. These hammocks are substantial. Unlike the thin sandy strands found closer to the mouth of the Suwannee that support only marsh grasses and a few cabbage palms, they support good stands of pines, southern redcedar, oaks, and understory vegetation.



Scrub vegetation on the access road to the Fishbone Creek launch site. Oaks dominate these dry old dunes, but in wetter sites they may be joined by slash pines and occasional hickories.

Spyglass: Florida Scrub

The largest areas of Florida scrub are in the central peninsula, especially in the Ocala National Forest. Less extensive areas occur along the coast of the Florida panhandle. And small areas of scrub such as this one occur in the Big Bend. These three areas are isolated, and the scrub in the Big Bend region forms a bridge that helps to connect the other two. These are fire-adapted communities, and the oaks are often joined by occasional sand pines or slash pines. The two pines have different strategies for dealing with fire, and the absence of sand pines, together with charring on the trunks of slash pines, suggests that controlled burning may have been employed here to favor the much more commercially valuable slash pines.