

Florida's Environment - North Central Region¹

Martin B. Main and Ginger M. Allen²

Florida's Environment Series

Introduction

Much of north central Florida (Fig. 1) consists of upland ridges, highlands, and hammocks interspersed with interior flatwoods and coastal lowlands. Conservation lands constitute about 20 percent of the north central region of Florida (Table 1). Many temperate species of the southern hardwood forest ecosystem extend into this region and some of the largest hardwood hammocks in the state occur in this area. High pine communities dominated by longleaf pine and scrub habitats also exist. This area supports a high diversity of wildlife, including large numbers of migratory birds that travel along the Gulf coast.

This area is characterized by many rivers, which cross the north central region on their way from large swamps in the northern highlands south to the Gulf of Mexico, emptying into the area known as the Big Bend (Fig. 2). Many springs fueled by the Floridan aquifer occur in the region and because of the porous limestone (karst) geology, many rivers disappear below ground only to emerge again some distance away. The Santa Fe, Steinhatchee, St. Marks, and

Aucilla rivers all flow underground during part of their journey to the Gulf.

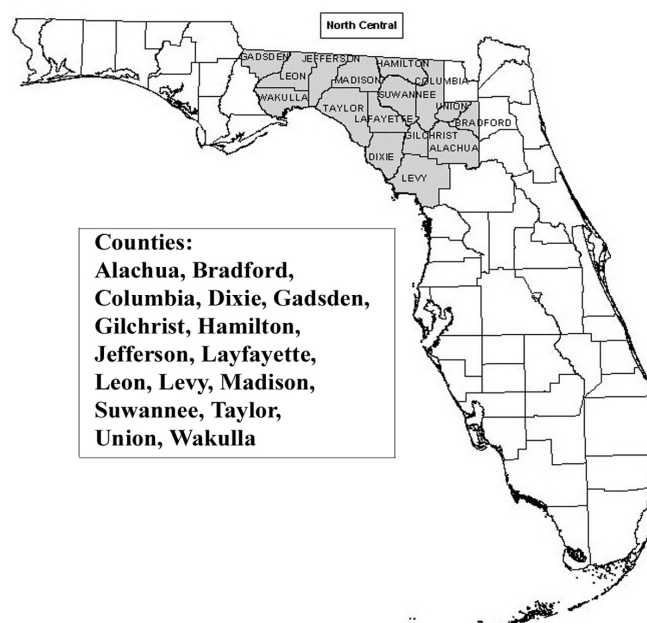


Figure 1. North central Florida region with counties.
Credits: UF/IFAS

Bordering the northeastern Gulf of Mexico, the Big Bend coastal lowland of marshes, swamps, and pine flatwoods is currently one of the least developed regions of the state. Estuarine marshes occupy

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2. Martin B. Main, associate professor, wildlife extension specialist, and Ginger M. Allen, senior biologist, Southwest Florida Research and Education Center, Immokalee, FL; Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-0304.

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160,000 acres of coastline from Tarpon Springs to Apalachee Bay.

This document summarizes major rivers, lakes and springs, featured natural areas, and cultural aspects of Florida's north central region. For information on other regions in Florida, refer to "The Florida Environment: An Overview" and the other seven regional profiles available online (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>).

Table 1. Conservation land acreage in Florida's north central region

County	Conservation Land Acres	% of Total County
Alachua	82,640	15%
Bradford	17,980	10%
Columbia	135,990	27%
Dixie	108,170	24%
Gadsden	18,370	6%
Gilchrist	7,090	3%
Hamilton	23,750	7%
Jefferson	92,830	27%
Lafayette	30,070	9%
Leon	143,730	34%
Levy	162,040	23%
Madison	14,050	3%
Suwannee	14,940	3%
Taylor	92,520	14%
Union	7,630	5%
Wakulla	240,920	62%
Region Total	1,192,720	18%

Based on 2006 Florida Natural Area's Inventory Managed Conservation Lands. Florida State University.

Major Rivers and Lakes

The **Suwannee River** has the second greatest flow of any river in Florida (the Apalachicola River in northwest Florida has a higher flow). The Suwannee River has a drainage basin of almost 1,000 square miles and flows 245 miles from its source in the Okefenokee Swamp in southern Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico, where it discharges into the Suwannee River estuary. The Suwannee is the only river in the eastern Gulf of Mexico that supports a healthy population of the Gulf subspecies of Atlantic Sturgeon, which spawn in the river.



Figure 2. North central Florida major conservation lands. Credits: UF/IFAS

The Floridan aquifer is at or near the Earth's surface in this region and freshwater from springs and rivers influence the high productivity of coastal waters. Madison County has more lakes and ponds than any other county in the region, although most of these are small and ephemeral. Larger lakes occur at either end of the region, with **Lake Miccosukee**, **Lake Iamonia**, **Lake Jackson**, and **Lake Talquin** reservoir at the northwest corner of the region, and **Orange Lake**, **Lochloosa Lake**, **Newnans Lake**, and **Santa Fe Lake** at the eastern edge of the region.

Featured Natural Areas

(see Table 2 for complete list of natural areas)

Located near the town of Chiefland in Levy County, the **Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge** is one of largest undeveloped river delta-estuarine systems in the United States. It includes rivers, coastal marshes and hardwood swamp.

California Swamp is an impressive mosaic of bald cypress, hickory, and sweet gum trees. This swamp serves as an important filtration system for the Suwannee River and provides important habitat for wildlife. There is a 32,000-acre conservation easement over the swamp, one of the largest conservation easements in Florida. The Suwannee River Water Management District holds the easement, which permanently restricts development and limits timber harvesting to sustainable practices.

Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park is designated a National Natural Landmark. This 32,128-acre preserve consists of salt marsh, pine flatwoods, sand pine scrub, and hardwood hammock

habitat that represents a relic of the once vast Gulf Hammock.

Paynes Prairie Preserve is a 21,000-acre preserve that is among the most significant natural and historic areas in Florida. The preserve includes a 13,735-acre basin that is a mosaic of wet prairie, marsh, and open water. Surrounding uplands include hardwood hammock, pine flatwoods, swamps, old fields, and scrub habitats. This mosaic of habitats supports 710 species of plants, which represent approximately 20% of known Florida plant species.

Cultural History

One of the earliest known native groups living in the north central region were the Potano, who inhabited the Santa Fe River basin from approximately 10,000 BC until the arrival of the Spaniards during the 1600s. Many small tribes lived in north Florida during the time of European exploration, such as the Euchee, Yamasee, Timugua, Tequesta, Abalachi, Coça, among others.

Table 2. Recreational and cultural opportunities in natural areas in north central Florida. (WMA=Wildlife Management Area, NWR=National Wildlife Refuge)

County	Natural Area	Phone	Web site
Alachua	Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings State Historic Site	(352) 466-3672	http://www.floridastateparks.org/marjoriekinnanrawlings/
Alachua	Palm Point Park (Newnans Lake)	(352) 334-2170	http://www.cityofgainesville.org/tabid/182/Default.aspx#GumRoot
Alachua	Newnan's Lake Fish Management Area	(352) 371-1767	http://sjrwmd.com/recreationguide/newnaslake/index.html
Alachua	Orange Lake Fish Management Area	(850) 488-4676	http://floridaswater.com/publications/pdfs/fs_orangecrbasin.pdf
Alachua	Lochloosa Wildlife Conservation Area	(904) 329-4404	http://sjr.state.fl.us/programs/operations/land_mgmt/index.html
Alachua	San Felasco Hammock State Park	(352) 955-2008	http://www.floridastateparks.org/sanfelascohammock/
Alachua	Gum Root Park and Swamp	(352) 334-2236	http://www.cityofgainesville.org/tabid/182/Default.aspx#PalmPoint
Alachua	Prairie Creek Conservation Area	(352) 446-3397	http://www.alachuaconservationtrust.org/index.php?alachua/archives/prairie-creek
Alachua	Paynes Prairie Preserve	(352) 466-3397	http://www.floridastateparks.org/paynesprairie/
Alachua	River Rise State Park	(904) 454-4201	http://www.floridastateparks.org/riverrise/
Bradford	Lake Sampson and Lake Rowell	(904) 964-9374	http://myfwc.com/Recreation/FW_forecasts_ncr.htm
Bradford	Lake Santa Fe	(352) 475-2844	http://myfwc.com/Recreation/FW_forecasts_ncr.htm
Columbia	Alligator Lake		http://www.srwmd.state.fl.us/features/cooperative+programs/alligator+lake/default1.htm
Columbia	Ichetucknee Springs State Park	(904) 497-2511	http://www.floridastateparks.org/ichetuckneesprings/
Columbia	Osceola National Forest	(904) 752-2577	http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/florida/recreation/index_osc.shtml
Columbia	Pinhook Swamp	(407) 682-3664	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/lands/FFAnnual/B_PinhookSwamp.pdf
Columbia	Okefenokee Swamp NWR	(912) 496-7366	http://www.fws.gov/okefenokee/
Columbia	OLeno State Park	(386) 454-1853	http://www.floridastateparks.org/oleno/
Dixie	Lower Suwannee NWR	(352) 493-0238	http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=41515
Gadsden/ Leon	Lake Talquin State Park	(850) 922-6007	http://www.floridastateparks.org/laketalquin/default.cfm

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County	Natural Area	Phone	Web site
Gilchrist	Ginnie Springs, Blue Springs	(904) 454 2202 (904) 454-1369	http://www.floridastateparks.org/bluespring/ http://www.ginniespringsoutdoors.com/
Gilchrist	Fanning Springs State Park	(352) 463-3420	http://www.floridastateparks.org/fanningsprings/default.cfm
Hamilton	Withlacoochee River (North) Canoe Trail	(352) 394-2280	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/guide/regions/north/trails/withlacoochee.htm
Hamilton	Big Shoals State Forest	(904) 208-1461	http://www.floridastateparks.org/bigshoals/
Hamilton	Suwannee River State Park	(904) 362-2746	http://www.floridastateparks.org/suwanneeriver/
Jefferson	Wacissa/Aucilla Rivers	(850) 997-5552	http://www.floridadep.org/gwt/guide/regions/panhandleeast/trails/wacissa.htm
Jefferson	Lake Miccosukee	(850) 488-4676	NA
Jefferson	St. Mark's NWR	(850) 925-6121	http://saintmarks.fws.gov/
Lafayette	Mallory Swamp	(850) 837-1253	http://myfwc.com/Recreation/WMASites_MallorySwamp_index.htm
Lafayette	Troy Springs	(904) 497-2511	http://www.floridastateparks.org/troyspring/
Leon/ Gadsden/ Liberty	Lake Talquin State Forest		http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/lake_talquin.html
Leon	Natural Bridge Battlefield State Historic Site	(850) 922-6007	http://www.floridastateparks.org/naturalbridge/
Leon	San Marcos De Apalache State Historic Site	(850) 922-6007	http://www.floridastateparks.org/sanmarcos/
Leon	Lake Jackson Mounds State Archaeological Site	(850) 922-6007	http://funandsun.com/parks/LakeJacksonMounds/lakejackson.html
Leon	Tallahassee Museum of History/Natural Science	(850) 576-1636	http://tallahasseeemuseum.org/
Leon	De Soto State Archaeological Site	(850) 922-6007	http://www.visitflorida.com/cms/e/tracing_floridas_native_american_history.php
Leon	Apalachicola National Forest, Bradwell Bay Wilderness Area	(850) 926-3561	http://apalachee.floridatrail.org/big-bend-area-trails/apalachicola-national-forest-east/
Leon	Lake Jackson Mounds Archaeological State Park	(850) 488-4676	http://www.floridastateparks.org/lakejackson/default.cfm
Leon	Leon Sinks Geological Area	(850) 942-9300	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/guide/regions/panhandleeast/trails/leon_sinks.htm
Levy	Big Bend WMA Hickory Mound/Hagen's Cove	(850) 838-1306	http://myfwc.com/Recreation/WMASites_BiqBend_index.htm
Levy	Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve	(352) 563- 0450	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/bigbend/info.htm
Levy	Cedar Key Scrub State Reserve	(352) 543-5567	http://www.floridastateparks.org/cedarkeyscrub/
Levy	Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park	(352) 543-5567	http://www.floridastateparks.org/waccasassabay/
Levy	Manatee Springs State Park	(352) 493-6072	http://www.floridastateparks.org/manateesprings/
Levy	Devil's Den/ Blue Grotto Springs, Blue Springs	(352) 528-3344 (352) 486-9002	http://www.devilsDen.com http://www.floridastateparks.org/bluespring/
Levy	Andrews WMA	(352) 493-6020	http://www.floridaconservation.org/viewing/sites/site-nw15.html

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County	Natural Area	Phone	Web site
Levy	Gulf Hammock WMA	(352) 486-3006	http://myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_GulfHammock_index.htm
Levy	Goethe State Forest	(352) 486-5494	http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/goethe.html
Madison	Ladell Brothers Outdoor Env. Center	(850) -2288	http://www.nfcc.edu/community-programs/ladell-nature-center
Suwannee	Suwannee River State Park	(386) 362-2746	http://www.floridastateparks.org/suwanneeriver/
Suwannee	Suwannee River		http://www.srwmd.state.fl.us
Suwannee	Peacock Springs State Recreational Area	(904) 776-2194	http://www.floridastateparks.org/peacocksprings/
Suwannee	Suwannee Cultural Music Park	(904) 364-1683	http://www.musicliveshere.com/
Suwannee	Springs: Suwanee Royal, Little River, Branford, Anderson, Charles, Falmouth	(904) 362-1001	http://www.suwanneechamber.com
Taylor	Econfina River State Park	(850) 922-6007	http://www.floridastateparks.org/econfinariver/
Taylor	Suwannee River Ranch	(386) 935-0012	http://www.suwanneeriverranch.com/
Wakulla	Apalachicola National Forest (Ochlockonee and Sopchoppy Rivers)	(904) 942-9300	http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/florida/recreation/index_apa.shtml
Wakulla	Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park	(850) 224-5950	http://www.floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings/

Archaeological sites, primarily middens (trash heaps) and burial mounds, have been found at many sites. For example, archeological sites have been found along the Steinhatchee, Econfina, Wakulla, Sopchoppy, St. Marks, Wacissa, and Aucilla rivers. The Lake Jackson Mounds State Archeological Site has yielded some of the most significant archeological discoveries in Florida. The site was once a large ceremonial and trading center dating back to the Fort Walton period of Florida's history (1000-1450 A.D.).

At least three mission settlements were built near the Santa Fe river before the end of the 17th century. Spaniards built the Fort San Marcos De Apalache in 1679 at the confluence of the St. Marks and Wakulla rivers. This same fort was later rebuilt and used by the Spanish, British, and later the Confederate Army during the Civil War. The Spanish operated a mission along the Suwannee River known as San Juan de Guacara, which may be the origin of the contemporary name for the Suwannee (San Juanee) River.

The Suwannee and lower Santa Fe rivers, served as main transportation routes for goods and people

between the interior of north central Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. Some rivers were modified to improve transportation, such as construction of the Slave Canal during the 1830s, which connected the Wacissa and Aucilla Rivers and provided a means to easily transport cotton from Jefferson County to the Gulf of Mexico. Much of the timber cut in north Florida and south Georgia during the late 19th and early 20th century was floated to Cedar Key and other coastal towns of the Big Bend that served as major shipping ports.

Springs were important locations for early inhabitants. White Sulphur Springs was regarded by Native Americans as sacred ground for its curative powers. During the early 1900s the spring was promoted as a health resort and the spring water advertised as a cure for almost any ailment. By 1906, the spring had been converted into a bustling resort complete with shops and clinical examination rooms. Today, visitors can view a reconstructed springhouse at the Stephen Foster State Park.

Additional Information

Published Resources

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Online Resources

Florida Division of Historical Resources,
<http://www.flheritage.com/>

Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission Wildlife
Viewing Sites, <http://www.myfwc.com/viewing/>

Florida's Historic Places,
<http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/florida/lessons/places.htm>

Florida's Museum of Natural History,
<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/>

Florida Natural Areas Inventory, <http://www.fnai.org/>

Florida's Scenic Highways,
[http://www.dot.state.fl.us/emo/scenichwy/
default.shtm](http://www.dot.state.fl.us/emo/scenichwy/default.shtm)

Florida State Parks, <http://www.floridastateparks.org/>

Florida Water Management Districts,
<http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/fgils/wmd.html>

P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History,
<http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pkyonge/index.html>

Touring the Georgia-Florida Coast,
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/geo-flor/g-fintro.htm>

Visit Florida, <http://www.visitflorida.com>