

Florida's Environment - Central Region¹

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Florida's Environment series

Introduction

Florida's central region (Fig. 1) is characterized by diverse upland habitats and wetland systems. Conservation lands make up nearly one quarter of the regional land use (Table 1).

The Ocala National Forest is one of three national forests in Florida and encompasses most of the northern portion of this region (Fig. 2). Natural communities include large tracts of upland pine forest and scrub. To the south is Florida's lake country, sparkling with thousands of clear, natural lakes which host the largest concentration of bald eagles in the continental United States.

The Lake Wales Ridge, which forms an important part of Florida's central ridge system, was once a series of islands in a long-ago sea and now is home to Florida's ancient and critically-endangered scrub communities. West and south of the Kissimmee River basin are Florida's largest remaining dry prairie habitats.

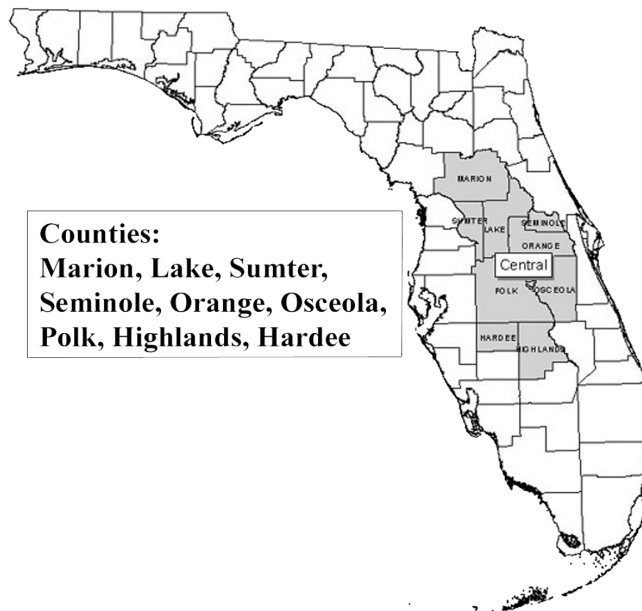


Figure 1. Central Florida region with counties. Credits: UF/IFAS

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

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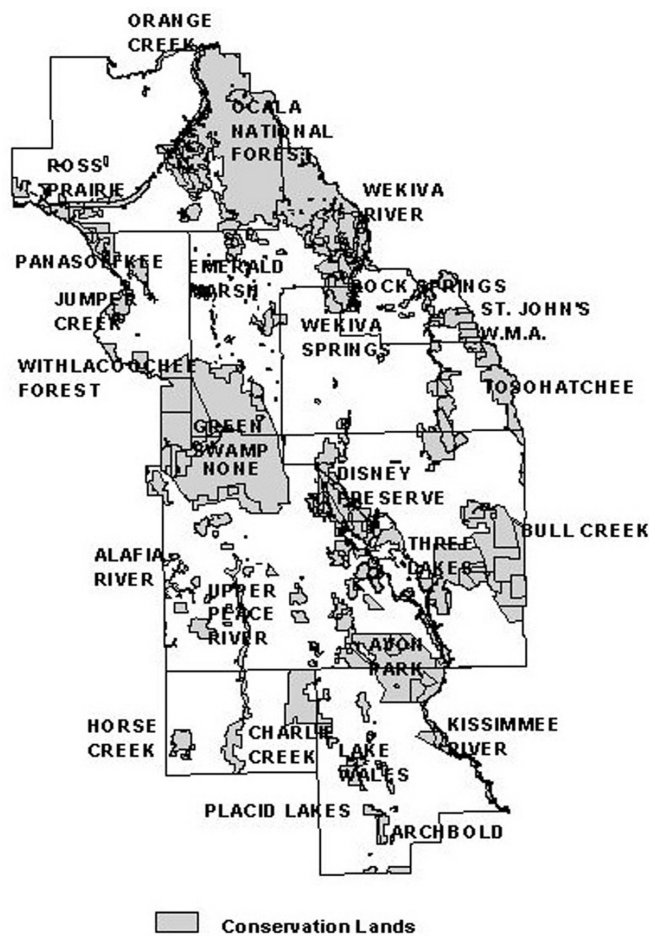


Figure 2. Central Florida major conservation lands.
Credits: UF/IFAS

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

County	Conservation Land Acres	% of Total County
Hardee	680	0%
Highlands	113,020	17%
Lake	191,620	31%
Marion	343,290	34%
Orange	83,880	14%
Osceola	159,530	19%
Polk	254,970	21%
Seminole	27,900	14%
Sumter	112,110	32%
Region Total	1,287,000	22%
Based on 2006 Florida Natural Areas Inventory Managed Conservation Lands. Florida State University.		

Major Rivers, Lakes and Springs

The rivers of central Florida drain the Lake Wales Ridge in all directions as they empty into various lakes and travel outside of the region into the Gulf of Mexico. Abundant springs originating from the Floridan aquifer dot the central landscape and give life to many of the rivers in the region.

The **Oklawaha River** flows 96 miles north from Lake Harris in Lake County to the St. Johns River, to which it is the principle tributary. The Oklawaha is one of the oldest rivers in Florida, and this gives it a variety of established habitats. Three dams, the Moss Bluff Dam, Eureka Dam, and Rodman Dam, alter the flow of the Oklawaha and create recreation areas. The river's water quality is tied to its source lakes, Lake Apopka and Lake Griffith.

The **Peace River** originates in the Green Swamp of Polk County and flows 105 miles before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico at Charlotte Harbor (Southwest Region). The Peace River has many tributary creeks and the land use along the banks is mainly agriculture.

The **Palatka River**, one of Florida's most pristine and beautiful rivers, is more of a watercourse connecting several lakes than a true river. It is contained entirely within Lake County, originating from Lake Louisa and ending at Lake Harris.

Historically, the **Kissimmee River** coursed 98 miles between Lake Kissimmee and Lake Okechobee. The river was channelized for flood control and navigation to a 56-mile-long canal by the early 1970s. The once extensive floodplain marshes were transformed into cattle pasture and the water cleansing ability of the river was lost, which increased nutrient loads entering Lake Okechobee. During 1992 the Kissimmee River became the site of the largest river restoration project in the world, with plans to restore over 40 square miles of river/floodplain ecosystem including 43 miles of meandering river channel and 27,000 acres of wetlands.

Designated an Outstanding Florida Water, a Wild and Scenic River, and an Aquatic Preserve, the **Wekiva River** is valued for its biological and archaeological resources, as well as for its pure water. The Wekiva is one of the steepest rivers in Florida. The banks and swamps along the Wekiva provide important bird rookeries and wildlife habitats.

Silver Springs is Florida's third largest spring and it has been made famous by movies and television. Visitors come enjoy glass-bottom boat tours, crystal clear waters, and constant water temperatures of 72°F. **Rainbow Springs, Silver Glen Springs, Alexander Springs, and Wekiwa Springs** are also popular recreational spots.

Lake Apopka is found in the headwaters of the Ocklawaha River in Lake and Orange counties. In 1941, a levee was built along the north shore to drain 20,000 acres of shallow marsh for farming. During 1947 citrus and muck farming wastes were discharged into the lake, which resulted in algae blooms and fish kills, and by the mid-1950s fish populations were greatly reduced. Water hyacinth invaded the lake in 1959 and replaced native eelgrass and pondweed by the early 1970s. Treated wastewater was discharged into the lake from shoreline communities until the 1980s. Agricultural discharge laden with phosphorous continued until the early 1990s. Lake Apopka was targeted for restoration by St. Johns Water Management District in partnership with local state and federal agencies in 1985. Lake Apopka's water quality has improved in response to these conservation efforts. Phosphorous levels are down 62 percent and water clarity has improved by 68 percent. Future improvements are anticipated as more former farms on the lake's north shore are reflooded.

Lake Istokpoga (27,692 acres) is located northeast of Lake Placid in Highlands County. Lake Istokpoga is highly known for high quality black crappie and large mouth bass fishing.

Lake Kissimmee, Florida's third largest lake, encompasses 35,000 acres in Osceola County. The lake and its surrounding area hosts over 200 species of birds making it one of the best birding areas in central Florida. A 1996 lake drawdown and habitat enhancement project has led to a great increase in large mouth bass populations.

Lake Panasoffkee, located in Sumter County, is a lake/swamp hybrid. Many acres of forested swamp occur within the lake, which drains into the Withlacoochee River. The lake is a popular fishing spot and it is a major wintering ground for migratory waterfowl.

Lake Griffin, located in Lake County, is also a popular fishing and birding location. "Marsh islands" occasionally appear in the lake, which are created by floating chunks of marsh vegetation that break off from the adjacent marsh habitat and float iceberg-like into the lake.

Featured Natural Areas

(see Table 2 for detailed list of natural areas)

Ocala National Forest covers approximately 389,000 acres in central Florida. Established in 1908, it is the oldest National Forest east of the Mississippi River and the southernmost National Forest in the continental U.S. This huge area includes scrub and various other upland habitats, as well as all manner of wetlands.

Wekiwa Springs State Park is a sandhill community located near Apopka. Barred owls and pileated woodpeckers are common in the cabbage palm-oak hammocks near the river. Sand pine scrub occurs near the picnic area and is home to a number of Florida rarities, including the Florida mouse, worm-lizard, and crowned snake. Sandhills, scrub, flatwoods, hammocks, and swamps support black bear and many other species of wildlife.

Archbold Biological Station, in Highlands County, is a 5,000 acre privately-owned property that supports an active research program dedicated to understanding and conserving species and habitats—particularly scrub—of the Lake Wales Ridge.

Nature Conservancy Tiger Creek Preserve encompasses 4,805 acres on the edge of Florida's oldest and highest landmass, the Lake Wales Ridge. Tiger Creek Preserve is named after the pristine blackwater stream within the preserve, almost all of which is protected as well as its surrounding hardwood swamps, hammocks, oak scrub, pine

flatwoods, sandhill, and longleaf pine/wiregrass habitats. Rare animals and plants live in the preserve, some of which occur nowhere else on Earth.

Highlands Hammock State Park preserves a virgin hardwood forest and also includes cypress swamp, pine flatwoods, sand pine scrub, scrubby flatwoods, bayheads, and marsh habitats. Three boardwalks provide easy access to forested habitats.

Avon Park Air Force Range manages unique and endangered central Florida habitats including dry prairie, oak and sand pine scrub, and seepage slopes. Pine flatwoods, marshes, and hardwood hammocks also occur. Hunting and other recreational opportunities exist.

Lake Kissimmee State Park was once used by Native Americans because of the abundance of fish and game in the area. Habitats include floodplain forests, hardwood hammocks, oak scrub, and longleaf pine communities. Lake Kissimmee State Park hosts over two hundred species of birds making it one of the best birding areas in central Florida.

Cultural History

Prehistoric Indian sites, middens (trash heaps), and mounds (burial sites), are found along many of central Florida's rivers. For example, the Oklawaha River, Arbuckle Creek, and the Wekiwa, all have archeological sites.

A look back at the region's history in the area gives evidence of changing land. For example, the land that is now Lake Kissimmee State Park was once used by Native Americans because of the abundance of fish and game in the area. During the third Seminole War Fort Gardiner was built near Lake Kissimmee as a temporary fortification. Later the area was widely used for timber and turpentine. During the Civil War the area was used for raising cattle that were shipped to the Confederate Army or traded with Cuba for supplies. After the war cattle ranching became the primary industry in the area and remains an important industry today.

A short drive to the east of Silver Springs is the Juniper Prairie wilderness area. The Long family, characterized in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' famous

book, "The Yearling," settled Pats Island around 1840. The character and history of the area are captured in Rawling's writing, and visitors can still visit many of the places described in her book.

Additional Sources of Information

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Online Resources

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Emeralda Marsh Journal,
<http://www.stetson.edu/~pmay/emeralda/>

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.htm>

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>

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

Table 2. Recreational and cultural opportunities in natural areas in central Florida

County	Natural Area	Phone	Web site
Hardee	Paynes Creek State Historic Site	(941) 375-4717	http://www.floridastateparks.org/paynescreek/
Highlands	Avon Park Air Force Range	(863) 452-4254	http://myfwc.com/viewing/sites/site-c20.html
Highlands	Highlands Hammock State Park	(863) 386-6094	http://www.floridastateparks.org/highlandshammock/
Highlands	Archbold Biological Station	(863) 465-2571	http://www.archbold-station.org/
Highlands	Buck Island	(863) 465-2571	http://www.archbold-station.org/
Highlands	Lake Istokpoga	(863) 648-3202	http://www.jimporter.org/lakes/istokpoga/
Lake	Emeralda Marsh Conservation Area	(407) 893-3127	http://sjr.state.fl.us/programs/outreach/pubs/recguide/w01_emeralda_marsh_CA.html
Lake	Blue Springs State Park	(904) 775-3663	http://www.floridastateparks.org/bluespring/
Lake	Lake Louisa State Park	(352) 394-3969	http://www.floridastateparks.org/lakelouisa/
Lake	Lake Griffin State Park	(352) 360-6760	http://www.floridastateparks.org/lakegriffin/
Lake	Lake Apopka Restoration Area	(904) 329-4500	http://sjr.state.fl.us/programs/outreach/pubs/recguide/w02_lake_apopka_RA.html
Lake	Seminole State Forest	(352) 360-6675	http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/seminole.html
Marion	Ocklawaha Prairie Restoration Area	(407) 893-3127	http://sjr.state.fl.us/programs/acq_restoration/s_water/uockr/ockprairie.html
Marion	Juniper Prairie Wilderness	(850) 523-8500	http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/florida/recreation/index_oca.shtml#juniper
Marion	Ocala National Forest	(850) 523-8500	http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/florida/recreation/index_oca.shtml
Marion	Silver River State Park	(352) 236-1827	http://www.floridastateparks.org/silverriver/default.cfm
Orange	Lower Wekiva River State Preserve	(407) 884-2008	http://www.floridastateparks.org/lowerwekivariver/default.cfm
Orange	Rock Springs Run State Reserve		http://www.floridastateparks.org/rockspringsrun/default.cfm
Orange	Disney Wilderness Preserve	(407) 935-0002	http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/florida/preserves/art5523.html
Orange	Forever Florida	(866) 854-3837	http://www.floridaeco-safaris.com/index.php
Orange	Split Oak Forest Mitigation Park		http://www.floridaconservation.org/recreation/split_oak/visitorinfo.asp
Orange	Tibet-Butler Preserve	(407) 876-6696	http://www.floridaconservation.org/viewing/sites/site-c07.html
Orange	Three Lakes Wildlife Mgmt. Area	(407) 436-1818	http://myfwc.com/viewing/sites/site-c16.html
Orange	Econlockhatchee River Canoe Trail	(850) 488-3701	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/guide/regions/eastcentral/trails/econlockhatchee.htm
Orange	West Orange Trail	(407) 654-5144	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/guide/regions/eastcentral/trails/west_orange.htm
Orange	William Beardall Tosohatchee State Reserve	(407) 568-5893	http://www.visitflorida.com/destinations/moreinfo.php/ID=8035/detail=park
Osceola	Disney Wilderness Preserve, The	(407) 935-0002	http://www.tnc.org

Table 2. Recreational and cultural opportunities in natural areas in central Florida

County	Natural Area	Phone	Web site
Osceola	Lower Reedy Creek Management Area		https://my.sfwmd.gov/portal/page?_pageid=2236,4736096&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL
Osceola	Lake Kissimmee State Park	(863) 696-1112	http://www.floridastateparks.org/lakekissimmee/default.cfm
Osceola	East Lake Tohopekaliga	(407) 957-7243	http://www.toptenlakes.com/lake_tohopekaliga.htm
Osceola	Three Lakes WMA	(352) 732-1225	http://myfwc.com/recreation/three_lakes/default.asp
Polk	Lake Weohyakapka	(850) 488-4676	http://www.toptenlakes.com/lake_weohyakapka.htm
Polk	Arbuckle Wildlife Mgmt. Area	(407) 635-7801	http://myfwc.com/viewing/sites/site-c19.html
Polk	Bok Tower Pine Ridge Trail	(863) 676-1408	http://www.boktower.org/index.html
Polk & Highlands	Nature Conservancy Tiger Creek Preserve	(407) 682-3664	http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/florida/preserves/art5524.html
Seminole	Cross Seminole Trail	(407) 869-5966	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/guide/regions/eastcentral/trails/cross_seminole.htm
Seminole	Little Big Econ State Forest	(407) 971-3500	http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/little_big_econ.html
Sumter	Dade Battlefield State Historic Site	(904) 793-4781	http://www.floridastateparks.org/dadebattlefield/default.cfm
Sumter	Withlacoochee State Forest	(352) 754-6777	http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/withlacoochee.html