

Withlacoochee River County Park, a Little Gem in the Great Green Swamp

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Mid-summer. The Florida sandhill is a desperate location for any living thing. The sun is unrelenting and all of the recommendations about a wide-brimmed hat, drinking plenty of water, donning light clothing, and being ‘summer smart’ seem ineffective. Not a single bird sings in the tremendous heat and the only sound comes from the brush of wiregrass, the crackle of last fall’s turkey oak leaves, and the crunch of longleaf pinecones under foot. The environment offers fewer obstacles here than an oak hammock or a pine flatwood system, and a kicked pinecone soars into the goal of a patch of saw palmetto twenty feet from my boot. I throw up my arms indicating ‘goal!’ before the heat reminds me who is boss around here. Then a rumble of thunder, gathering clouds and the promise of a rain offer a possible respite. But first I retreat a couple of hundred feet to the banks of the slow, gathering waters of the Withlacoochee River.

The Withlacoochee River County Park is near to my heart and close to my home and workplace. To paraphrase, you love what you know, and this little park is one of my favorite Florida locations because it is easily accessible even if at first glance it’s an underwhelming place. It has no outstanding features like a gorgeous aquamarine springhead, friendly manatees, pristine beaches, or estuaries, nor sweeping vistas of sawgrass. But this park is a wonderful teaching laboratory, a place where I can take college students to see a part of Florida beyond pavement, theme parks, highways, and insane traffic.

What does this place have that makes it a gem? An outstanding representation of many Florida ecosystems, not too many visitors, nice trails, relative isolation, and ease of access. The park abuts the Green Swamp, a few miles east Dade City in eastern Pasco County. Packed into its 458 acres are prairies, hammocks, wetlands, a river floodplain, and plenty of sand hills.

I make my way down to the river floodplain with its cypress swamps, cool shade, and the blackwater of the Withlacoochee River looks inviting. On the dock, however, is a quirky sign with humanoid shape warning, “No Swimming.” I’m guessing it’s not the swift currents, which occur only after heavy rains, but the presence of too many alligators.

The river emerges from the Green Swamp, which on night-time satellite imagery appears as a dark hole of over half a million acres in central Florida between the Orlando and Tampa metropolitan areas. No lights, no roads and sprawl, and very few people. The little Withlacoochee park-jewel is contiguous with a huge area that includes 110,000 acres of protected areas stitched together from the Green Swamp, including the headwaters of the Withlacoochee, Hillsborough, Ocklawaha, and Peace Rivers. The area was purchased in 1974 in an effort to preserve the Floridan aquifer, which in the western part of the Green Swamp pushes subterranean waters toward the Gulf of Mexico ensuring two million people in the Tampa Bay metro area have good, clean drinking water.

The park is a tiny section of a vast system that is home to many species of wildlife, including reports of bears and bobcats. This park is a terrific setting for students to conduct ecological research in a fairly pristine setting. It is amazing that less than 40 miles north of Tampa, there are relatively few invasive species.

The tiny park has a big park feel. I recommend a visit to see the river, a tower that looks out over sandhill, hammock, and prairies. Lots of trails and enough variety to escape the summer heat on foot, canoe, or just sitting on a bench enjoying the flow of the river (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Withlacoochee River, near Dade City, in the fall. Photo by author.