

Segment 6

Big Bend

Emergency contact information:

911

Jefferson County Sheriff's Office: 850-997-2523

Taylor County Sheriff's Office: 850-584-4225

Dixie County Sheriff's Office: 352-498-1220

Levy County Sheriff's Office: 352-486-5111

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

Begin: Lower Aucilla River launch

End: Cross Florida Greenway spoil island campsite near Yankeetown

Distance: 153.5 miles

Duration: 14-15 days

Special Considerations: This is a remote area where cell phone coverage can be non-existent. Being properly equipped and prepared and leaving a float plan is very important. Also, you may travel two to four days at a time without being able to replenish fresh water supplies, and opportunities for replenishing food supplies are also scarce, so plan accordingly. The coast here can be very shallow and low tides can present a problem for navigation and when seeking to land or launch. Keep a tide chart to help plan your trip. You may have to paddle a mile or two off the coast during extreme low tides.

Introduction

With the exception of the Ten Thousand Islands/Everglades segment, this is the remotest segment of the trail, featuring long stretches of unspoiled shoreline, marsh expanses, and sea islands. The Big Bend also has the most stable population of bay scallops in the state and the most intact seagrass beds. These seagrass beds serve as vitally important nurseries for fish, shrimp, crabs and a host of other marine species, one reason the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve covers much of this segment. Spanning more than 945,000 acres, the aquatic preserve is the largest and possibly the most pristine in the state. To learn more, log onto <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/bigbend/>.

Fortunately, much of the Big Bend coastline is in public ownership. The first 105-mile stretch of the trail, including six primitive campsites, is managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) as part of the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail. Free permits must be obtained before using any of the campsites and you must paddle from top to bottom. Campsites are marked by white poles and signs and limited to 8 persons and 4 backpacking size tents to better protect the fragile coastal environment, a general rule to follow along the entire segment. The six campsites are closed during the busy July and August scallop season. These are not the best months for overnight camping anyway. The FWC trail guide is recommended for paddlers in this section as it provides more detailed information and waterproof maps. For more information about FWC permits and how to purchase the trail guide, log onto http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm.

Near the Suwannee River, you'll pass through lands managed by the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, <http://www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee/>. The refuge covers numerous islands and more than twenty miles of the famed river of song.

Near Cedar Key, the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge encompasses 13 historic and wildlife-rich islands ranging in size from 1 to 120 acres, totaling 762 acres, <http://www.fws.gov/cedarkeys/>.

It is unlawful to camp on either the Lower Suwannee or Cedar Keys national wildlife refuges.

Two state parks are part of this segment—Econfina River and Waccasassa Bay Preserve. Econfina River encompasses more than 3,000 acres of pine flatwoods, oak/palm hammocks, and broad expanses of marsh and tree islands. The 34,000-acre

Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park offers sweeping marsh vistas and tree islands between Cedar Key and Yankeetown. To learn more about these two parks, log onto www.floridastateparks.org.

There are many friendly trail towns in this segment that offer restaurants, small grocery stores, and some have motels. Advice and fishing yarns are generally free of charge. Information on local communities along the trail can be obtained by logging onto www.steinhatcheetoperry.com and www.purewaterwilderness.com.

Leave No Trace principles should be followed in camping at designated primitive sites in order to keep them open for paddlers. To learn more about Leave No Trace principles, log onto <http://www.lnt.org/>.

1. Lower Aucilla River Launch to Econfina River State Park, 10-11 miles

From the Aucilla River mouth, it is about four miles to the mouth of the Econfina, and another 2.5 miles to the state park boat ramp.

The primitive paddler's campsite is about a mile upriver from the boat ramp and is on high ground in the river forest along the west bank. Shoals just above a small bridge before the campsite may inhibit passage at low tide or during low water conditions. If this is the case, you may want to wait an hour or so at the boat landing before attempting again with a rising tide or elect to stay at the private campground. The primitive campsite is free and requires no permit. However, the park would like for campers to notify them if using the site so they can gauge use, 850-922-6007. There is a two-night maximum stay.

If the primitive site is occupied or cannot be reached, then arrange for camping through the park concessionaire (The Econfina River Resort) at 850-584-2135, or visit their store. The campground and store, along with showers and bathrooms, are a quarter mile north of the park boat ramp along a paved road. There is a fee. The store is closed on Mondays. You can also access the store from the primitive campsite by hiking a red

blazed trail to the park road and turning left for a total of about a mile. The trail, like other hiking trails in the park, are best utilized in cool weather when venomous snakes and ticks are dormant.

The river above the campsite is worth a paddle. Large live oaks and other hardwoods arch over the waterway, and numerous wildflowers often bloom along shore.

2. Econfina River State Park to Rock Island Campsite, 10.5 miles

(Permit required -

http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm)

Leave the state park with a 2-day supply of water.

An optional rest stop about halfway to Rock Island is the Hickory Mound Impoundment, where there is a picnic area and an observation tower. The tower will likely be visible from the water. You'll need the FWC trail guide for the best route up a tidal creek to the picnic area.

Rock Island is the larger of two offshore islands, where you can land in a narrow rocky cove on the north side. The island, about 20 acres in size, is interesting to explore, with its many tidal pools and exposed limestone. It can be buggy in warm weather, however.

3. Rock Island Campsite to Spring Warrior Creek Campsite, 11 miles

(Permit required -

http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm)

Leaving the island, it is a little over two miles to the mouth of the Fenholloway River, which may have an unpleasant smell due to effluent from a paper mill. A good rest stop is Big Spring Creek, about three miles past the Fenholloway, where you can access a picnic area and a spring run (3 miles roundtrip).

About 3 miles from the mouth of Big Spring Creek is the Spring Warrior channel marker. It is 1.6 miles to the campsite. Paddling up Spring Warrior can be challenging in

a falling tide. Before the campsite, you can obtain fresh water from the Spring Warrior Fish Camp. If unattended, you can use a hose on the side of the building, but this water may not be potable. The campsite is along a bend on the right side about a half-mile upstream from the fish camp. The campsite was once a Thanksgiving gathering place for a local family. You can explore the scenic river for about another mile upstream until logjams may restrict passage.

4. Spring Warrior Creek Campsite to Sponge Point Campsite, 12.5 miles

(Permit required -

http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm)

As you cruise along the marsh, you may notice small outcroppings where cedar trees are growing. These are often the brick and stone remnants of Confederate saltworks where furnaces and iron kettles were set up during the Civil War to boil seawater to obtain salt. Salt was vitally needed to cure meat for the Confederate Army. Many of the salt works were destroyed by Union raids near the end of the war.

A must stop is the county park at Keaton Beach where you can have a picnic, take an outdoor shower, replenish water supplies, and eat in a nearby restaurant. There are a couple of small convenience stores along the town's main road along with an opportunity for lodging at the Keaton Beach Marina and Motel (850-578-2897). Inexpensive beach house rentals are available through the Gulf Coast Realty (850-587-2039). Leave Keaton Beach with enough water for two days.

Sponge Point, marked by majestic coastal live oak trees, appears to be an island as it is separated from the mainland by an expanse of marsh. Its name was derived from spongers that once frequented the Big Bend Coast. A massive 1940s outbreak of red tide, coupled with the advent of synthetic sponges, severely curtailed the native sponge industry. Be watchful of prickly pear cacti when hiking the island.

For restrooms and a covered picnic shelter, you can paddle to Hagen's Cove a half mile to the east, although no camping is allowed.

5. Sponge Point Campsite to Dallus Creek Campsite, 8 miles

(Permit required -

http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm)

This is a short day along more shallow tidal creeks, but there are several options to further explore the area. From your campsite, you can paddle up Dallus Creek another 1.3 miles to a boat ramp and picnic area where you can hike a 2-mile loop trail. During high tide, you can paddle Dallus Creek past the boat ramp to its swampy origin or take a 3.5-mile loop around Clay Creek (see FWC guide).

The remote campsite is in a grove of coastal live oaks at the end of a cleared trail through needlerush. Be watchful of rattlesnakes during warm weather. The campsite may be difficult to reach during low tide.

6. Dallus Creek Campsite to Steinhatchee, 8 miles

Steinhatchee is the largest town in this segment until you reach Cedar Key. Here, you can rent a motel room or campsite, sample restaurant fare, and stock up on supplies. You should arrange for your stay in advance by selecting a motel or private campground utilizing either of these websites: www.steinhatcheetoperry.com and www.purewaterwilderness.com. One easily accessible overnight stop in Steinhatchee, and clearly marked from the water, is the Sea Hag Marina (352-498-3008). Bear in mind that the only public boat ramp in the area is across from Steinhatchee on the south side of the river at Jena (see map).

7. Steinhatchee to Sink Creek Campsite, 10 miles

(Permit required -

http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm)

Sink Creek, one of the more remote spots along the trail, is an island-like spot surrounded by tidal creeks, marsh and sand flats. It is about a half mile in from the mouth of the creek on the south bank. A high tide will make accessibility easier.

Behind the campsite at low tide, you can hike the salt flats--an open sandy ribbon between marsh and tree hammocks. Look for evidence of rising sea levels as many cedars and other trees have died, leaving behind their naturally sculpted trunks.

A brackish spring is a quarter mile upstream near a remote boat ramp. Here, you can take a swim, explore numerous small sinkholes, and hike the back roads for great vistas. The spring area is where mullet fisherman camped and traded salted fish for farm produce and other goods in the early 1900s. A fish house once stood on the shore, but like many of the Big Bend's shoreline areas, storms and rising sea levels have erased most obvious signs of human existence.

8. Sink Creek Campsite to Butler Island Campsite, 14 miles

(Permit required -

http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm)

From the campsite, Bowlegs Point is a good rest stop, about 2.5 miles away. Past the point, you can only cruise between Pepperfish Keys and the mainland at high tide. Otherwise, stay on the Gulf side. Northern Pepperfish Key is a bird rookery, so keep at least 300 feet from the island so as not to disturb nesting wading birds.

A good rest stop near the end of the day is a county park at the town of Horseshoe Beach. You can replenish water supplies—enough for two days--and walk a short distance to a convenience store and a restaurant.

The Butler Island Campsite is 1.7 miles from Horseshoe Point, on the south side of the island. Camping is beneath a canopy of live oaks, palms and a rare stand of mature cedars, but beware of poison ivy. As with other sites, the low-lying coontie palm grows here, a protected species. The starchy tubers—poisonous if not prepared properly--were once an important food source for Native Americans and early settlers.

9. Butler Island Campsite to Angler's Resort Campsite in Suwannee, 11.5 miles

From Butler Island, you'll pass through a maze of oyster bars across Horseshoe Cove. As you enter the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, several tidal creeks

offer scenic paddling opportunities, and Fishbone Creek has an observation tower about 1.5 miles from the mouth. If you want to explore the area further, one option is to stay at the county campground at Shired Island (pronounced Sheered), about 5 miles from Butler Island (fee required). The water is not potable. Nearby, a large Indian shell midden about 12 feet high, with sides exposed due to erosion, is worth viewing.

Several islands in the refuge, such as Big Pine Island, offer inviting white sand beaches and palm-lined shores, great for rest stops. Bear in mind that Cat Island, near the mouth of Salt Creek, is privately owned but camping is allowed on an emergency basis and it is an enjoyable rest stop. From Cat Island, follow the navigational markers into the Salt Creek channel where you can take a right just before the county boat ramp and wind around a series of canals on the east side of town, where the Angler's Resort is along Highway 349. There is a small fee for primitive camping. Suwannee has two restaurants within easy walking distance.

10. Angler's Resort Campsite to Shell Mound Park campground, 12 miles

From the campsite, it is a fairly straight shot to the lower Suwannee River via a canal. Paddle downstream to the river mouth through West Pass, being wary of strong currents and boat traffic. Continuing southeast along the coast, a good rest stop is the white sandy beach of Deer Island. One option for camping near Deer Island is the private Clark Island, where you can stay for a fee. Call Nature Coast Expeditions at 352-543-6463 for more information. As with many areas along the Big Bend, access at low tide can be tricky.

The county campground at the Shell Mound County Park is inexpensive and on the water, although the ramp can be difficult to reach at low tide. A half mile away, you can access the boat ramp at the Shell Mound historic site at low tide and walk to the campground if necessary.

The historic shell mound is a must see. This five-acre, 28-foot tall Timucuan Indian mound affords a panoramic view of a Gulf Coast wilderness. It was primarily built from discarded oyster and scallop shells over the course of generations that may have spanned 3500 years.

11. Shell Mound Campground to Hall Creek Campsite, 10 miles

The shortest route is to paddle close to the mainland and pass beneath the bridge to Cedar Key on your way to Hall Creek. You'll pass numerous small islands on your way. Hall Creek, Kelly Creek, Waccasassa River and Turtle Creek campsites are part of the Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park and are available free of charge on a first-come, first-serve basis. The campsites are not exclusively for paddlers, so you may be sharing them with boaters.

If you seek to visit the historic town of Cedar Key, cross under the bridge and paddle around Scale Key to a cove on the southwest part of town where you can land at the Cedar Key Park (see map). This will add up to two miles to your day. At Cedar Key, you can buy groceries, eat in a restaurant, visit a museum, and peruse numerous shops. In the late 1800s, Cedar Key was a major port city and processor of cedar logs for the pencil industry. Several factors contributed to its downfall: hurricanes, the emergence of Tampa as a major port, and the depletion of old-growth cedar trees. Today, tourism is a major industry. Cedar Key is also known for its tasty clams.

One option is to stay at Cedar Key in one of many waterfront motels and kayak to the scenic islands of the Cedar Key National Wildlife Refuge. All beaches along the islands are open for public access with the exception of Seahorse Key from March 1 through June 30 due to bird nesting. Atsena Otie Island, a half mile south of Cedar Key, is the only island where the interior is open for hiking year-round. Here, you can view an explanatory kiosk and the historic ruins of the Faber cedar mill near the dock and walk to the eastern end of the island to view the historic cemetery.

Seahorse Key is another must stop when the beaches are open. This former prison for Confederate soldiers has the highest elevation on Florida's west coast, rising 52 feet. Other nearby islands include Snake Key and North Key. The interiors of these islands are closed to the public, and for good reason. They have venomous snakes and thick undergrowth.

For information on lodging, restaurants and other Cedar Key offerings, log onto the Cedar Key Chamber of Commerce website at <http://www.cedarkey.org/>. If staying at

Cedar Key, be sure to take the historic walking tour. Brochures can be purchased from the Cedar Key Historical Society Museum in the old downtown.

If paddling from the Shell Mound Campground to the spoil island campsite near Yankeetown and beyond, skipping Cedar Key, be sure to bring enough water for four to five days.

After entering Hall Creek, follow the winding main channel through the marsh to the first tree island on the left. You'll see a small side creek that takes you closer to this one-acre site.

12. Hall Creek Campsite to Kelly Creek Campsite, 8 miles

Kelly Creek is another unspoiled tidal creek along the marshy coast. The campsite is about a mile upstream from the mouth of Kelly Creek. After entering the mouth, stay in the main channel as you proceed up the creek. You'll begin passing through an area of bleached dead cedars and palms. The campsite is a large 2-3 acre tree island on the right. Land on the backside (north) where you can more easily get out of the current. There's plenty of room to spread out and the island has a stone fire ring.

13. Kelly Creek Campsite to Waccasassa River Campsite 7 miles

One option for this day is to paddle up the Waccasassa River, initially following channel markers that stretch into the bay. The campsite is along a small side creek on the west side of the river called Double Barrel Creek. If you're not a thru paddler, you can access this area from a remote boat ramp along the upper Waccasassa River at the end of County Road 326 near Gulf Hammock, about 4 miles upriver from the river campsite.

If skipping the Waccasassa River campsite, it is 10 miles from the Kelly Creek Campsite to the Turtle Creek Campsite.

14. Waccasassa River Campsite to Turtle Creek Campsite, 7 miles

After entering Turtle Creek Bay, proceed inland to an obvious fork. Take the left fork and follow the obvious channel past several tree islands and a small primitive landing at the terminus of a tree-covered peninsula on your right. The campsite is along this peninsula at another shell landing. Camp anywhere near the landing. The campsite is a little more than a mile from the fork. Because this is a peninsula, you can stretch your legs by hiking along several unpaved roads. Turpentine and salt-making operations were once common in the area.

15. Turtle Creek Campsite to Cross Florida Greenway Spoil Island Campsite, 14 miles

It may seem that the wild tidal creeks, marshy vistas and scenic tree islands will never end as you paddle to the boat ramp near Yankeetown at the mouth of the Withlacoochee River. The town itself is 3.5 miles up the Withlacoochee River where limited supplies can be obtained. B's Fish Camp and Marina in Yankeetown offers tent camping with showers, restrooms and a small grocery store (352-447-5888). Yankeetown is a picturesque fishing village with old-growth trees and stately homes.

The spoil island campsite is about two miles past the ramp (see map for GPS point). This island was created by dredging a channel for the now defunct Cross Florida Barge Canal. The old canal lands are now primarily managed for recreation as part of the Cross Florida Greenway (<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/cfg/default.htm>). Primitive camping is on a first-come, first-serve basis.