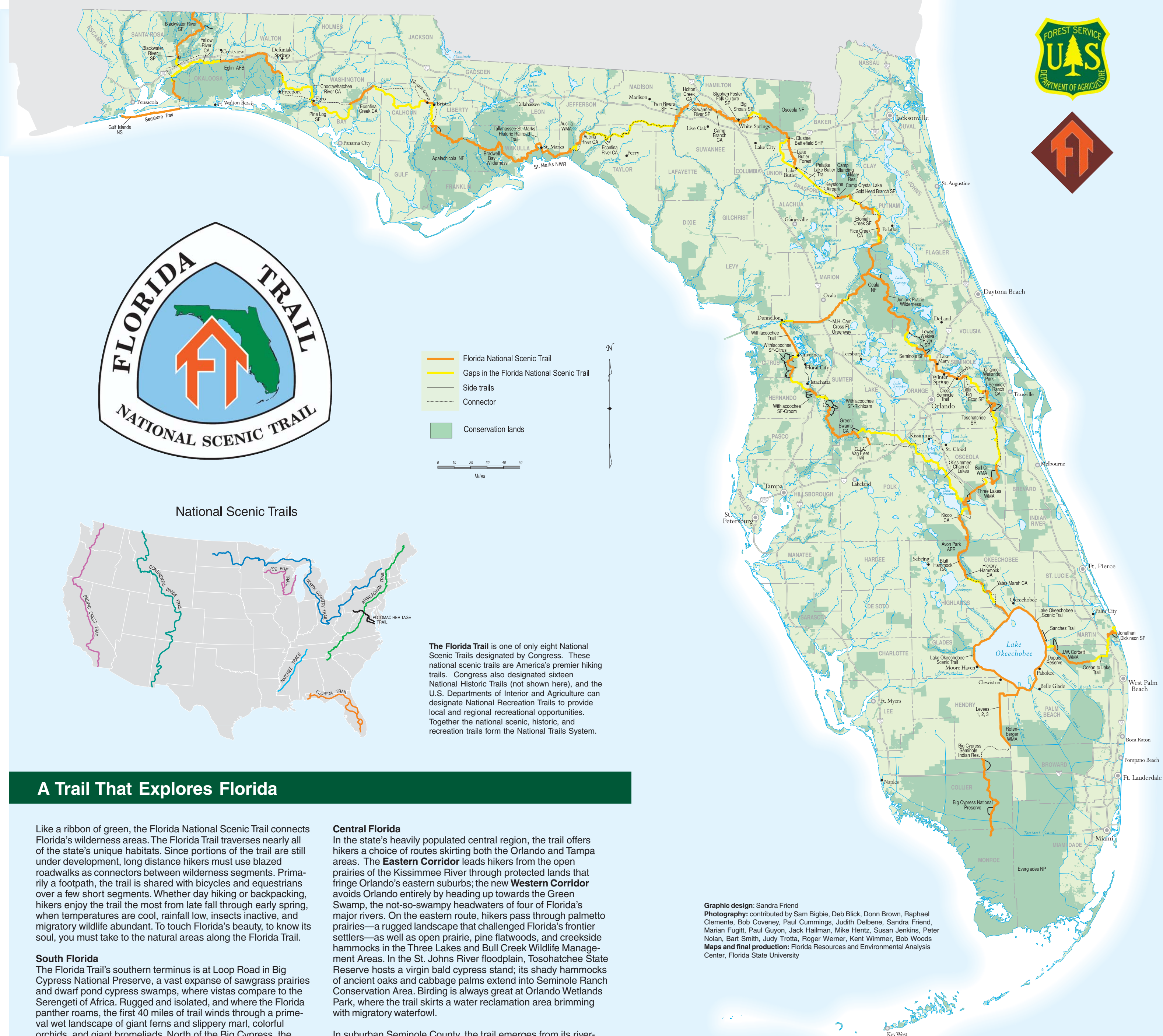
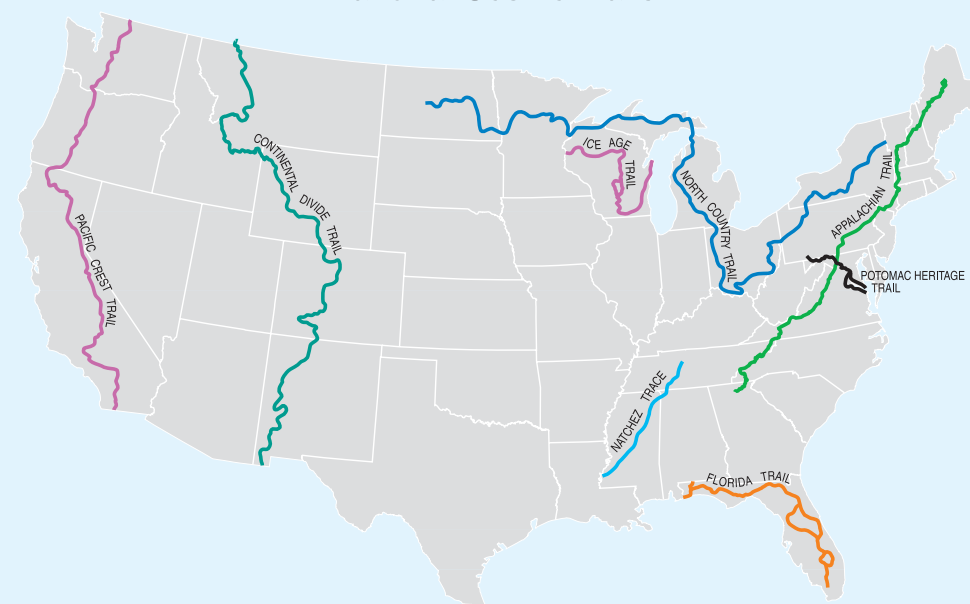




# Florida National Scenic Trail



National Scenic Trails



The Florida Trail is one of only eight National Scenic Trails designated by Congress. These national scenic trails are America's premier hiking trails. Congress also designated sixteen National Historic Trails (not shown here), and the U.S. Departments of Interior and Agriculture can designate National Recreation Trails to provide local and regional recreational opportunities. Together the national scenic, historic, and recreation trails form the National Trails System.

## A Trail That Explores Florida

Like a ribbon of green, the Florida National Scenic Trail connects Florida's wilderness areas. The Florida Trail traverses nearly all of the state's unique habitats. Since portions of the trail are still under development, long distance hikers must use blazed roadwalks as connectors between wilderness segments. Primarily a footpath, the trail is shared with bicycles and equestrians over a few short segments. Whether day hiking or backpacking, hikers enjoy the trail the most from late fall through early spring, when temperatures are cool, rainfall low, insects inactive, and migratory wildlife abundant. To touch Florida's beauty, to know its soul, you must take to the natural areas along the Florida Trail.

### South Florida

The Florida Trail's southern terminus is at Loop Road in Big Cypress National Preserve, a vast expanse of sawgrass prairies and dwarf pond cypress swamps, where vistas compare to the Serengeti of Africa. Rugged and isolated, and where the Florida panther roams, the first 40 miles of trail winds through a primeval wet landscape of giant ferns and slippery marl, colorful orchids, and giant bromeliads. North of the Big Cypress, the Seminole Tribe of Florida permits Florida Trail Association (FTA) members to follow roads through its reservation, where stops at Billie Swamp Safari and the Ah-Tha-Thi-Ki Museum are a must in learning about Seminole culture.



Backpackers enjoy a cypress strand on the Ocean to Lake Trail.

North of the reservation, the trail passes through the relic Everglades, now almost entirely converted to ranch lands and sugar cane fields. The trail continues on the levees of the South Florida Water

Management District on its way to Lake Okechobee, where hikers have the choice of walking atop the Herbert Hoover Dike around the east or west sides of the second largest freshwater lake in the United States. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed the dike in the 1940s after a storm surge cost the lives of thousands along the lake. On the west side of Lake Okechobee, hikers are treated to views of the lake's expansive wetlands, while on the east side, they enjoy colorful sunsets along the vistas of this inland sea. Every Thanksgiving week for more than a decade, the Florida Trail Association's popular Big O Hike draws participants from across North America on a series of nine supported day hikes that circle the lake on a 109-mile segment of the Florida Trail. A new spur trail, the 72-mile Ocean to Lake Trail, leads west through wilderness in northern Palm Beach County and Martin County.

North of Lake Okechobee, the Florida Trail continues along the Kissimmee River floodplain, historically Florida's cattle country. Winding through beautiful hammocks such as those at Hickory Hammock, Bluff Hammock, and KICCO, the trail parallels the river for more than 50 miles, passing through ghost towns and abandoned homesteads of Florida's early settlers before crossing the broad prairies of the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area, where sandhill cranes abound.



The palmetto-dotted prairies of Central Florida

### Central Florida

In the state's heavily populated central region, the trail offers hikers a choice of routes skirting both the Orlando and Tampa areas. The **Eastern Corridor** leads hikers from the open prairies of the Kissimmee River through protected lands that fringe Orlando's eastern suburbs; the new **Western Corridor** avoids Orlando entirely by heading up towards the Green Swamp, the not-so-swampy headwaters of four of Florida's major rivers. On the eastern route, hikers pass through palmetto prairies—a rugged landscape that challenged Florida's frontier settlers—as well as open prairie, pine flatwoods, and creekside hammocks in the Three Lakes and Bull Creek Wildlife Management Areas. In the St. Johns River floodplain, Tosohatchee State Reserve hosts a virgin bald cypress stand; its shady hammocks of ancient oaks and cabbage palms extend into Seminole Ranch Conservation Area. Birding is always great at Orlando Wetlands Park, where the trail skirts a water reclamation area brimming with migratory waterfowl.

In suburban Seminole County, the trail emerges from its river-side route in the beautiful Little-Big Econ State Forest to follow bike paths across Seminole County. Turn off the beaten path to explore shady Spring Hammock along Lake Jesup and Big Tree Park where "The Senator," one of the largest (17.5 feet diameter, 138 feet high) and oldest (3,500 years) cypress trees in the world still towers. Crossing Interstate 4 on a suspension bridge, the trail continues on bike paths to the wild and scenic Wekiva River, where Florida black bears roam the corridor through Seminole State Forest. When hikers reach the Ocala National Forest, it's a step back in time—the first segment of the Florida Trail was built here in 1966, and the unbroken 70-mile route is the most popular segment of the trail for backpacking. Hikers can expect to meet up with pleasant company as they walk through the world's largest sand pine forest, the Big Scrub, and roam through the prairies and pine flatwoods of the Juniper Prairie Wilderness past beautiful springs that invite a stop for a swim.

On the **Western Corridor**, hikers experience different terrain and more immersion into Old Florida. Roadwalks connect completed segments, taking hikers through St. Cloud and Kissimmee—where they are sure to see sandhill cranes along the road, as well as wood storks on Lake Tohopekaliga—and up along the Old Tampa Highway, a section of which still retains its 1930s cypress planks and red bricks.

A short walk on the Van Fleet Rail Trail, north of Polk City, brings hikers closer to the Green Swamp, where the first significant wilderness segment begins, offering several days of peace and quiet through pine flatwoods, rolling sandhills, and the floodplain forests of the Withlacoochee River. Emerging from the Richloam Tract of Withlacoochee State Forest, the trail then connects to the Croom Tract, offering a nice day's walk through hardwood forests along the Withlacoochee River, and on to the Withlacoochee State Trail, a rail-trail passing through the historic towns of Istachatta, Floral City, Inverness, Hernando, and Dunnellon, paralleling part of the route of explorer Hernando de Soto.

After crossing the Withlacoochee River, hikers enjoy the challenging slopes and scenic vistas of the Cross Florida Greenway, a green ribbon of reshaped landscapes created during the 1930s diggings of the failed Cross-Florida barge canal. Crossing Interstate 75 on the nation's first land bridge, the trail continues up the Greenway and through the jungle-like forests of the Silver River and Ocklawaha River floodplains before meeting up with the eastern route in the Ocala National Forest.

### North Florida

Long on scenery, the Florida Trail through North Florida entices with beauty spots connected by roadwalks on rural dirt roads. The first stop is Rice Creek, where a 1700s indigo and rice plantation thrived in the shade of giant cypresses. Dogwoods and azaleas lend their color to the scenic Etowah Creek ravine; the trail parallels its lip before heading through dense oak forests to Gold Head Branch State Park, with its beautiful streams and eerie Devil's Washbasin. Following the Palatka-Lake Butler Trail, hikers reach the Lake Butler Forest and then wind through timberlands to Oulustee, site of Florida's largest Civil War battle. In Osceola National Forest, watch the white-banded trees for signs of the red-cockaded woodpecker. Persons with disabilities can view a large colony of these endangered birds from an accessible portion of the trail near Oulustee Battlefield. Nearly 60 miles of trail parallels one of Florida's most beautiful rivers, the Suwannee, requiring some stamina and acrobatics for stream crossings and rapid elevation changes along the high bluffs. Camp on white sand beaches; explore the waterfalls. Heading west into the Big Bend, walk through more timberlands to reach the Aucilla River and its sinks, an unusual place where the river appears and disappears through "windows" in the limestone aquifer. Birding is fabulous in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, where the trail passes through cathedrals of cabbage palms and along salt marshes en route to the heart of Florida's Panhandle.



Hiking sand dunes in the Seashore section, Santa Rosa Island

### The Florida Panhandle

Wild and wooded, the Florida Panhandle is especially diverse in flora and fauna. Although the trail breaks into more segments connected by roadwalks, the future is bright. Most of the Panhandle remains undeveloped; protection of the trail corridor is a matter of developing public and private partnerships or acquiring the land upon the landowner's approval. Leaving the Big Bend area, the trail continues west through Apalachicola National Forest where it enters the 23,000-acre Bradwell Bay Wilderness, described by *Backpacker* magazine as one of the ten toughest hikes in the United States. Here, the trail requires several miles of wading in waist-deep water through dark tilt and gum swamp forests. Beyond, hikers encounter pitcher plant bogs amid vast pine flatwoods, where terrestrial orchids sparkle under the wiregrass. Along Econfina Creek, the trail feels downright Appalachian, with mountain laurel and flame azalea in bloom above the rushing water. The segment through Florida's oldest state forest, Pine Log, treats the hiker to cypress-lined ponds in the midst of the pines.

Dozens of tannic streams gurgle through the rolling sandhills of Eglin Air Force Base, creating steep ravines crossed by log bridges; rare varieties of pitcher plants thrive on moist slopes. There are two termini for the northern end of the trail. Long-distance hikers headed north along the Eastern Continental Trail will take on the bluffs and ravines, rolling sandhills, and tilt swamps along the Blackwater River and its tributaries; those completing the traditional Florida Trail route head for the seashore, walking on Santa Rosa Island's famed white quartz beaches and its beside dunes to historic Fort Pickens in Gulf Islands National Seashore.

The USDA Forest Service wishes to thank the volunteers and staff of the Florida Trail Association for their continued service to public lands and trails throughout the State of Florida. Because of the hard work, dedication and vision of the Florida Trail Association, both American and International visitors are offered an unparalleled opportunity to experience the natural and cultural diversity of Florida. Through their members, F-Troop volunteer trail crews, and young adult internships, Florida Trail Association is a pioneer in fostering volunteerism as a form of outdoor recreation in Florida. The Florida National Scenic Trail legacy is a testament to the power of citizens in action, and the National Forests in Florida is proud to be granted the responsibility and honor of administering this amazing resource.