

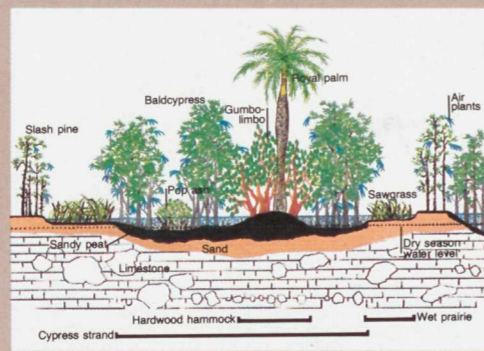
Big Cypress

Big Cypress National Preserve
Florida

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Young alligators (1) sun themselves on a culvert, which holds warmth on cool days. Gators, predatory fish, and wading birds find culverts prime fishing spots. They wait below culvert openings for the current to channel fish to them!



The cross section of Big Cypress ecosystem (2) shows seasonal water levels. Cypress trees (photo above) can grow in the water; most trees would drown. Bald-cypresses (5) border a pond in the Bear Island area; the foreground

shows typical grasses and sedges. A closer look in Big Cypress reveals a green lynx spider (3) inspecting a morning glory, or this imperial moth (4) which put down near the Oasis Ranger Station.

NPS photos by Glenn Van Nimmegen (above) and Kevin Peier (left).

Vast Wilderness Watered by Tropical Summer Rains

Big Cypress Swamp. "Big" refers not to the tree's size but to the swamp's extent of more than 2,400 square miles in subtropical Florida. "Swamp" is a misnomer, for the land consists of sandy islands of slash pine, mixed hardwood hammocks (tree islands), wet prairies, dry prairies, marshes, and estuarine mangrove forests. Still, "swamp" somehow fits. At its best the swamp should be seen by any of us who dream of the world as it was before we humans arrived. Airplants, both bromeliads and orchids, perch on the cypress and hammock trees like strange bird nests. An occasional Florida panther leaves impressive paw marks in wet marl. Black bears claw crayfish from the sloughs or rip cabbage palmetto apart for its soft fruits.

Big Cypress is about one-third covered with cypress trees, mostly the dwarf pond cypress variety. Broad belts of these trees edge wet prairies; cypress strands line the sloughs; and occasional cypress domes dot the horizon with the symmetry of paint bubbles. Giant cypresses such as those pictured in the large photograph above are nearly gone. They are the great bald-cypresses. Today's few remaining giants, escapees of the lumber era, embody antiquity; some are 600 to 700 years old. Their bulbous bases flare downward and outward to root systems loosely locked in rich, wet organic peat. Their girths outstretch the combined embrace of you and 3 long-armed friends. The big cypress trees stand safe now, here in this national preserve, from earlier fates as gutters, coffins, stadium seats, pickle barrels, and the hulls of PT boats. It's reason enough for alligators, also protected, to grin.

We humans have tried most everything with this grand swamp in our own short past here. The Miccosukee and Seminole Indians subsisted here in tune with nature. Then grand schemes sought to drain vast regions: meandering rivers were gutted to straight canals; sawgrass prairies became sugarcane and citrus plantations. Loggers came. Oil rigs came. Land speculators descended. Then came roads, and drainage canals that parched extensive tracts. But the main resource turned out to be water, not land, not trees, not oil, but freshwater wending slowly seaward, requiring a day to flow across a half mile of the land's incredibly unrelieved flatness.

With completion of the Tamiami Trail in 1928, the Big Cypress became easily accessible; economic exploitation began in earnest. Lumbering boomed in the 1930s and 1940s and small settlements at Ochopee, Monroe Station, and Pinecrest attracted rugged people. Many lived on here as hunters, fishermen, guides, plant collectors, and cattlemen—latter day frontiersmen fleeing urban restraints. Florida's first producing oil well was drilled in 1943 north of the present-day preserve, near Sunniland. During the 1960s drainage of the Big Cypress began as land development and speculation schemes blossomed. Thousands invested sight unseen in land that was under water much of the year. Public interest burgeoned when jetport plans were unveiled in 1968 for the swamp's eastern edge. The threat posed to the watershed of Everglades National Park sparked establishment of the Big Cypress National Preserve. The 1970s brought more enlightened attitudes toward watersheds and wetlands, and

today Florida is much involved in environmental protection efforts. Now we are back simply to trying nature's way while allowing for recreational enjoyment.

A reporter once overheard a south Florida native say: "If California had our water, they'd think they'd gone to heaven." Sixty inches of rain fall in an average year, beginning as clouds stacked up over the Gulf of Mexico. The rain falls and falls during a season of thunderstorms that usually begins each year in May. The rains flood the cypress strands and prairies before flowing slowly to the south through Everglades National Park. It's a slow drainage upon which creatures great and small have learned to depend. Only humans were quite slow to realize our dependence. The land slopes but 2 inches per mile to the Gulf of Mexico, causing a delayed drainage of the wet season's watery bounty, its lifeblood. The gradual drainage extends the wet season by 2 to 3 full months after the rains taper off in October. And it provides a steady mix of freshwater and saltwater in the estuaries along the coast of Everglades National Park. This nutrient-rich mix supports marine animals such as pink shrimp, snook, and snapper, all important to Florida's fishing industry. The swamp also provides vital water for several southwest Florida cities. During the wet season much of the landscape may flow with water belly-high to a great blue heron.

Most out-of-staters come here in the dry season, winter, to escape the rigors of snow and ice elsewhere. In the dry season water evaporates or flows into the estuaries downstream and the

swamp's aquatic life concentrates in the remaining deeper pools and sloughs. To these come stately wading birds, the herons and egrets and the unique wood stork. And with some luck you may see alligators, red cockaded woodpeckers, wild turkey, deer, mink, or the bald eagle, as though the drying up of the water reduced these creature's hiding places. But this is illusion, life simply concentrates at its source, water. Amazing things have been seen here. A gar might flash silver-gold in the amber water under a bunch of ghost-orchid flowers. Herons and ibises were once measured here not by count but by the number of acres their numbers covered at one sighting. For sounds try the wild and unsettling wailing of the long-legged, long-billed, limpkin. And use your other senses, too. Feel the saw grass, not a true grass but a sedge, and in that feeling touch one of the oldest green growing forms of this world.

Two worlds of beauty confront us here: the beauty of broad sweeps and limitless horizons; and the beauty of infinite miniature and interrelated worlds. One is the aerial view, perhaps of the swallowtail kite; the other is the view from a self-propelled canoe, or the view of a gator with only eyes and snout protruding from the water. That's Big Cypress Swamp.

A National Preserve

Congress set aside about 45 percent of the Big Cypress Swamp in 1974 as a national preserve. Its wild country is protected, but certain preexisting human uses not allowed in most national park areas are permitted to continue. Hunting and off-road-vehicle use continue—see Recreation—as do oil and gas exploration and cattle grazing. Also, several land owners maintain homes and cabins on private property. Humans continue to use and enjoy the area but with extra plan-

ning and care to assure minimal impacts. Expanded in 1988, the Preserve totals 729,000 acres.

Getting to the Preserve Big Cypress National Preserve lies in south Florida between Miami and Naples. It extends from Everglades National Park north to 7 miles north of I-75. The major highways crossing the Preserve are I-75 and U.S. 41; the latter provides better access to the Visitor Center and other points of interest.

Information Obtain visitor information at Preserve headquarters or the Visitor Center or write or call: Big Cypress National Preserve, HCR 61, Box 11, Ochopee, FL 33943; 813-695-4111.

To contact Preserve headquarters, write or call: Superintendent, Big Cypress National Preserve, Box 110, Ochopee, FL 33943; 813-695-2000.

Recreational Activities

Hunting Plants, animals, and other features are generally protected against collection and injury. Yet, hunting, fishing, and trapping of game animals are permitted under federal and state regulations managed by the National Park Service and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Special Florida Game Management Area regulations apply in the Preserve. For more information on hunting, contact the Visitor Center.

Off-road Vehicle Use All off-road vehicles, including swamp buggies, airboats, and ATVs, must have a permit from the National Park Service for off-road travel in the Preserve. Obtain permits at the Visitor Center. Information about areas and trails open for off-road vehicle use, vehicle requirements, and regulations are provided with permits. The terrain makes off-road travel hazardous for vehicles not designed for this purpose.

Hiking The Preserve includes 31 miles of the Florida Trail, a national scenic trail. Here it passes through varied vegetation. Hikers should be prepared for wet areas from ankle to waist deep in the rainy season. There are 2 primitive campsites but no potable water on the trail. **A short nature trail** explains the Preserve's plants and animals. The Tree Snail Hammock Nature Trail is across from the Interpretive Center on Rt. 94, the Loop Road Scenic Drive).

Camping Nine campgrounds are available but with no water or facilities. All allow tent camping; most accommodate motor homes. A dump station with potable water can be found at the Dona Drive campground.

Other activities people enjoy in the Preserve include fishing, canoeing, and bird watching. Contact the Visitor Center for more information.

Sightseeing From a Car

From car windows winter visitors easily view birds and alligators in roadside canals where wildlife congregates during seasonal low water. The Loop Road Scenic Drive affords leisurely passage through different plant habitats for viewing such hard-to-see animals as deer and otter. This 26-mile, single-lane road with unimproved surface is open to 2-wheel-drive vehicles. The road is passable year round but watch for pot holes and water flowing over the road.

Canals along U.S. 41 attract wading birds; alligators sun themselves along the rocky banks. Parking along the highway is hazardous. If you stop, pull completely off the road and do not obstruct traffic. Pedestrians take care: vehicles travel the road at high speeds.

Turner River Road and Birdon Road form a U-shaped, 17-mile drive through mostly open grass prairie dotted with slash pine and bald-cypress. This graded-dirt drive is ideal for viewing wildflowers in the prairies and along canals.

Safety and Regulations

Several poisonous snakes live in the Preserve. With all other animals, they are protected: do not harm them. Snakes are found almost anywhere in the Preserve, so watch where you walk, sit, and reach. Hikers note: poison ivy and poison wood are found in the hammocks.

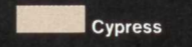
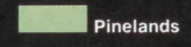
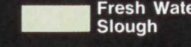
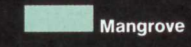
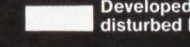
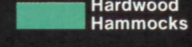
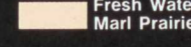
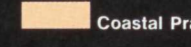
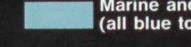
Wildfires pose a danger all year but especially in the drier winter and spring seasons. Please help to prevent careless wildfires. Never discard burning materials or leave campfires

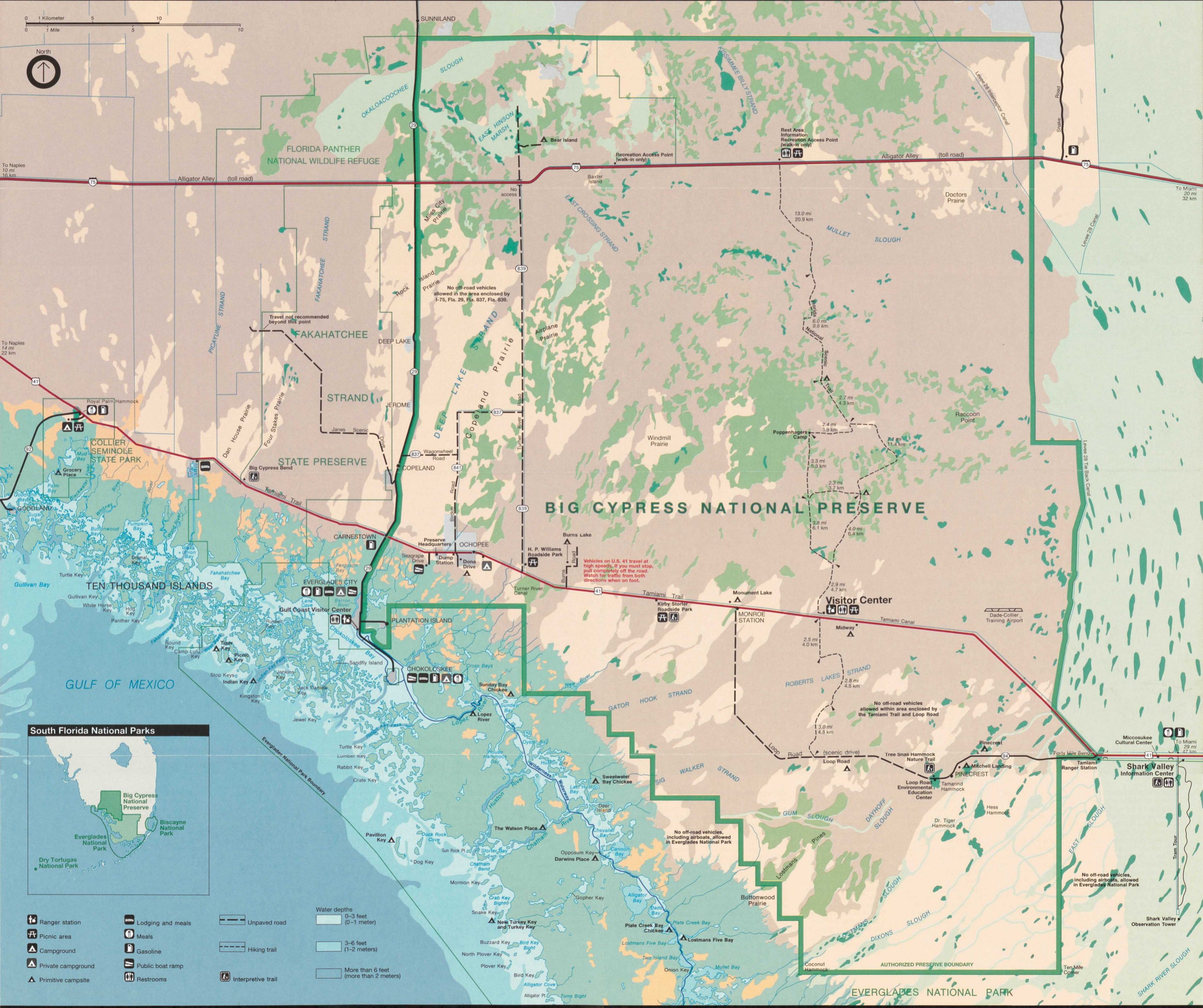
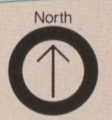
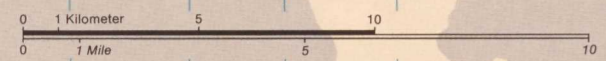
unattended. Use extreme caution when driving off the improved roadways because hot catalytic converters can ignite fires. Uncontrolled fires can endanger lives, property, and resources. Federal law prohibits collecting archeological artifacts or disturbing historic sites or Indian mounds.



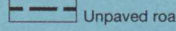
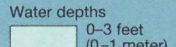


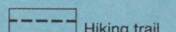
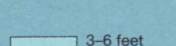



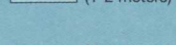




Limited Services Big Cypress National Preserve is located in a remote section of south Florida. Limited services are found around access areas. Have a full tank of gas before entering—there are no gasoline stations or food services in the Preserve.

Big Cypress

Color key to ecosystems

-  Cypress
-  Pinelands
-  Fresh Water Slough
-  Mangrove
-  Developed or disturbed land
-  Hardwood Hammocks
-  Fresh Water Marl Prairies
-  Coastal Prairie
-  Marine and Estuarine (all blue tones)



- | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
|  Ranger station |  Lodging and meals |  Unpaved road |  Water depths
0-3 feet
(0-1 meter) |
|  Picnic area |  Meals |  Hiking trail |  3-6 feet
(1-2 meters) |
|  Campground |  Gasoline |  Interpretive trail |  More than 6 feet
(more than 2 meters) |
|  Private campground |  Public boat ramp | | |
|  Primitive campsite |  Restrooms | | |

Vehicles on U.S. 41 travel at high speeds. If you must stop, pull completely off the road. Watch for traffic from both directions when on foot.

No off-road vehicles allowed within area enclosed by the Tamiami Trail and Loop Road

No off-road vehicles, including airboats, allowed in Everglades National Park

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