

MERRITT ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

VISITOR CENTER BOARDWALK Trail

This is a leisurely 15 minute 1/4-mile walk across a freshwater pond and into a hammock habitat. Slow down and quietly watch for wildlife in its natural surroundings.

1. Firebush

The large shrub you see on your right is a Firebush, a native evergreen shrub that produces tubular flowers that are followed by red and black berries. It is a great butterfly and hummingbird attractant.



Firebush

2. Freshwater Pond

As you walk across the bridge, you will be crossing over a man-made freshwater pond that's home to a variety of wildlife. Largemouth bass and bluegill are common fish species seen in the pond. Turtles such as the Florida softshell and the Florida cooter can be found in the water or sunning atop vegetation.

Alligators are found everywhere on the Refuge, even near the Visitor Center. However, they are hard to spot during the hotter parts of the day, so watch the water's edge and you just might see an alligator keeping cool in the shade.



American Alligator

3. Osprey Nest

On this first covered veranda, if you look up to your left you will see a nesting platform. Osprey, also known as 'fish or sea hawks', nest here seasonally. They are often mistaken for Bald Eagles, but if you look closely, you'll notice a dark band of feathers across the face and a white breast. These birds of prey suffered in the 1960s and 1970s as the use of DDT and other pesticides increased. These harmful chemicals were passed up the food chain to the Osprey causing their eggshells to thin. The use of DDT was banned in 1972. Since the ban, their populations have greatly improved.



Zebra Longwing



Monarch

4. Purple Martin Gourds

The gourds see across the pond were placed here specifically to attract Purple Martins. In 2004, after several years of unsuccessful attempts to attract these particular birds, the gourds were raised 5 feet and within weeks the Purple Martins arrived. Unfortunately, the arrival of the martins not only sparked the interest of visitors, but enticed yellow rat snakes in the area as well. The sand at the base of the pole and silver cylinder are guards that will protect future nests from snake predation.



Purple Martins

5. Butterfly Garden

This native vegetation garden, built by volunteers, is a certified National Wildlife Federation backyard wildlife habitat, and serves as an example of a habitat beneficial for wildlife, especially butterflies. We encourage central Floridians to follow this example in their own backyards.

6. Waterbirds

While crossing this second bridge, watch the pond closely and you may catch a glimpse of an Anhinga hunting for food. This water bird swims with only its neck above water and is often mistaken for a water snake. Anhingas have a very sharp beak great for spearing their prey, but do not have oil glands to waterproof their feathers, so you may also see them spreading their wings in the sun to dry.



7. Cattails

Cattails are probably the most familiar of all wetland plants. Their swaying brown flower and seed clusters can be seen at the edges of ponds, rivers, lakes, or just about any place where there is shallow, standing freshwater for at least part of the year. The lower parts of the leaves can be eaten in salads. The leaves are used for weaving, for padding seams in boats, and for packing material between barrels. Red-winged blackbirds, bitterns, coots, marsh wrens, and other shore birds nest among cattails.



Cattail



Here, species such as wild coffee, American beautyberry and coastal plain willow intermingle with wax myrtle, cabbage palm, saw palmetto, and oak species that host epiphytes (air-plants), creating a rich habitat for wildlife with abundant food and shelter, two of their primary needs. Nearby water, from these man-made ponds, meets their third primary need.



Saw Palmetto



Spanish Moss
(an epiphyte commonly found in the hammock)



American Beautyberry

8. Transition into Hammock

Notice the transition from the freshwater pond into the hammock habitat. The word 'hammock' is derived from Native American cultures meaning "a shady place". Hammocks are primarily narrow bands of forest vegetation along watercourses or around margins of lakes and sinkholes that develop in areas where wild fire is suppressed and water tables are high. This hammock lies between coastal dunes and salt marsh areas leading to the Indian

9. Sights and Sounds of the Hammock

Once inside the hammock, close your eyes and listen for the variety of wildlife found here. The loud buzzing sounds you may hear are the hundreds of cicadas in the trees. You may occasionally hear a grunting noise that sounds similar to that of a pig, however, it is actually a pig frog. Florida's second largest frog spends almost all of its time in the water and is rarely seen but commonly heard in the spring and summer.



Pig Frog

Watch the boardwalk's edge and the trunks of trees and you can see green anoles and the exotic Cuban brown anole. Also, Southeastern five-lined and broadheaded skinks.

Snakes are very common in the hammock as well; however, they are more difficult to spot. Most common are the black racer and the banded water snake.



Green Anole

Although they are nocturnal, armadillos can often be spotted in the vegetation near the boardwalk. You may also notice many large spider webs as you walk along the boardwalk, chances are, the large spider you see in the web will be a golden orb weaver, also



Armadillo



Golden Orb Weaver

10. Freshwater Pond

Similar species from the previous freshwater pond habitats can be seen from this veranda. The cattails near the shore are a great place to look for alligators. This is also a good area to watch for hungry Florida softshell turtles which may come to feed on fish eggs.



11. Songbirds

You may notice sounds other than the cicadas and pig frogs, and this is because there are a variety of songbird species found in this hammock. Seasonally, yellow-rumped warblers, gray catbirds, yellow warblers, Northern parula, white-eyed vireos and Northern cardinals are just a few of the species that can be spotted or heard here.



White-eyed Vireo



Red-winged Blackbird

Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge

Visitor Center Boardwalk

Legend

----- Interpretive Trail

Wetlands

Freshwater Ponds

Visitor Center/
Ranger Station

Interpretive
Trailhead

Butterfly Garden

Shelter

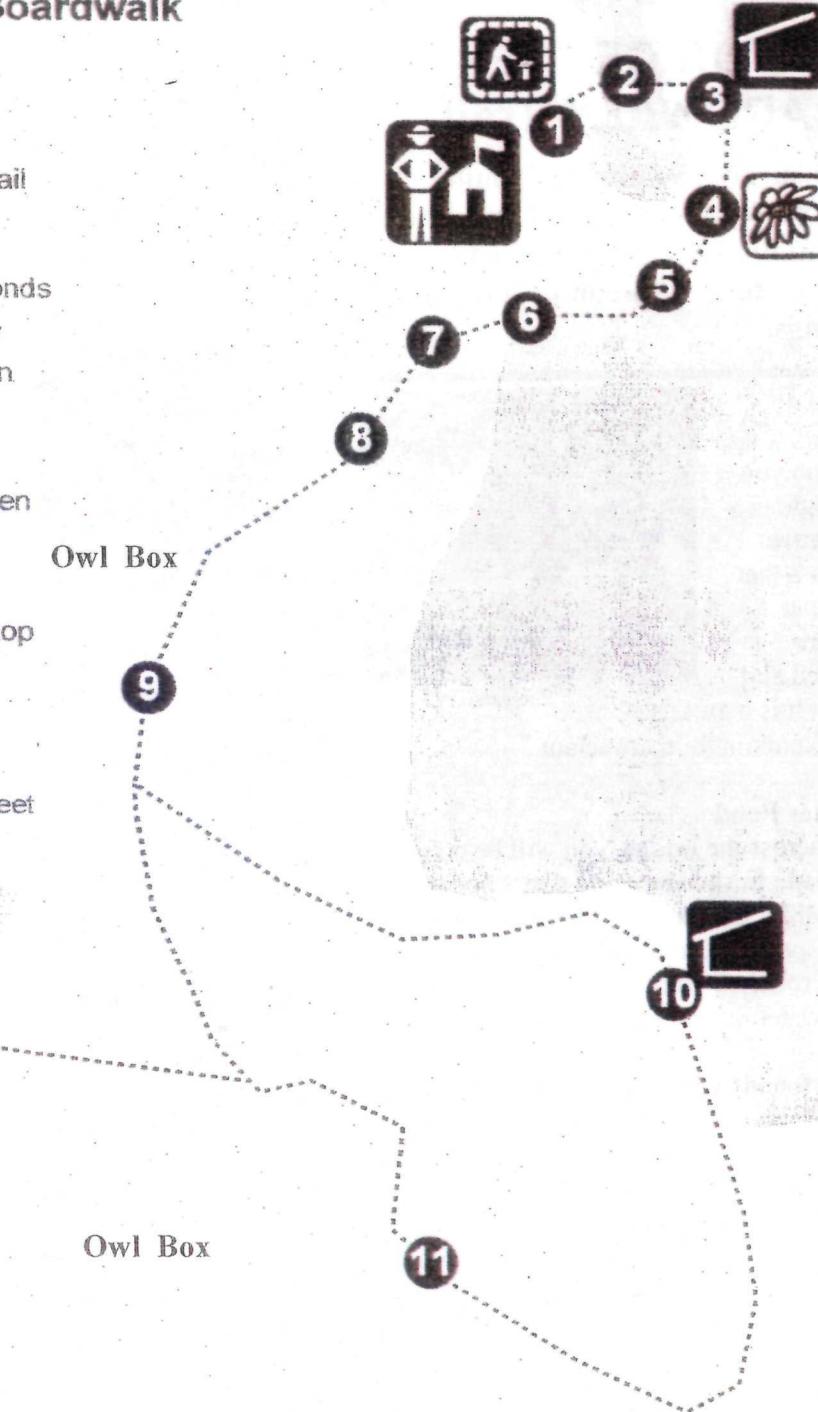
1 Interpretive Stop



Feet

0 25 50 100 150

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



12. Edge Habitats

From this veranda, you'll see a great example of an edge habitat. An edge is where two or more habitats meet, in this case a hammock and wetland, and can attract a variety of wildlife that feed in the wetland and flee to the hammock for shelter. Common species sighted here are the red-winged blackbirds, damselflies and a variety of butterflies.

From here you will be on your way back, but keep your eyes open because there are still many opportunities to see new wildlife.