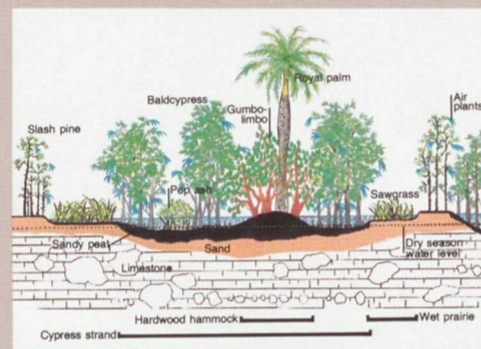




Young alligators (1) sun themselves on a culvert which holds warmth on cool days. Gators, predator fish, and wading birds find culverts prime fishing spots. They wait below culvert openings for the current to channel fish to them!



The cross section of the Big Cypress ecosystem (2) shows seasonal water levels. Cypress trees (see photo above) can grow in the water, while most trees would drown. A closer look into Big Cypress reveals a green lynx spider (3) inspecting

a morning glory and this imperial moth (4) which put down near the visitor center. Baldcypresses (5) border a pond in the northern part of the park; the foreground shows typical grasses and sedges.

NPS photos by Glenn Van Nimwegen (above) and Kevin Peier (left); cross-section illustration by Betty Fraser (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 humans arrived. Air plants, 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 out 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 baldcypresses. 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 three 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.

In our own short past here, we humans have tried almost everything with this grand swamp. The Miccosukee and Seminole Indians subsisted here. Later grand schemes sought to drain vast regions: meandering rivers were gutted to straight canals, and sawgrass prairies became sugar cane 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 fresh water 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 reached, and 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—hunting, fishing, collecting plants, raising cattle, or leading tours—latter day pioneers 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. 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 is 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 only two 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 two to three 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. With 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 an 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. 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 inter-related 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

Visiting the Preserve

In 1974 Congress set aside about 45 percent of Big Cypress Swamp as a national preserve. Expanded in 1988, the preserve totals 729,000 acres. Its wild country is protected, but some pre-existing human uses not allowed in most national park areas are permitted here. Hunting, off-road vehicle use, oil and gas exploration, and cattle grazing continue (see Recreational Activities at right). Landowners maintain homes and cabins on private property. Humans continue to use the area, but with planning and care to assure minimal impacts.

Getting to the Preserve

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

More Information
Get visitor information at preserve headquarters or the visitor center, open daily except December 25.

Write: Big Cypress National Preserve, HCR

61, Box 11, Ochopee, FL 34141. Call: 941-695-4111. Find information at www.nps.gov/bicy on the Internet.

To contact preserve headquarters, write: Superintendent, Big Cypress National Preserve, Box 110, Ochopee, FL 34141. Call: 941-695-2000.

Recreational Activities

Hunting

Plants, animals, and other features are generally protected against collection and injury. 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, ATVs, and 4x4s must have a permit from

the National Park Service for off-road travel in the preserve. Get permits at the visitor center. Information about areas and trails open for off-road vehicle use, vehicle requirements, and regulations are provided with the 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 two primitive campsites but no potable water on the trail. **A short nature trail** explains local plants and animals. The Tree Snail Hammock Nature Trail is across from the education center on Rt. 94, Loop Road. Two hiking trails are found along Rt. 839. These trails were originally roads leading to oil pads. Now closed to regular traffic, they are multiple-use recreation trails. The Concho Billy Trail is used by hikers, mountain bicyclers, and off-road vehicles. The Fire Prairie Trail is a bicycle and hiking trail.

Canoeing

Canoe trails in the preserve take 5 to 6 hours to paddle. The Turner River Canoe Trail begins at U.S. 41 and ends in Chokoloskee Bay. Take-out points are at Chokoloskee or the Everglades National Park Gulf Coast Visitor Center. The Seagrape Drive is the launching point for the Halfway Creek Canoe Trail. You can paddle on this trail south past Plantation Island or loop through the mangrove channels. The take-out points beyond Plantation Island are along the causeway leading to Chokoloskee or at the Gulf Coast Visitor Center.

Bicycling

A series of limerock trails offers a scenic bicycle trip through the back-country. These trails are also used by off-road vehicles and hikers.

Camping

Eight campgrounds are available (no water or facilities). All allow tent camping; most accommodate motor homes. There is a dump station with potable water at Dona Drive.

Other activities within the preserve include fishing and bird watching. Contact the visitor center for more information.

Sightseeing From a Car

From car windows winter visitors can view birds and alligators in roadside canals, where wildlife congregates during seasonal low water. Loop Road scenic drive is a passage through different plant habitats. Look carefully for hard-to-see animals such as deer and otter. This 26-mile, one-lane road with an unimproved surface is open to 2-wheel-drive vehicles. The road is passable all year, but watch for potholes and water flowing over the road.

Canals along U.S. 41 attract wading birds, and alligators sun themselves along the rocky banks.

Safety and Regulations

Rt. 839 and Birdon Road form a U-shaped, 17-mile drive through open grass prairie dotted with slash pine and baldcypress. This graded-dirt drive is ideal for viewing wildflowers in the prairies and along the canals.

Limited Services

Big Cypress National Preserve is located in a remote area of south Florida. Limited services are found outside the park. Be sure to fill your gas tank before entering—there are no gasoline stations or food services in the preserve.

Please use caution and observe these regulations.

- Alligators and venomous snakes (including water moccasins) are found almost everywhere in the preserve. They are protected by federal law: do not harm them. Watch where you walk, sit, or reach.

- Poison ivy and poison wood are plentiful in the hammocks.

- Wildfires pose a danger year-round, especially in the drier winter and spring seasons. Never discard burning materials or leave campfires unat-

tended. Use extreme caution when driving off improved roadways; hot catalytic converters can ignite fires. Uncontrolled fires endanger lives, property, and resources.

- Federal law prohibits collecting archeological artifacts or disturbing historic sites or Indian mounds.

Warning! Vehicles on U.S. 41 travel dangerously fast. Parking along the highway is hazardous. If you must stop, pull completely off the road—do not block traffic. Pedestrians must use extreme caution.

Big Cypress

Color key to ecosystems

- Cypress
- Pineland
- Freshwater Slough
- Mangrove
- Developed or disturbed land
- Hardwood Hammock
- Freshwater Marl Prairie
- Coastal Marsh
- Marine and Estuarine



South Florida National Parks

This inset map shows the locations of four national parks in South Florida: Everglades National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve, Biscayne National Park, and Dry Tortugas National Park. The Big Cypress National Preserve is highlighted in a darker shade to indicate its location relative to the other parks.

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

No off-road vehicles allowed in the area enclosed by I-75, Fla. 29, Fla. 837, Fla. 839

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

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

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

Travel not recommended beyond this point. Get a local map from the Big Cypress National Preserve Visitor Center.

Access into this area is by permit only