

# Big Cypress

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Big Cypress  
National Preserve



## Play It Safe

*Big Cypress National Preserve is a prime example of natural Florida unfamiliar to most visitors, filled with natural wonders that are also potential hazards at times. While there is no guarantee of your safety, it need not be dangerous while enjoying this primeval landscape. Whether exploring the backcountry, canoeing the Turner River, observing wildlife, or simply driving the Tamiami Trail let safety be your companion. Regulations are strictly enforced to protect you and the Preserve's wonders. Spend a few moments reviewing some common safety concerns to ensure an enjoyable visit.*

**M**ost visitors to Big Cypress National Preserve never encounter any major safety issues during their visit. However, in some circumstances an ill-planned trip or misunderstanding of the area can lead to injury or worse. By understanding potential hazards in the swamp and with proper planning you can avoid these potentially dangerous situations and ensure that the memories you acquire are positive ones.

### Driving

Many visitor injuries and accidental deaths at Big Cypress result from vehicle accidents. While driving is a great way to see the Preserve, it can also be dangerous, especially if you are tired or going too fast. Follow posted speed limits, and watch for wildlife that may be crossing the road, especially at night.

Trying to view wildlife while driving creates several safety concerns. We recommend you visit established viewing points such as HP Williams, Oasis and Kirby Storter where you can safely get out off the road to view wildlife.

### Heat

Tropical heat can kill. The average high temperature in Florida during the summer months is around 95°F. Factoring in humidity the heat index often soars to over 100°F. It is very easy to become overheated or dehydrated while enjoying the Preserve. Carry plenty of water with you during any activity, at least one gallon per person per day. Also wear a hat, long pants, long sleeves, and sunscreen while hiking. Plan ahead and try to bring water with you or you can stock up at any visitor center. Though not recommended, if you do collect water in the backcountry, be sure to properly treat it to destroy any microscopic organisms, such as Giardia.

### Lightning

South Florida receives more lightning strikes than anywhere else in North America, and results in more casualties than from any other hazard, except driving. Thunderstorms are common in the summer months appearing almost every afternoon. In the winter months storms and lightning are less frequent, but may be as severe.

### The Top Ten Essentials for a Day in the Swamp

1. GPS unit
2. Rain gear
3. First aid kit
4. Insect repellent
5. Layers of clothing
6. Knife or multi-tool
7. Cellphone or radio
8. Flashlight (even for just a simple day hike)
9. Map & compass (and know how to use them)
10. Food & water (up to a gallon per person, per day)

## Keep Wildlife Wild

Big Cypress is home to a variety of creatures, including Florida panthers, alligators, and black bears. It is important to respect and never approach or feed wildlife. Although they may appear tame, all of the animals in the Preserve are wild, and could pose a threat to your health and safety. Most wildlife will move off the trail when it hears you coming, but in the event that you meet an alligator on the trail, give it a wide berth and do not attempt to move it yourself. To prevent creatures from becoming habituated to humans, store all food, coolers, cooking utensils, and toiletries in a hard-sided vehicle, preferably in the trunk of your car. Dispose of garbage properly. Remember to report sightings of bears and panthers to a park ranger.

## Venomous Animals

Venomous snakes, scorpions, and spiders are active year round. Inspect your shoes and sleeping bags or bedding before use and always carry a flashlight at night. While snake bites are rare, they usually occur below the knee or elbow. None are aggressive, but will bite if provoked. Pay attention to where you place your hands. Consider wearing high boots or protective leggings while hiking. If you are bitten by a snake, it is crucial to immediately leave the backcountry and go to the nearest emergency room.



Cottonmouth

## Poisonous Plants

Several poisonous plants can be found throughout the Preserve and it is important to be familiar with them. Poison ivy is very common, usually found as a creeping vine. Keep the phrase “leaves of three, let it be” in mind when moving through dense vegetation. Poisonwood is also found in the southern portion of the Preserve, identified by its shiny, leathery green leaves. Both species can cause red, itchy rashes. Some people may also have a similar reaction to Brazilian pepper, an exotic shrub found commonly throughout the Preserve. Check with your local pharmacy for products that can be applied before and after contact with these species.



Poison ivy

## Hiking

Exploring this swampy wild country on foot requires both mental and physical preparation. Trails vary from well maintained to primitive and barely visible. Plan hikes within your ability. Take along a map and compass and know how to use them. Be aware of weather and avoid hiking during inclement weather. Carry a flashlight and first aid kit, even during daylight hours. If you get hurt or lost, stay in one place to conserve energy and water. Signal for help; three blasts on a whistle is a well-recognized distress call. In remote areas, a large “X” marked on the ground by means visible by air will signify that help is needed. Carry a signal mirror.

Deer hunting season in the Preserve is September through December. To ensure maximum visibility hikers are advised to wear a lightweight, blaze orange vest.



A walk through the sawgrass.

## Proper Attire and Equipment

Long sleeves and long pants can help protect you from branches, sawgrass, or other obstacles that may pierce your skin. Closed toed shoes are necessary to protect toes and ankles from roots, caprock, or other obstacles along trails. A wide brimmed hat and sunscreen will also help protect against sunburn. Remember that the south Florida sun is intense! Other important things to carry include a first aid kit, flashlight, whistle, extra food and water, bug spray, warm clothing and matches or a firestarter.

Carry these items with you even if you’re only planning a day hike, because it’s better to have it and not need it, rather than to need it and not have it.

## Helpful Resources

The nearest hospitals to the Preserve are:

NCH North Naples Hospital- 11190 Health Park Blvd.  
Naples, FL 34110  
239-552-7000

Metropolitan Hospital- 5959 NW 7th Street  
Miami, FL 33126  
305-264-1000

In case of emergency please call the Preserve Dispatch at **1-800-788-0511** or dial **9-1-1**.

For more information visit us online at- [www.nps.gov/bicy](http://www.nps.gov/bicy)