



Hell's Bay Canoe Trail

DESCRIPTION

This sheltered route weaves through mangrove lined creeks and ponds to a series of small bays. You will see two backcountry chickees and a ground site along the way. A backcountry permit is required for overnight camping.

LENGTH

5.5 miles one way to Hells Bay Chickee. This is an in-and-out trail, marked by more than 160 numbered white PVC pipes

TIME

Allow 6-8 hours to leisurely paddle the entire trail and back.

SEASONS

Low water levels in late February through May can make the trail difficult or impassable. Check with a ranger.

SAFETY & COMFORT

The mangrove tunnels through which much of the trail winds can be buggy, particularly during the summer and fall months.

WHAT TO BRING

Recommended supplies include water, sunscreen, sunglasses, insect repellent or bug jacket, rain gear, snacks, PFD for each canoeist, an extra paddle, and a waterproof bag for gear. Any further navigation beyond the marked canoe trail requires Nautical chart #11433.



Backcountry chickees provide paddlers a way to experience the mangrove swamp overnight.

“Hell to get into, and Hell to get out of” is what old timers claimed about the mangrove maze leading into Hells Bay. Here, near the headwaters of the mangrove swamp, a confusing and seemingly infinite series of ponds, islands and narrow creeks becomes the landscape’s dominant theme. Whether you complete the whole trail or just paddle for an hour or two, your experience will expose you to the complex and distinctive mangrove ecosystem.

The Mangrove Swamp

A tangled web of reddish, arching roots rises out of the tea-colored water. The red mangrove, stunted due to thin soil over the limestone bedrock, dominates the landscape here. It’s stilt-like prop roots hold the tree upright in the soft mud and water, and aerial roots drop down from the branches to lend further support.

The red mangrove’s ability to grow in soil that is mostly submerged by saltwater affords them the luxury of not having to compete with other plants for light, nutrients, and space.

Green beans, anyone?

As you paddle along, you may notice what appear to be giant green beans floating in the water or dangling from the mangrove branches. These are the red mangrove’s young offspring, called propagules. After a propagule falls from a tree, it either anchors in the soft mud, or, if it falls into water, drifts along until it becomes waterlogged and sinks to the bottom. Tiny roots will sprout from the tip of the propagule, anchoring it into the mud. A new mangrove is born!

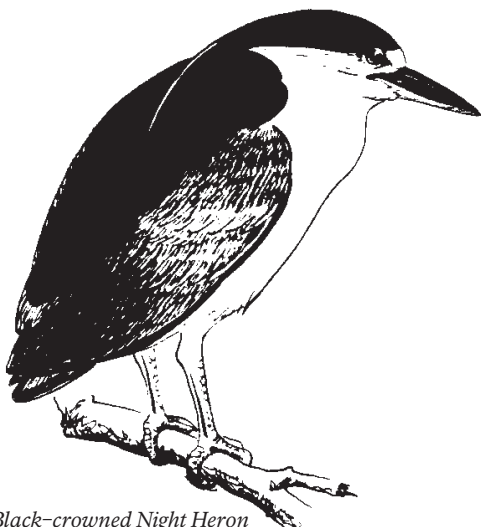
Squatters

Bromeliads, often called “air plants”, perch regally upon mangrove branches all along the trail. Rainwater is captured and stored by the plant’s vase-like base. Mosquitoes and other insects deposit eggs and reside in the bromeliads, attracting tree frogs, lizards, and birds. Decaying leaves, animal droppings and other ingredients mix with captured water to form a nutrient base for the plant. These plants are nonparasitic squatters using the host tree only as a perch from which to gather sunlight and nutrients.

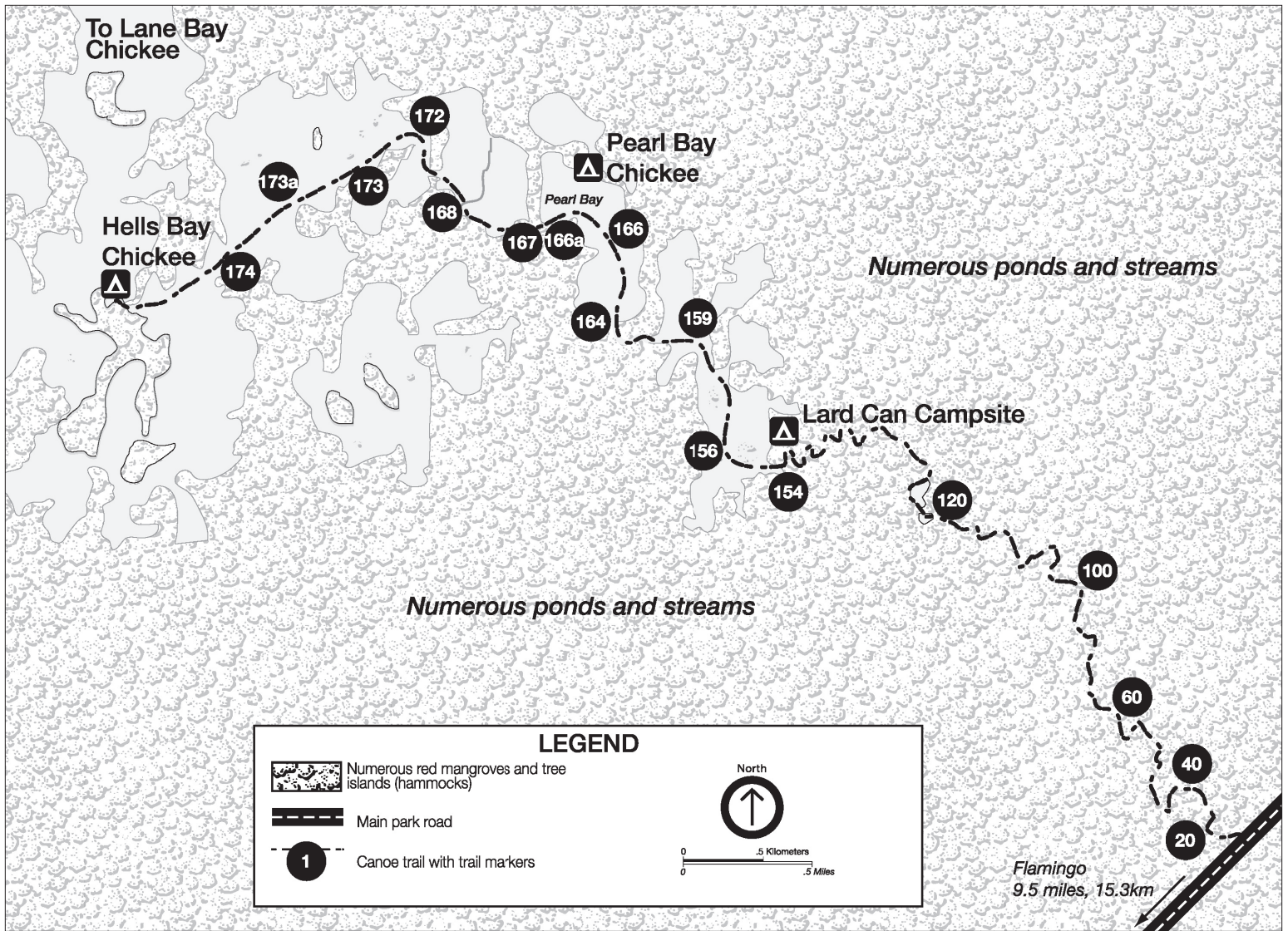
Wildlife alert!

You’ll need to look carefully for wildlife as you wind through the mangroves. A few resident alligators haul themselves onto exposed clearings along the creek bank. Watch for these “roadside pullouts”. Alligators normally don’t nest in the mangrove environment, but an abundance of fish provides them with plenty of food.

A closer look into the maze of arching roots might be rewarded with a glimpse of mangrove crabs, snails, and anoles.



Black-crowned Night Heron



Underwater nurseries

The mangrove swamp offers juvenile marine life—such as fish, crabs, and shrimp—an ideal nursery ground. The tangle of arching red mangrove prop roots is a suitable hiding place from predators. Also, decomposing mangrove leaves, coated with tiny bacteria and fungi, are high in protein and form the basis for food chains upon which these creatures depend.

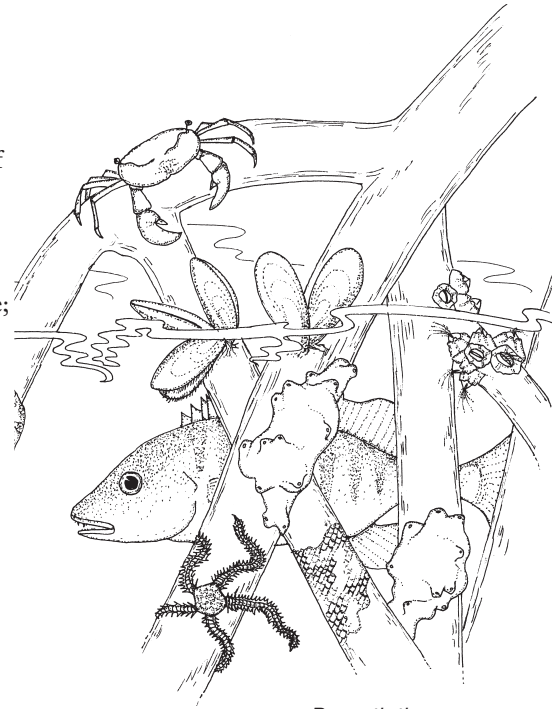
As the fish, crabs, and shrimp mature, they move into the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean. It may be hard to believe, but most of the sport fish, food fish, and shellfish that are captured off our tropical coasts depend on the mangrove as a nursery or feeding ground for at least part of their lives.

Wilderness camping opportunities

3.5 miles into the canoe trail, you will discover the first of two backcountry chickees, Pearl Bay. Chickees are elevated wooden platforms constructed over open water, and allow canoeists the opportunity to stay in the mangrove swamp overnight! A permit is required for any backcountry camping. Permits and Wilderness Trip Planners are available at the Flamingo Visitor Center.

Hells Bay and Beyond

Trail markers end at the Hells Bay Chickee. But before beginning your return trip, take a moment to float on the open water. Open your ears to the songs of birds, the splashes of fish, and the choruses of frogs. The mangrove swamp through which you have just traveled serves not only to house, feed, and protect these and many other creatures, but it also provides us with a true wilderness experience; one that can't be replicated anywhere else in the world.



Beneath the mangroves