



## Treasures Along the Gulf Coast

Gulf Islands National Seashore is a place of many riches—blue-green, sparkling waters, magnificent white beaches, and fertile coastal marshes. It stretches 160 miles along the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico in Florida and Mississippi, and includes barrier islands, maritime forests, historic forts, bayous, and marine habitat.

Congress established the national seashore in 1971 to protect the barrier islands, wildlife, salt marshes, historic structures, and archeological sites along the Gulf of Mexico, and to provide recreational opportunities. The long, narrow islands are composed

of white sand carried seaward by rivers draining from the Appalachian Mountains. During violent storms the islands function as barriers, blocking ocean waves that would otherwise strike the mainland with greater force.

Evidence of the American Indians who settled in the forests and marshes helps archeologists understand the native peoples' long history. After "discovery" by Europeans came a long struggle for the region's control. Eventually Florida and Mississippi became part of the United States. The US government developed the first federal tree farm at Naval Live Oaks Area in 1828 for the single

purpose of cultivating live oaks, used for shipbuilding. To help defend the mainland against foreign invasion, the government began fortifying Pensacola in 1829, and Ship Island, Mississippi, in 1859. From Ship Island's Fort Massachusetts the Union Army staged the capture of New Orleans in 1862. By the end of the Civil War new inventions like rifled cannon and ironclad warships called for new defenses. The US Army Coast Artillery Corps built underwater mines, searchlights, a complex system for tracking targets at sea, and huge guns in concrete batteries. These coastal defense systems became obsolete after World War II, and the military eventually abandoned the fortifications.

## How Barrier Islands Change

All theories about the barrier islands' formation involve waves, winds, and fluctuating sea levels. The islands move steadily westward as longshore currents wear away their eastern ends and build up the western ends. Shifting winds sculpt the dunes. Storms also alter islands' shapes when waves wash over the surfaces and rearrange sand. Such constant changes are slowed only by the protective covering of grasses and other plants on the dunes and island interiors. Sea oats (shown above) have elaborate stem and root systems that play a vital role in holding these islands together.



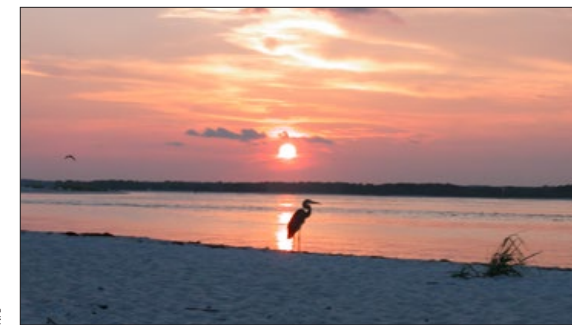
Dunes of snow-white sand on Horn Island, Mississippi.



Fort Pickens, completed 1834, on Santa Rosa Island, Florida.



The waters of the sounds, bays, and bayous are less salty than the Gulf.



A great blue heron at sunset.



Saw palmetto grows under stands of pine and oak. American Indians found medicinal uses for its berries.

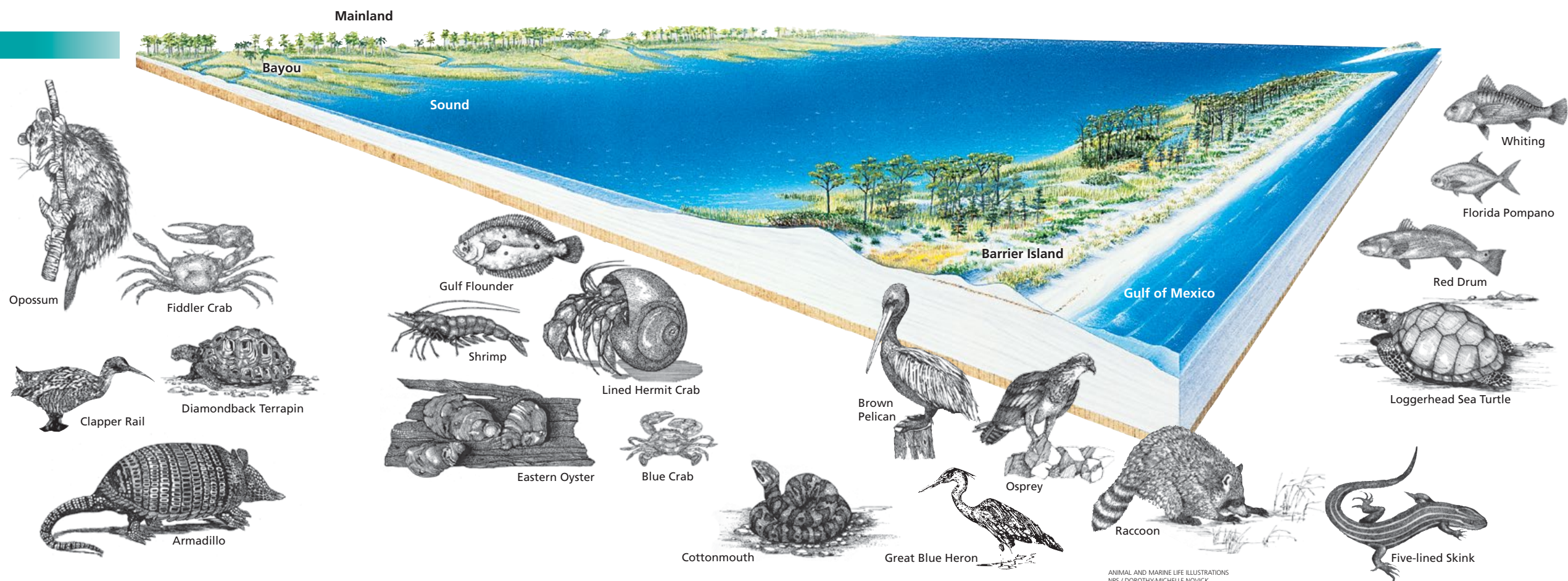
## Homes for Plants and Animals

Despite nature's unrelenting forces, life clings tenaciously to the barrier islands. Grasses and other plants slow the constant change process. Shrubs and some trees stand only a little higher than the dunes that protect them from salt spray.

Cordgrass can tolerate fluctuating sea levels. Submerged roots break down, helping to create "nursery grounds" where finfish and shellfish grow.

Interior marshes collect rainwater and support many plants and animals. Nutrients washed from the mainland enrich the waters of the bayous, sounds, and bays, which are less salty than the Gulf. Here shrimp and fish spend parts of their lives. Herons, egrets, and fiddler crabs reproduce and thrive.

The barrier islands also protect plant and animal communities on the mainland coast.



ANIMAL AND MARINE LIFE ILLUSTRATIONS  
NPS / DOROTHY MICHELLE NOWICK  
BARRIER ISLAND ILLUSTRATION NPS / ROBERT W. TOPE



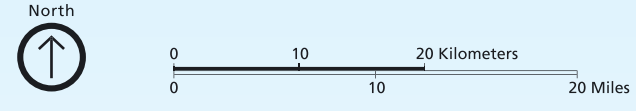
# Exploring Gulf Islands



## GULF ISLANDS NATIONAL SEASHORE

## GULF ISLANDS NATIONAL SEASHORE

- Trail/boardwalk
- Multi-use trail
- Florida National Scenic Trail
- Gulf Islands National Seashore
- Gulf Islands National Seashore boundary
- Fortification
- Wheelchair-accessible
- Ranger station
- Boat launch
- Swimming area
- Picnic area
- Pavilion
- Campground
- Primitive campsite



### VISITING THE MISSISSIPPI AREAS

On the mainland, William M. Colmer Visitor Center in Davis Bayou, near Ocean Springs, offers information, a bookstore, maps, exhibits, and films. The center is closed on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. For hours, programs, and boating and fishing regulations, check the park website, [www.nps.gov/guis](http://www.nps.gov/guis) or call 228-230-4100.

Follow signs for Gulf Islands National Seashore along I-10 and US 90. Davis Bayou campground (open year-round, no reservations) has electricity, water hookups, a sewage dump station, group tent area, picnic pavilions, and a boat launch. Self-guiding hiking and bicycling trails are available.

The barrier islands, about 10 miles offshore, offer dramatic scenery, but facilities are limited. You can reach **Cat, East Ship, Horn, and Petit Bois** islands only by private boat. Use your own boat or hire a licensed operator from the list at the visitor center in Davis Bayou and on our website.

To visit **West Ship Island**, take the passenger ferry from Gulfport, March through October, or dock your boat near Fort Massachusetts, during daylight hours only, year-round. Free exhibits and tours are available seasonally. Follow the boardwalk to the swim beach, pavilions, restrooms, showers, and snack bar. Fishing, boating, and dogs are prohibited in the swim beach area.

**Primitive camping** is allowed on East Ship, Horn, and Petit Bois islands. (Groups of 10 or more must get a permit). Camping is allowed on Cat Island on National Park Service land. Camping is not allowed on West Ship Island or on privately owned land on Cat Island.

Bring all your food and drinking water. Practice "Leave No Trace" principles and remove all trash. For information visit [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org).

State fishing regulations apply.

Boaters follow NOAA charts 11372, 11373, and 11374.

### VISITING THE FLORIDA AREAS

Historic Fort Barrancas, Fort Pickens, and Naval Live Oaks offer information and exhibits. All Florida areas are open daily; however, visitor centers at Fort Barrancas and Fort Pickens are closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. For programs, hours, and guided tours, visit [www.nps.gov/guis](http://www.nps.gov/guis) or call 850-934-2600.

To reach the mainland forts and National Naval Aviation Museum, take Blue Angels Parkway (FL 173) to the West Gate of Pensacola Naval Air Station. • For Perdido Key, take Barrancas Avenue (FL 292) from Pensacola. • For Fort Pickens, Naval Live Oaks, and Santa Rosa, take US 98 east to Pensacola Bay Bridge. • Fort Pickens Road is subject to flooding; for current status,

call 850-934-2656. • For Okaloosa take US 98 east past Fort Walton Beach.

**Camping reservations** highly recommended. Visit [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov) or call 877-444-6777 for reservations. Naval Live Oaks Youth Group Camping Pavilion (see map below) is for organized groups.

Some pavilions may be reserved. Call the Special Use Permits Office, 850-934-2605.

Swim beaches are at Rosamond Johnson Beach on Perdido Key, Langdon Beach at Fort Pickens, Opal Beach at Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa. Do not swim in shipping channels.

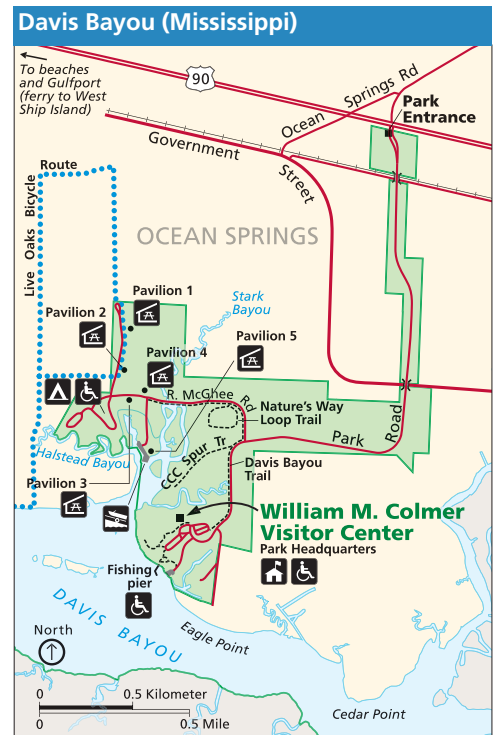
Fishing is allowed from Fort Pickens fishing pier without a license. Otherwise, state fishing licensing and regulations apply.

Boaters follow NOAA charts 11378, 11383, and 11384.

Hike self-guiding trails at Fort Barrancas, Fort Pickens, Perdido Key, and Naval Live Oaks.

Dunes may be closed to restore vegetation.

Entrance fees apply at Fort Pickens, Perdido Key, Fort Barrancas, Okaloosa, and Opal Beach, or show valid National Parks or Federal Recreational Lands pass.



Davis Bayou, on the mainland, has no swim beach. To reach public beaches go west on US 90, turn south at the Ocean Springs business district onto Washington Avenue, and proceed to Front Beach.

### FOR A SAFE VISIT

Never swim alone. Beware of sharks, jellyfish, rip currents, stingrays, Portuguese man-of-war, and barnacle-covered rocks. • Watch for sudden storms. Do not stand on piers, beaches, or fortifications during thunderstorms. • Use caution if exploring forts and batteries. Carry a flashlight for dark passageways. For your safety, some fortifications are closed. • Sunlight is intense. Wear protective clothing, drink plenty of fluids, and always use

sunscreen. Watch for changing surf and weather conditions. • No glass containers on beaches. • Carry out all trash. • Metal detectors prohibited anywhere in the park. • Motor vehicles must stay on the roads. • Bird nesting areas may be closed during nesting seasons. • Do not feed or disturb wildlife. • Spear-fishing is not allowed anywhere in the park. • Federal law protects all wildlife, plants, and historic objects.

### ISLAND WILDERNESS AREAS

In 1978 Congress designated Horn and Petit Bois islands—among the few undeveloped barrier islands on the Gulf coast—as wilderness areas. Uncommon species of birds, animals, and marine life are protected here. These areas also preserve the land's natural conditions and

provide opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. Preserving wilderness benefits generations to follow.

Before visiting Horn and Petit Bois islands, ask a ranger about wilderness area regulations and the difficulties of visiting places without water,

### MORE INFORMATION

Gulf Islands National Seashore is one of more than 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn about national parks at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

**Mississippi Areas**  
Gulf Islands National Seashore  
3500 Park Rd.  
Ocean Springs, MS  
39564-9709  
228-230-4100

For all park regulations, including firearms, check the park website.

### Emergencies call 911

**Accessibility** We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Call or check our website.



shelter, facilities, or communication. Park rangers can help you plan. For information visit [www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net) or [www.nps.gov/guis](http://www.nps.gov/guis).

Practice "Leave No Trace" principles while visiting these wilderness areas.

**Florida Areas**  
Gulf Islands National Seashore  
1801 Gulf Breeze Pkwy.  
Gulf Breeze, FL 32563  
850-934-2600

Visit [www.nps.gov/guis](http://www.nps.gov/guis) or follow us on Twitter

