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Treasures Along the Gulf Coast

Gulf Islands National Seashore is a place of myriad riches—sparkling blue waters, magnificent white beaches, and fertile coastal marshes. There are forts from the 1800s, shaded picnic areas, trails, and campgrounds. Diverse and abounding with wildlife, the park is a mosaic that includes 12 units stretching eastward 160 miles from Cat Island, Mississippi, to the Okaloosa Area east of Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

Congress established Gulf Islands National Seashore in 1971 to provide recreation and to protect the wildlife, barrier islands, salt marshes, historic structures, and archeological sites along the Gulf of Mexico. Although over 80 percent of the park is submerged lands, the islands are the outstanding features to most people.

The islands are long and narrow, composed of white sand carried seaward by rivers draining the Appalachian Mountains. The barrier islands block ocean waves and violent storms that would otherwise strike the mainland with greater force. Besides the islands, the national seashore includes parcels of land on the Florida and Mississippi mainlands. Here you can find fortifications built by Spaniards and Americans, the site of the first federal tree farm (established in 1829), archeological traces of American Indians, and forests and marshes with a variety of wildlife.

When Europeans arrived on the northern Gulf of Mexico in the early 1500s, they found American Indian settlements in the area. At the Naval Live Oaks Area in Florida, middens and other arti-

facts help archeologists understand and chronicle the long period of American Indian settlement. *Note:* All the park's archeological sites, historic sites, and artifacts are protected by federal law and must not be disturbed.

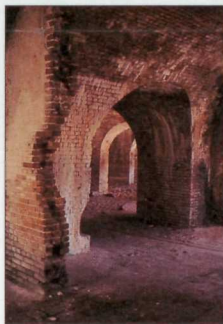
Along the Gulf of Mexico, discovery by Europeans was followed by a long struggle for the region's control. In 1559 Spain established a settlement in Florida on Pensacola Bay, but the place was soon abandoned. Spain revived the settlement in 1698, surrendered it to the French in 1719, regained it by treaty in 1722, ceded it to the English in 1763, and repossessed it by force in 1781. In Mississippi, sovereignty shifted from France to England and from England to Spain. Eventually, Florida and Mississippi gained statehood. In

1825, the U.S. government began fortifying Pensacola with forts and a navy yard, and in 1859 work began on a fort on Ship Island, Mississippi. The forts saw brief action during the Civil War, remaining active until the end of World War II when modern weapons made traditional coastal defense systems obsolete.

Gulf Islands National Seashore is in hurricane alley. The damages caused by major hurricanes, including Ivan (2004) and Katrina (2005), required significant repairs to island roads and facilities. Like the ever-changing barrier islands and the plants and animals that live here, the national seashore is resilient. Gulf Islands National Seashore is yours to enjoy. Please help us protect it for you and for future generations.

How Barrier Islands Change

How the barrier islands formed is something of a mystery. All theories involve the work of waves, winds, and fluctuating sea levels. Longshore currents wear away the islands on their eastern ends while building them up on the west. As a result, the islands shift steadily westward. More changes are made by violent storms that overwash the islands and rearrange the sand, and by winds that shift and sculpt the dunes. Such changes are constant. They are slowed only by the protective covering of grasses and other plants growing on the dunes and on island interiors. Sea oats, with their elaborate stem and root systems, play a vital role in holding the islands together.



Forts here span from the Colonial era in the 1700s to World War II in the 1940s.



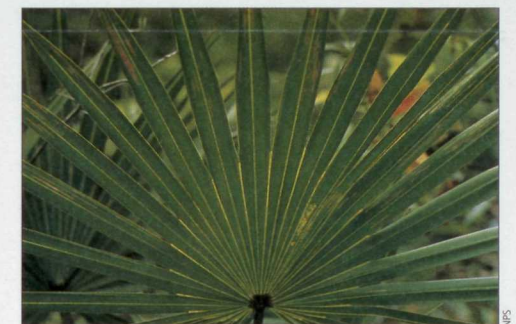
Misty mornings, cool, quiet, and peaceful, can be the best time to see birds, catch a fish, or meditate on the beauty of nature.



Dunes of snow-white sand give the islands a distinctive look. Held together by a network of stems and roots, the dunes are composed of fine quartz sand that originates in distant mountains.



Look closely to glimpse the variety of animals living in the marsh, including little fiddler crabs and stately great blue herons.

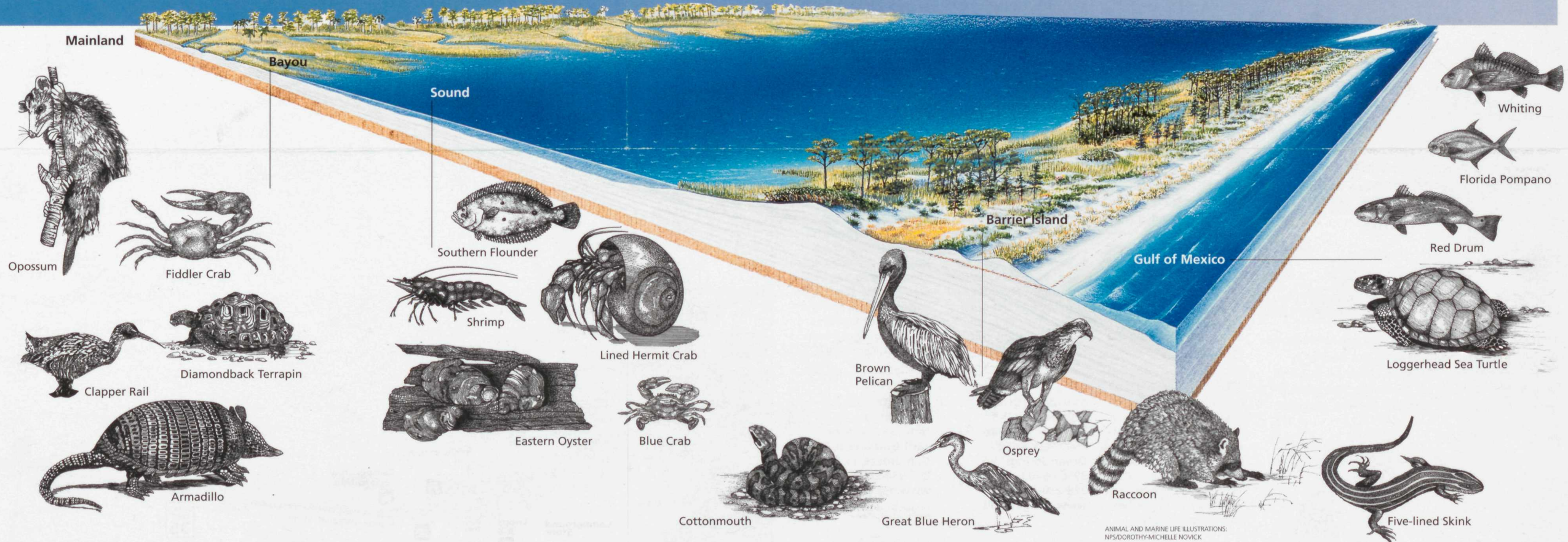


Saw palmetto grows under stands of pine and oak. American Indians found uses for the berries, as does medicine today.

Homes for Plants and Animals

Always changing, barrier islands provide habitat for wildlife and buffer the mainland from storms. Storms may cause an island to change shape or disappear. In 1969 Hurricane Camille split Ship Island in half. Later hurricanes have significantly altered the islands. Despite changes, life clings tenaciously here. Near the water, plants tolerant of high salt levels, like sea oats and cordgrass, flourish. Behind the primary dunes, shrubs and some trees grow, but they stand little higher than the dunes that protect them from salt spray.

In the island interiors, marshes collect rainwater and support a variety of plants and animals. Behind these islands, waters of the sounds, bays, and bayous are less salty than the Gulf. Nutrients washed from the mainland give rise to a wealth of marine life. Here shrimp and fish valuable to fishing pass portions of their lives, and creatures like herons, egrets, and fiddler crabs reproduce and thrive. Without the protection afforded by barrier islands, the plant and animal communities of the mainland coasts would not be as rich.



ANIMAL AND MARINE LIFE ILLUSTRATIONS:
NPS/DOROTHY-MICHELLE NOVICK

Exploring Gulf Islands



VISITING THE MISSISSIPPI DISTRICT

The Mainland At the William M. Colmer Visitor Center in Davis Bayou you will find information, publications, maps, exhibits, films, and a bookstore. It is open daily. For information about activities, boating, fishing, and regulations, call 228-230-4100 or visit www.nps.gov/guis.

To reach Davis Bayou on the mainland in Ocean Springs, follow signs for Gulf Islands National Seashore along I-10 and U.S. 90. Davis Bayou has year-round facilities, including a campground (first-come, first-served) with electric sites, water hookups, and a sewage dump station. The area has a group tent area, picnic pavilions, a self-guiding trail, and boat launch but no beach.

Getting to the Islands The islands are about 10 miles offshore and are reached only by boat. Visitors may use their own vessels, hire a licensed boat operator, or use the passenger ferry (spring through fall) to reach West Ship Island.

Boats may dock near Fort Massachusetts on West Ship Island year-round but only during daylight hours. Get a list of boats licensed to carry passengers to the offshore islands (Cat, East Ship, Horn, and Petit Bois) at the visitor center at Davis Bayou, or check our website.

The Islands The islands offer dramatic scenery but limited facilities. On East Ship, Horn, and Petit Bois islands primitive camping is permitted, but food and drinking water

must be packed in and all trash removed. West Ship Island has water and limited food service. Private property remains on Cat Island, and there are no facilities.

Fort Massachusetts on West Ship Island has a contact station, exhibits, and tours during tour boat season. A boardwalk goes from the boat dock to a swimming beach, bathhouse, restrooms, showers, snack bar, and picnic pavilion. Sunlight is intense; wear protective clothing, drink plenty of fluids, and always use sunscreen. Watch for changing weather and surf conditions. Fishing is permitted except in swimming areas; state regulations apply. Boaters should consult NOAA charts 11372 and 11374. Boats are not allowed in the West Ship Island swimming beach area.

VISITING THE FLORIDA DISTRICT

Things To Know All areas of the Florida District are open year-round unless posted. Hours vary seasonally and from area to area. All Florida District units have picnic areas. For details about activities, guided tours, camping, and how to plan your visit, contact the park at 850-934-2600 or visit www.nps.gov/guis.

Getting Around It is easy to reach the park's historic and natural areas (see maps above and below right). To reach the historic mainland forts and National Museum of Naval Aviation, use the back entrance of Pensacola Naval Air Station. Barrancas Avenue, Fla. 292, goes from Pensacola to the Perdido Key Area. To get to the Naval Live Oaks, Fort Pickens, and Santa Rosa areas, take U.S. 98 east across the Pen-

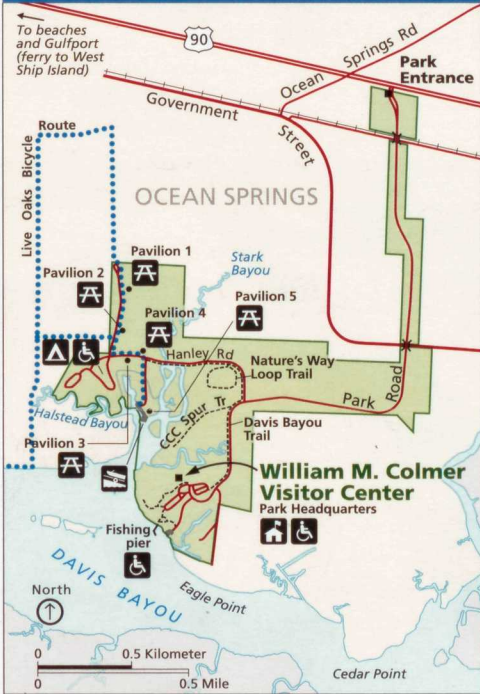
sacola Bay Bridge. The Okaloosa Area is on U.S. 98, east of Fort Walton Beach.

Swimming, Fishing, Boating, Hiking • Swimming beaches are at Rosamond Johnson Beach on Perdido Key, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, and Fort Pickens. Do not swim in shipping channels. • No fishing license is required on the Fort Pickens Fishing Pier. To use the pier when the park is closed, a night-owl permit is required (fee). Do not spearfish around jetties, piers, or where people are swimming. Check state laws for license requirements. • When boating use NOAA chart 11378. • Fort Pickens, Naval Live Oaks, Fort Barrancas, and Perdido Key have self-guiding trails. Hikers are advised that some dune areas may be closed to restore vegetation.

Fees Perdido Key, Santa Rosa, and Fort Pickens areas charge entrance fees. All National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands passes are honored. Buy night-owl permits for after-hours entrance to the Perdido Key and Fort Pickens areas.

Visitor Centers, Camping Visitor centers at Naval Live Oaks Area, Fort Barrancas, and Fort Pickens have information, exhibits, and bookstores. A 200-site campground near Fort Pickens is open daily. Naval Live Oaks youth group campground (see map below) is for educational groups; reservations are required. A snack bar is open seasonally at Fort Pickens.

Davis Bayou (Mississippi)



There is no beach at the national seashore's Davis Bayou Area, but public beaches are nearby in Ocean Springs. From the park entrance, go west on U.S. 90, turn south at the Ocean Springs business district onto Washington Avenue; proceed to Front Beach.

SAFETY FIRST

For your safety and to protect the park, follow these regulations:

- Never swim alone. Beware of sharks, jellyfish, rip currents, sting rays, Portuguese man-of-war, and barnacle-covered rocks.
- Boaters should know and obey the "Rules of the Road."
- Watch for sudden storms. Get off piers, beaches, and fortifications during thunder-

storms. • Use caution if exploring forts and batteries. Carry a flashlight for dimly lit passageways. For safety some fortifications are closed; all are closed sunset to 8 am. • Glass containers are prohibited on beaches in the national seashore; remove trash as you leave. • Motor vehicles must stay on the roads. • Metal detectors are prohibited. • Bird nesting areas may be

closed during nesting seasons. • Pets must be leashed at all times; they are not allowed on beaches in Florida, at the designated swimming area on West Ship Island, on tour boats, in historic structures, or in buildings. • Do not feed or disturb wildlife. All animals, plants, and historic objects are protected by federal law.

Emergencies: call 911.

ISLAND WILDERNESS AREAS

In 1978 Congress designated Horn and Petit Bois islands as wilderness areas, preserving these barrier islands as some the last undeveloped on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Uncommon species of birds, animals, and marine life are protected here.

Wilderness areas preserve the land's natural conditions and provide opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. Preserving wilderness shows restraint and humility and benefits generations to follow. For information visit www.wilderness.net.

Before visiting the islands ask a ranger about regulations for visiting a wilderness area and the difficulties involved in going to a place where there is no water, shelter, communication, or facilities. Park rangers can help you plan carefully.

MORE INFORMATION

Gulf Islands National Seashore is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.

Mississippi District
Gulf Islands National Seashore
3500 Park Road
Ocean Springs, MS 39564-9709
228-230-4100
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Florida District
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Fort Pickens, Fort Barrancas, Advanced Redoubt, and Naval Live Oaks (Florida)

