

The Florida Wildlife Corridor

Legislation

Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida Legislature created the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act in 2021. This law directs the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to encourage and promote investments in areas that protect and enhance the Florida Wildlife Corridor. It specifies that the Florida Wildlife Corridor is an existing physical, geographically defined area comprised of over 18 million acres, of which 10 million acres are protected conservation lands.

In 2024, The Focus on Florida's Future budget dedicated \$100 million specifically to support these efforts through Florida Forever, the state's premier land conservation program. This funding can be used for the acquisition of Florida Wildlife Corridor lands, in fee simple or conservation easements. Also in 2024, Senate Bill (SB) 1638, Funding for Environmental Resource Management, was signed into law, and provides a dedicated source of funding from the Seminole Tribe Compact to support land acquisitions within the Florida Wildlife Corridor for future years.

The Science Behind the Wildlife Corridor

The ability to migrate plays an important role in supporting biodiversity by enabling animals to safely travel to find mates, food and shelter. Animal migration results in increased genetic diversity within the species population and ensures a species' resistance to issues such as disease, genetic mutations from inbreeding, and potential extinction.

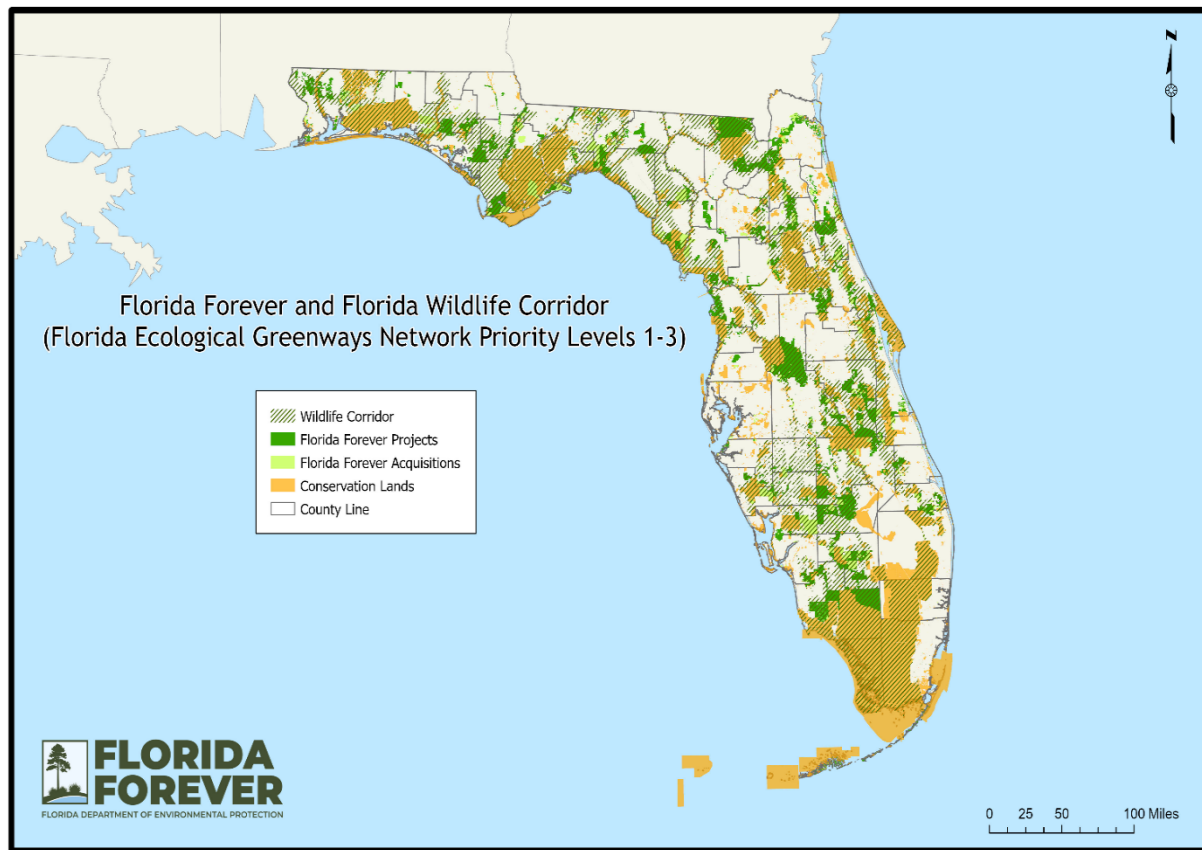
Many wildlife habitats have become fragmented and isolated by human development such as residential areas, commercial centers, industrial activity and transportation infrastructure. Wildlife corridors are sections of land that can connect two or more areas of wildlife habitat and allow animals to migrate and avoid roads and other development.

The Florida Wildlife Corridor refers to the conserved lands and opportunity areas defined as Priority 1, 2 and 3 of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN). The FEGN is a statewide database that identifies and prioritizes a functionally connected statewide ecological network of public and private conservation lands. The FEGN is used to inform Florida Forever and other state, federal, and regional land acquisition programs regarding the most important ecological corridors and intact landscapes across the state for protection of Florida's native wildlife, ecosystem services, and ecological resiliency: ([Florida Ecological Greenways Network Florida Forever Projects](#)). It identifies "opportunity areas," which are lands and waters within the wildlife corridor that are not conserved lands, and green spaces within the corridor which lack conservation status and/or are contiguous or between conserved lands.

Vision for the Florida Wildlife Corridor

There are 1.91 million acres within the Florida Wildlife Corridor opportunity area that are a high priority for conservation through the state's Florida Forever program. Utilizing the most current scientific analysis of Florida's natural resources, DEP's Division of State Lands triages properties in the same manner as Florida Forever potential acquisitions. Priority is given to lands that preserve, protect or enhance wildlife habitats and corridors and linkages to existing private and public conservation lands.

The Florida Wildlife Corridor is a strategic priority for the Florida Forever program. Its purpose is to build upon the network of public and private lands for safe passage and dispersal routes to maintain healthy populations of plants and animals.



Florida Wildlife Corridor Acquisition Successes as of June 2024

Florida Forever Blue Head Ranch – Located in the Fisheating Creek watershed in Highlands County, this 1,285-acre conservation easement helps to protect the endemic dry prairie and mesic flatwoods on the property and preserve the water quality of Fisheating Creek and its tributaries.

Horse Creek Ranch – The acquisition of an 11,958-acre conservation easement in DeSoto and Hardee counties along with an adjoining purchase of 4,358 acres by the Southwest Florida Water Management District will protect this large working landscape from the threat of development and mining. Approximately 11 miles of Horse Creek, a major contributor of the Peace River, runs through the property. This acquisition will help to further the goals of the Horse Creek Ranch project by enhancing water quality for Horse Creek and the Peace River.

Red Hills Conservation – Located in Leon and Jefferson counties, this 4,132-acre conservation easement will protect more than three miles of shoreline around Lake Miccosukee and increase biodiversity through the protection, restoration and maintenance of exemplary uplands and wetlands within the Red Hills Region.

Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch – This 4,222-acre conservation easement in Osceola County is located within the Kissimmee Prairie and is home to several federally-protected bird species such as the Florida grasshopper sparrow, red cockaded woodpecker, and crested caracara.

Fisheating Creek Ecosystem – This strategic 10,464-acre conservation easement in Glades County shares much of its border with the Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area and Platt Branch Wildlife Environmental Area and will expand a critical habitat corridor for the Florida panther.

Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector – The acquisition of this 3,634-acre conservation easement in Okeechobee County further protects the conservation area surrounding Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park and Avon Park Air Force Range.

Devil's Garden – Located in Collier and Hendry counties, this 17,229-acre fee simple acquisition protects critical habitat for the Florida panther on a landscape level and enhances connectivity between federal easements. Acquisition of this property helps to further the goals of the Devil's Garden project and offers an opportunity for FWC to restore critical upland and wetland natural communities.

Avalon – This 6,929-acre conservation easement in Jefferson County lies within the Wacissa springshed and the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape. This property protects water quality and a variety of rare species such as the Florida black bear and yellow fringed orchid.

Rainbow River Corridor – The strategic acquisition of a 135-acre conservation easement in Marion County along the Rainbow River helps preserve the water quality of one of the largest spring runs in the world and serves as an important buffer to nearby Rainbow River State Park. Acquisition of this easement will help to further the goals of the Rainbow River Corridor project by protecting the water quality of the Rainbow River.

Bluefield to Cow Creek – This 3,153-acre conservation easement is in west-central St. Lucie County, between the St. Lucie Pinelands Preserve and Cypress Creek Preserve. The acquisition enhances connectivity amongst conservation lands and ensures that enough water is available to meet the current and future needs of natural systems and the citizens of the state.

St. Joe Timberland – This 376-acre fee simple acquisition is in Franklin County, near Apalachicola, and shares its northern and western boundary with Tate's Hell State Forest. This property's 2-mile frontage on Whiskey George Creek helps to protect water quality of East Bay and helps to facilitate management of Tate's Hell State Forest.

Florida Wildlife Corridor Pending Opportunities

Deer Creek Ranch – Located in DeSoto County, this proposed 5,700-acre conservation easement would protect a section of Tiger Bay Slough and Myrtle Slough. These tributaries help to provide drinking water for the City of Punta Gorda and protect the water quality of the Peace River and Charlotte Harbor. The upland areas within the property provide habitat for a variety of imperiled species such as the Florida scrub jay and Florida burrowing owl.

Myakka Ranchlands – Located in southwest Hardee County, Quail Creek Ranch is a 2,650-acre property within the Florida Wildlife Corridor that was recently approved for a conservation easement. Nestled between the Myakka and Peace River watersheds, the property contains the headwaters of Owen Creek, an important tributary of the Myakka River. This property will help to enhance surface water protection as well as protect habitat for imperiled species such as the Florida sandhill crane, fox squirrel and gopher tortoise.

Caloosahatchee-Big Cypress Corridor – This 25,039-acre conservation easement in Collier and Hendry counties strengthens connectivity between the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and Big Cypress National Preserve to Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Wildlife and Environmental Area, Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest and Dinner Island Wildlife Management Area. The conservation of these lands provides protection to water resources and expands and protects lands that provide safe passage for the Florida panther.

Lake Hatchineha Watershed – Located in eastern Polk County, Creek Ranch is a 1,342-acre property under pressure from expansion of nearby suburban population areas and includes frontage on Lake Hatchineha, a critical part of the headwaters of the Kissimmee River-Lake Okeechobee-Everglades system. Proposed for fee simple acquisition, the property would be managed by FWC as a wildlife management area, adding recreational opportunities to the region, protecting water quality and buffering Lake Hatchineha from encroaching commercial and residential development.

Yarborough Ranch – This 1,361-acre property, recently approved for fee acquisition, is located within Seminole County. It is surrounded on three sides by the Little Big Econ State Forest and within a critical linkage for the Florida Wildlife Corridor. This property is within the Big Econlockhatchee Drainage Basin and protects the Geneva Freshwater Lens, which provides drinking water to residents of Seminole County. Once under imminent threat of development, acquisition of this property will enhance connectivity of adjacent conservation lands and protect water quality. Yarborough Ranch will be managed as part of the Little Big Econ State Forest, providing public access and recreational opportunities.