



# **NORTH FLORIDA HIGHLANDS**

## Regional Introduction





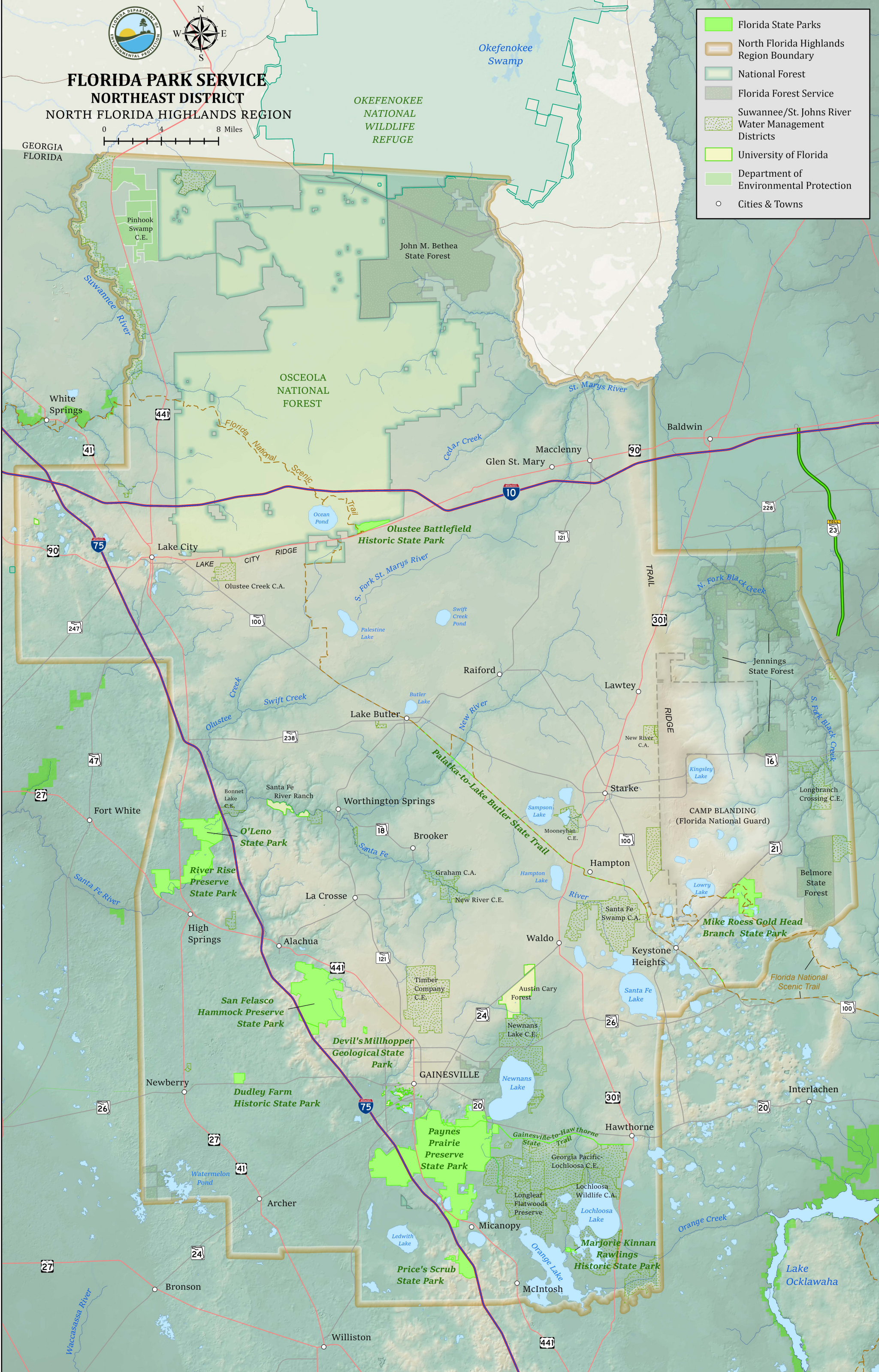


**FLORIDA PARK SERVICE**  
**NORTHEAST DISTRICT**

**NORTH FLORIDA HIGHLANDS REGION**



- Florida State Parks
- North Florida Highlands Region Boundary
- National Forest
- Florida Forest Service
- Suwannee/St. Johns River Water Management Districts
- University of Florida
- Department of Environmental Protection
- Cities & Towns







# **NORTH FLORIDA HIGHLANDS REGION**

## **REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY**

The North Florida Highlands Region includes all or portions of Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Marion, and Union counties. The northern end of this region borders the state of Georgia and is confined to the east and west by the St. Marys and Suwannee rivers, respectively. Moving south, the region follows Interstate 75 for approximately 100 miles to Cross Creek and the historic Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings House nestled between Lochloosa and Orange lakes.

The region's largest population center by far is the city of Gainesville, the county seat of Alachua County. Historically, the central highlands of north Florida have been sparsely populated, with much of the landscape dominated by agriculture. However, recent decades have seen substantial population growth in traditionally rural towns such as Lake City and Lake Butler.

North Florida Highlands Planning Region State Parks:

- Devil's Millhopper Geological State Park
- Dudley Farm Historic State Park
- Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park
- Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park
- O'Leno State Park
- River Rise Preserve State Park
- Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park
- Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park
- Price's Scrub State Park
- San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park

These Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) units protect and preserve examples of natural domain and significant cultural resources along the inland elevated karsts and ridges of north Florida. While these units are all identified as state parks, they are internally classified as either park, recreation area, preserve or special feature site based on the inherent content and scale of their natural and cultural resources. These agency classifications determine how the individual units are managed in terms of program area focus.

## **REGIONAL GEOMORPHOLOGY, TOPOGRAPHY, AND SOILS**

The North Florida Highlands Region falls within portions of four geomorphological districts. The Okefenokee Basin District extends into north Florida from Georgia. Thick, impermeable surface layers of clay and clayey sands cover most of this district, preventing percolation of water and the dissolution of the underlying limestone thus limiting the formation of sinkholes and other features more common to the south and west. Soils support forests of upland pine and various pine flatwoods throughout most upland portions of the Okefenokee Basin District. Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park is located along a subunit of the Okefenokee Basin known as the Lake City Ridge, a relict coastal berm formed during a past interglacial period.

O'Leno State Park, River Rise Preserve State Park, Dudley Farm Historic State Park, and Price's Scrub State Park occur at the western edge of the Ocala Karst District along the Cody Escarpment. The escarpment is the largest and most prominent geological break in Florida. It follows the ancient shoreline of past interglacial periods when sea levels were much higher. Karst features are common along the escarpment and reveal themselves at O'Leno State Park and River Rise Preserve State Park as sinkholes, swallets and stream rises. The abundance of limestone at or near the surface at these parks is a contributing factor that supports hardwood dominated forests.

Dudley Farm Historic State Park is located farther south within the geomorphological subdivision known as the Williston Plain. Karst features at the park include numerous sinkholes, limestone outcrops and aquatic caves.

San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park and Devil's Millhopper Geological State Park are located within the Alachua Karst Hills. This region's many sinkholes, like the "Devil's Millhopper", are caused by dissolution of the underlying Ocala limestone. Over geologic time, similar erosion processes throughout the karst hills have contributed to the area's rolling landscape.

Price's Scrub State Park sits alone within the Fairfield Karst Hills, a small geomorphological subdivision characterized by Hawthorn Formation clays and clayey sands near the surface. Well drained uplands and increased depth to the surficial water table lend to xeric woodlands such as the scrub and scrubby flatwoods found at Price's Scrub State Park.

The northern edge of the Lakes District enters the North Florida Highlands Region at its southern boundary. While this region shares much in common with the adjacent Ocala Karst District, the Lakes District is characterized by larger sinkhole features. A notable example of this is Paynes Prairie, a limestone plain or polje formed by the coalescence of numerous sinkholes. The park's expansive limestone plain supports one of the largest wet prairies in Florida, a treeless wetland characterized by herbaceous and emergent aquatic vegetation. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, located southeast of Paynes Prairie, also falls within the Lakes District. Adjacent Lochloosa Lake and Orange Lake are characteristic of the district's many large lakes.

Steephead ravines that drain to streams or sandhill lakes occur in the deep marine deposited sands of the Trail Ridge at the region's eastern edge. These deep sands allow for the formation of ravines through an erosion process that involves slumping of loose, sandy soils around a groundwater seep as opposed to top-down gully erosion. Located at the far southern end of the Trail Ridge, Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park is home to the largest steephead ravine system in northeast Florida. The park also preserves one of the finest examples of sandhill forest in the entire state.

## **REGIONAL HYDROLOGY**

Major hydrological features that characterize many of the parks within the North Florida Highlands Region include large basins, and other self-draining landscapes where surface waters disappear into sinkholes or steephead streams feed isolated lakes. Larger drainageways are part of an east-west divide, where streams in the western portions of the region feed the Suwannee River on its way to the Gulf of Mexico, and streams in the eastern portion feed the St. Johns River or the St. Marys River on their way to the Atlantic Ocean.

### **Santa Fe River**

The Santa Fe River is the region's only named river. It begins at Lake Santa Fe near the town of Keystone Heights and meanders west for 75 miles until its confluence with the Suwannee River near the town of Branford. The Santa Fe is typical of many rivers in karst regions in that certain segments flow underground. The river drops into a large sinkhole in O'Leno State Park and reappears in adjacent River Rise Preserve State Park approximately 3 miles southwest. Major springs along the Santa Fe include Hornsby Spring, Devil's Ear Spring, Gilchrist Spring and Poe Spring.

## **REGIONAL RESOURCE-BASED RECREATIONAL THEMES**

Nearly all the region's parks contain visible karst features such as sinkholes, limestone outcrops, stream swallets or large basins. These features offer excellent opportunities to wander deep into some of north Florida's best preserved natural places. Extensive hardwood and pine forests, with often appealing topography, are inviting landscapes for trail users such as hikers, bikers, and equestrians. Wildlife viewing, botanical appreciation and learning about the natural processes that have shaped the land and biota are key components of the region's nature-based recreational opportunities.

The region's rich cultural history is showcased through opportunities for learning at Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, and Dudley Farm Historic State Park. The Olustee battlefield preserves the site of the largest and most significant civil war engagement in Florida. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park preserves the author's 1930s Florida homesite at Cross Creek, made famous by her writings. Lastly, Dudley Farm Historic State Park preserves an authentic working Florida farm from the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Other important cultural history includes pre-Columbian societies, Spanish period mission sites and the role of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the development of Florida State Parks.

## **REGIONAL INTERPRETIVE THEMES**

The region's interpretive themes are connected to the undulating landscape that reveals Florida's fascinating geology and the cultures shaped by it. Sinkholes coalesce, a river vanishes into the Floridan aquifer below and cultural sites contain evidence of limestone tools from Florida's first people. Drawn to this region were also farmers, writers and the Civilian Conservation Corps. Battles were fought for it. Listed below is the **Central Park Theme (CPT)** for each regional park, highlighting its most significant natural or cultural features:

### **Devils Millhopper Geological State Park**

Descend into the alluring mystery of the Devil's Millhopper sinkhole, where layers of sediment hold traces of Florida's natural history beneath lush mosses, ferns, and waterfalls.

### **Dudley Farm Historic State Park**

Travel back in time at Dudley Farm, an authentic farmstead that reveals the challenges and ingenuity of our shared agricultural heritage, including the evolution of human rights in the community.

### **Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park**

The words of a quintessential Florida author jump off the page at Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, where the author's own story is told through the homestead and orange grove she treasured.

### **Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park**

Spring waters carve a lush green ravine through Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park, contrasting with golden grasses that shimmer beneath the ancient pines of Florida's disappearing sandhills.

### **O'Leno State Park**

The scenic Santa Fe River winds through O'Leno State Park before abruptly plunging underground at River Sink, a mysterious geological feature that has inspired generations of Florida's conservationists.

### **Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park**

The sounds of war once echoed around Olustee Battlefield, where those who walk the somber grounds of Florida's largest Civil War battle can contemplate what conflict meant to the Florida frontier.

### **Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park**

Only minutes from the cityscape, Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park's timeless vistas feature the dynamic rhythms of water that is the lifeblood for seasonal displays and wildlife migrations across an expansive 16,000-acre wetland.

### **River Rise Preserve State Park**

After flowing beneath our feet for over three miles, the Santa Fe River re-emerges from its complex underground journey at River Rise Preserve State Park, breathing new life into a landscape shaped by Florida's ancient geological past.

### **Prices Scrub State Park**

Sunny, sandy trails wind through the quiet charm of Price's Scrub State Park, a critical connection between vital Central Florida habitats for rare and imperiled wildlife.

### **San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park**

Beneath the shaded trails of San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park's mature hardwood forests is an intricate connection of seeps, sinks and streams in a complex karst landscape.