



## **Segment 5**

### **Crooked River/St. Marks Refuge**

#### **Emergency contact information:**

**911**

Franklin County Sheriff's Office: 850-670-8500

Wakulla County Sheriff's Office: 850-745-7100

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

#### **FPTA Region: B**

**Begin:** The Moorings in Carrabelle

**End:** Econfina River State Park

**Distance:** 81.1 miles

**Duration:** 6 days

**Special Considerations:** Extreme caution is advised in paddling open water areas from St. George Island to Carrabelle and in paddling across Ochlockonee Bay.

#### **Introduction**

From traditional fishing communities to wild stretches of shoreline, tidal creeks, and rivers, this segment is one where paddlers can steep themselves in "Old Florida." This is also the only segment where paddlers can follow two scenic rivers for a significant distance: the Crooked and Ochlockonee rivers. The Crooked River is the only area along the trail where paddlers have a good chance of spotting a Florida black bear. Several hundred black bears roam the Tate's Hell/Apalachicola National Forest area, one of six major black bear havens in the state. Florida black bears are protected under Florida law.

Keep food and garbage tightly packed and hanging in a bag from a tree branch at least ten feet off the ground.

Campsites along the Crooked River in Tate's Hell State Forest are \$10 per night and can be reserved online through Reserve America or by phone at 877-879-3859. Please see the Trip Planning – Reservations and Permits section at the back of this Guide for clearer Reserve America reservation instructions.

Bear in mind that campsites at Warren Bluff, Sunday Rollaway and Loop Road are also hunting campsites that are occupied from mid-November through early February. Campsites at Rock Landing, Crooked River #44, Crooked River #45, and Womack Creek are mixed-use campsites that are available during the hunting season, so you should have better luck reserving them at any time. Rock Landing has three sites in a row, good for groups, and Womack Creek Campsite has 13 sites, good for very large groups. Additionally, Womack Creek is the only camping area in Tate's Hell State Forest with restrooms that include hot showers. Showers can also be used by non-campers if paddlers pay the day-use fee.

Although the Crooked River is not technically a river since both ends connect to the Gulf, the river is aptly named, with numerous twists and turns. The water levels depend mostly on the tides, which normally do not cause a problem getting under the CR 67 bridge. However, during periods of extreme high tides and prolonged heavy rain, the added flow may cause some difficulty in getting under the bridge. The midpoint of the river is about 1 mile east of the bridge, at which point you will notice the flow change to the opposite direction. After Carrabelle, most of the river is completely undeveloped. Note that during high water it may be difficult to go under the CR 67 Bridge, so portaging may be necessary.

In paddling the Crooked River paddlers will enjoy a slice of the untrammeled 200,000-plus-acre Tate's Hell State Forest. For Crooked River campsite reservations, go to Reserve America - Tate's Hell State Forest. Crooked River Campsites can be difficult to locate on the Reserve America site. Please see the Trip Planning – Reservations and Permits section at the back of this Guide for clearer reservation instructions. This scenic route also features Ochlockonee River State Park where there is a full-service campground a short distance from the water. For camping reservations, visit Reserve Florida State Parks or call (800) 326-3521.

Along the coast, paddlers can observe a major geologic change. St. George and Dog islands mark the end of a chain of barrier islands that have been formed by sediments deposited by the Apalachicola and Ochlockonee rivers. The numerous wild islands east

of Ochlockonee Bay are chunks of land that have been isolated by millennia of rising sea levels, thus the reason why their shapes are not as elongated.

Public lands include a scenic county park at Mashas Sands along the east side of Ochlockonee Bay and state lands along Dickerson Bay near Panacea that have been purchased under the Florida Forever program.

The last stretch of the trail, including three campsites, is part of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Permits must be obtained for camping and these may only be used by long-distance paddlers traversing the entire refuge portion of this segment. A nominal one dollar per person per day fee is charged, the same fee charged for long-distance Florida Trail hikers. Bear in mind that no camping is allowed other than at the designated sites. All campers must secure permits from the Refuge Office: P.O. Box 68, St. Marks, FL 32355 or call (850) 925-6121. Obtain your permit at least two weeks prior to your arrival; you can change your date of arrival by phone later than that if you are unexpectedly delayed. The refuge needs to know the location of anyone camping on the refuge so they can safely plan management activities such as prescribed burning. The almost 70,000-acre refuge was established in 1931 to provide wintering habitat for migratory birds. Numerous small streams that wind through unspoiled expanses of marsh and coastal forests in the refuge offer countless hours of paddling enjoyment. A good day trip off the main route of this segment is the Alligator Harbor Aquatic Preserve, which is enclosed by the Alligator Point sand spit. This area is a pristine coastal water body and its seagrass beds and salt marshes serve as important nursery grounds and refuges for a variety of sea life. There are also several clam leases in the preserve marked by PVC poles.

This segment complements the Apalachee Bay Maritime Heritage Paddling Trails, a network of ten coastal paddling trails through the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and Bald Point State Park.

For kayak rentals, shuttle support, and other services, check Journeys of St. George Island, The Wilderness Way, and St. Marks Outfitters which also offer on-the-water boat support.

Leave No Trace principles should be followed in camping at designated primitive sites in order to keep them open for paddlers.



Crooked River. Photo by AJ Rivera.

### **1. The Moorings of Carrabelle to Crooked River Campsite #44, 15.3 miles**

When launching from the Moorings, while not absolutely necessary, an incoming tide will make your journey up the river easier. This paddle will take you from the outskirts of Carrabelle, to salt marshes that skirt along the southern boundary of Tate's Hell State Forest. As you navigate each turn and oxbow, you will understand why it is called the Crooked River.

Rest stops are limited, however, Sunday Rollaway, with decaying pilings/evidence of an old trestle, provides the first opportunity since Oxbow campsite to get out and stretch your legs. From Sunday Rollaway, it's another 4 miles to the CR67 bridge, then 3 miles to Campsite #44. The campsite is located on the south side of the river and is easily accessible.

### **2. Crooked River Campsite #44 to Crooked River Loop Road Campsite #28, 11.3 miles**

From Crooked River Campsite #44, you have the option of a shorter day by camping at Rock Landing Campsite, about 7.5 miles, or paddling another 4 miles to Loop Road Campsite #28.

If paddling to the Ochlockonee River State Park, leave the Crooked River and head down the Ochlockonee River past the exposed pilings of an old railroad bridge. The state park is on the northern shore. You can land near the park boat ramp and access the main campground by walking about a quarter of a mile.

As an option to staying at the state park, you can proceed north about two miles from the Crooked River junction to Tate's Hell State Forest Womack Creek campsite. This is a more developed first-come, first-serve campground featuring hot showers.

If you are in a group, another option is to utilize the isolated youth camp on the shore of the Dead River just off the Ochlockonee River. It is available to adult groups of six or

more on a first-come, first-serve basis, or you can make advanced reservations for organized youth groups. Call the park at 850-962-2771 for more information and to check on availability. Be sure to hike the park's scenic nature trail through open pine flatwoods. Scan the mature pines for cavities of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, the only native woodpecker that nests in living trees. You might also glimpse some of the park's unusual white squirrels.

### **3. Crooked River Loop Road Campsite #28 to Holiday Campground, 12.4 miles, or Chaires Creek Campsite at Bald Point State Park, 16.2 miles**

Head south on the ever-widening Ochlockonee River to the bay. One option for camping is the Holiday Campground just before the bay bridge on the left. The campground offers a bathhouse, laundromat, pool, and recreation room. Definitely make reservations ahead of time, call (850) 984-5757, or book online. On the east side of the bridge are a small convenience store and several restaurants.

For another camping option, from the bridge area, cross the bay and hug the southern shore a little less than 2 miles to Chaires Creek in Bald Point State Park. Proceed up the creek about a mile to the primitive campsite on your left. Call the park headquarters at 850-349-9146 or 850-962-2771 if you plan to use this site.

For side trips, you can follow Chaires Creek to Tucker Lake if the tide is high, or take more narrow creeks to small ponds. Part of the beauty of this marshy wilderness is the lack of human-made noises. Jet and highway noises are generally absent. Only occasional boats can be heard.

From the campsite, you can link up with the park's many miles of scenic hiking trails and unpaved roads. More than 500 different plant species and over 230 different animal species have been documented in the park. More species will likely flourish here as restoration of former slash pine timber plantations continues. With luck, you may glimpse one of the area's Florida black bears. In autumn, monarch butterflies often pause here before their bold migration across the Gulf of Mexico.

For birdwatchers, Bald Point is an exciting place to explore. According to the Great Florida Birding Trail guide, raptors such as peregrine falcons and harriers migrate along the shore in October. Black-bellied plovers and dunlins are seen in winter, and springtime often heralds colorful indigo buntings and other songbirds. Year-round residents include brown-headed nuthatches in the piney woods and clapper rails in the extensive marshlands.

### **4. Bald Point State Park or Holiday Campground to Apalachee Point (Fog Island) campsite 16-18 miles.**

If paddling from Chaires Creek, be watchful of high winds as you cross the wide Ochlockonee Bay. Mashles Sands County Park, at the head of the bay on the northeast side, offers a good rest stop with picnic tables and restrooms. You can then wind around the islands of scenic Dickerson Bay with the option of stopping on a small beach to visit Gulf Specimen Marine Lab and Aquarium (a small entrance fee required) just across the road. The aquarium features marine exhibits and touch tanks, focusing more on smaller marine life such as seahorses, rays, starfish, urchins, crabs, anemones, octopuses, jellyfish, spiny boxfish, sea turtles, small sharks, eels, and a variety of fish. No leaping dolphin acts. You can picnic here or stop at a city park just to the east, where you can land along a tiny creek near a fishing pier. A blue crab festival occurs here during the first weekend in May. Both of these Panacea access points are marked on the map. Numerous restaurants and small stores are within easy walking distance.

Another access point and kayak launch marked on the map is the Wakulla County Visitor's Center, where you can use restrooms and learn more about the area. Across the road is the Panacea Mineral Springs Park, the site of an old motel that once housed visitors seeking the healing qualities of these natural sulfur springs. There is a restaurant across the street and a seafood retailer aptly named Mineral Springs Seafood on US 98 (.25 miles east) that offers excellent fresh and smoked fare, an excellent opportunity to sample a local favorite, smoked mullet.

Paddling into Dickerson Bay and stopping at Panacea will add two to three miles to your day. From Panacea, you can cruise on the inside of Piney Island and traverse Oyster Bay.

Spring Creek is a traditional fishing community that is under tremendous development pressure as coastal land prices soar and historic fishing activities fade due to changes in net regulations. For now, you can enjoy a taste of Old Florida by viewing historic tin-roofed buildings, old docks, and derelict fishing vessels. More importantly, several residents are fifth-generation commercial fishermen who often regale visitors with tales of fishing on the open water and in the area's tidal creeks and bays.

Take time to explore Spring Creek by kayak as several high magnitude springs can be seen in and around the camp and along small inlets. Researchers believe that these springs connect with Wakulla Springs to the north, although water discharge has mysteriously diminished, beginning in 2006.

As a side trip, you can paddle up palm-lined Spring Creek from the town about two miles until it narrows and becomes impassable with fallen trees. In spring, look for blooming purple flag irises, clusters of yellow senecio flowers, and the white blooms of duck potato. Bald eagles are commonly seen in cool months, and on warm sunny days, alligators often sun themselves along the shore and on fallen logs. As you travel inland,

look for freshwater-loving cypress, live oak, and bay trees. The brown tint of the water is generally due to harmless tannins released by fallen leaves and other decomposing vegetation from swamps that feed the stream. Most of this stretch falls under the protected auspices of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

As you continue toward Apalachee Point (Fog Island), you can take a break at the Shell Point Beach, a public park, where there are picnic tables and restrooms.

From Shell Point, paddle towards the St. Marks Lighthouse, visible along the eastern horizon in good weather conditions. In choppy conditions, you may want to hug the shoreline, although this will add more miles. The Apalachee Point primitive campsite is on a spoil island near the mouth of the St. Marks River about two miles from the lighthouse. Camping is on a first-come, first-serve basis. In the 1700s, the Spanish called this the Apalachee River after the local Native American tribe. The campsite has a small rise that provides for an excellent view of the area and it's a good spot to catch a breeze. Other names for this island are Fog Island and Rock Island.

A good access point for this area is Wakulla Beach, a small sand landing and beach that is an ideal access point for kayaks, although it is not advisable to leave vehicles parked overnight and low tide can make access challenging. It is the terminus of Wakulla Beach Road off Highway 98. Tidal creeks in the area make for great side trips through more wild lands of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

Note: There is no available fresh water until Econfinia River State Park. Plan on leaving Ochlockonee Bay with one gallon per person per day for 4 days.

## **5. Apalachee Point (Fog Island) Campsite to Ring Dike Campsite, 8.8 miles**

A good rest stop is the St Marks Lighthouse, a national historic site. First built in 1829, but rebuilt more solidly two years later and then again in 1842 and 1866, the lighthouse has withstood many severe hurricanes and storms. One 1843 storm washed away every building except for the tower, killing several people in the area except for the lighthouse keeper's family, who clung to the garret floor near the top of the tower. Various lighthouse keepers lived at the site with their families until the light became fully automated in 1960. The lighthouse is only open to the public on rare occasions. There is no museum.

East of the lighthouse, you'll paddle an open stretch of water along an untrammelled shoreline of trees and marsh. The Ring Dike Campsite is a mile up Deep Creek from the Gulf. The campsite is distinguishable from the open marsh habitat by a ring of large live oaks. With open views in all directions, this campsite is one of the most scenic on the trail. Florida Trail hikers who are traversing the refuge also use this campsite. For permit

information call (850) 925-6121. Obtain your permit at least two weeks prior to your arrival; you can change your date of arrival by phone later than that if you are unexpectedly delayed. Caution is advised that access is best at higher tidal levels.

#### **6. Ring Dike Campsite to Econfina State Park, 16.1 miles**

After returning to the Gulf, you'll have more seemingly endless vistas of marsh and palm hammocks as you paddle to the mouth of the Aucilla River. From the Aucilla River mouth, it is about four miles to the mouth of the Econfina River, and another 2.5 miles to the Econfina River State Park boat ramp. After landing at the Econfina River State Park boat ramp, walk up the ramp and enter the first opening on your left. The CT primitive campsite is on your left. Please notify the Park Manager at 850-766-9033 if you plan to camp for the night. A quarter mile up the road is a small store, showers, and bathrooms at the Econfina River Resort. There is a fee. They also have rooms (another overnight option) that may be available. Contact them at 850-584-2135. Please practice "Leave No Trace" principles at the campsite.

**Closing Note:** The CT along the Forgotten Coast through the Big Bend (and onward south) courses over a wide shelf of shallow water, often remote. Long stretches of exposed coastline are irregularly shaped saltmarsh, featureless and wild, a true water wilderness. CT paddlers who adopt the outlook of mariners with keen attention kept on the tide and winds, who seek favorable conditions to paddle, will trend toward more enjoyable and safer experiences.