



## **Segment 6**

### **Big Bend**

**Emergency contact information: 911**

Jefferson County Sheriff's Office: (850) 342-0211

Taylor County Sheriff's Office: (850) 584-7288

Dixie County Sheriff's Office: 352-498-1220

Levy County Sheriff's Office: 352-486-5111

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

**FPTA Region: C**

**Begin:** Econfina River State Park

**End:** Cross Florida Greenway spoil island campsite near Yankeetown

**Distance:** 136.5 miles

**Duration:** 11 days

**Special Considerations:** This is a remote area where cell phone coverage can be non-existent. Being properly equipped and prepared and leaving a float plan is very important. Also, you may travel two to four days at a time without being able to

replenish fresh water supplies, and opportunities for replenishing food supplies are also scarce, so plan accordingly. The coast here can be very shallow and low tides can present a problem for navigation and when seeking to land or launch at campsites. Keep a tide

chart to help plan your trip and count on tides making access a challenge. You may have to paddle a mile or two off the coast during extreme low tides.

## **Introduction**

With the exception of the Ten Thousand Islands/Everglades segment, this is the remotest segment of the trail, featuring long stretches of unspoiled shoreline, marsh expanses, and sea islands. The Big Bend also has the most stable population of bay scallops in the state and the most intact seagrass beds. These seagrass beds serve as vitally important nurseries for fish, shrimp, crabs, and a host of other marine species, one reason the [Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve](#) covers much of this segment. Spanning more than 945,000 acres, the aquatic preserve is the largest and possibly the most pristine in the state.

Fortunately, much of the Big Bend coastline is in public ownership. The first 105-mile stretch of the trail, including six primitive campsites, is managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) as part of the [Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail](#). Free permits must be obtained before using any of the campsites and an online calendar makes checking availability and reservations simple. For details, see the Trip Planning section of this guide. Campsites are marked by white poles and signs and limited to 8 persons and 4 backpacking size tents to better protect the fragile coastal environment, a general rule to follow along the entire segment. The six campsites are closed during the busy July and August scallop season. These are not the best months for overnight camping anyway with almost daily storms, biting insects, and intense heat. The [FWC trail guide](#) is recommended for paddlers in this section as it provides more detailed information and waterproof maps.

Near the Suwannee River, you'll pass through lands managed by the [Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge](#). The refuge covers numerous islands and more than twenty miles of the famed river of song.

Near Cedar Key, the [Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge](#) encompasses 13 historic and wildlife-rich islands ranging in size from 1 to 120 acres, totaling 762 acres,

It is unlawful to camp on either the Lower Suwannee or Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges.

Two state parks are part of this segment—[Econfina River State Park](#) and [Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park](#). Econfina River encompasses more than 3,000 acres of pine flatwoods, oak/palm hammocks, and broad expanses of marsh and tree islands. The 34,000-acre Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park offers sweeping marsh vistas and tree islands between Cedar Key and Yankeetown.

There are many friendly trail towns in this segment that offer restaurants, small grocery stores, and some have motels. Advice and fishing yarns are generally free of charge. For kayak rentals, shuttle support, and other services, check [Suwannee Guides and Outfitters](#) and [St. Marks Outfitters](#) who 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.

### **1. Econfinia River State Park to Rock Island Campsite, 10.5 miles**

#### **Big Bend - Saltwater Paddling Trail Permit Required**

Leave Econfinia River State Park with a 2-day supply of water.

An optional rest stop about halfway to Rock Island is the Hickory Mound Impoundment, where there is a picnic area and an observation tower. The tower will likely be visible from the water. You'll need the FWC trail guide for the best route up a tidal creek to the picnic area.

Rock Island is the larger of two offshore islands, where you can land in a narrow rocky cove on the north side. The island, about 20 acres in size, is interesting to explore, with its many tidal pools and exposed limestone. It can be buggy in warm weather, however. Be sure to stow away food to keep out vermin.

### **2. Rock Island Campsite to Spring Warrior Creek Campsite, 11 miles**

#### **Big Bend - Saltwater Paddling Trail Permit Required**

Leaving Rock Island, it is a little over two miles to the mouth of the Fenholloway River, which may have an unpleasant smell due to effluent from a paper mill. A good rest stop is Big Spring Creek, about three miles past the Fenholloway, where you can access a picnic area and a spring run.

About 3 miles from the mouth of Big Spring Creek is the Spring Warrior channel marker. It is 1.6 miles to the campsite. Paddling up Spring Warrior can be challenging in a falling tide. Before the campsite, you can obtain fresh water from the [Spring Warrior Fish Camp](#) which also offers a lodging option. If unattended, you can use a hose on the side of the building, but this water may not be potable. The campsite is along a bend on the right side about a half-mile upstream from the fish camp. The campsite was once a Thanksgiving gathering place for a local family. You can explore the scenic river for about another half mile upstream until logjams may restrict passage.

### **3. Spring Warrior Creek Campsite to Sponge Point Campsite, 13.4 miles**

### **Big Bend - Saltwater Paddling Trail Permit Required**

As you cruise along the marsh, you may notice small outcroppings where cedar trees are growing. These are often the brick and stone remnants of Confederate saltworks where furnaces and iron kettles were set up during the Civil War to boil seawater to obtain salt. Salt was vitally needed to cure meat for the Confederate Army. Many of the salt works were destroyed by Union raids near the end of the war.

A must-stop is the county park at Keaton Beach where you can have a picnic, take an outdoor shower, replenish water supplies, and eat in a nearby restaurant. There are a couple of small convenience stores along the town's main road. Inexpensive beach house rentals are available through several local realty offices. Leave Keaton Beach with enough water for two days.

Sponge Point, marked by majestic coastal live oak trees, appears to be an island as it is separated from the mainland by an expanse of the marsh. Its name was derived from spongers that once frequented the Big Bend Coast. A massive 1940s outbreak of red tide, coupled with the advent of synthetic sponges, severely curtailed the native sponge industry. Be watchful of prickly pear cacti when hiking the island.

For restrooms and a covered picnic shelter, you can paddle to Hagen's Cove a half-mile to the southeast, although no camping is allowed.

#### **4. Sponge Point Campsite to Dallus Creek Campsite, 8 miles**

### **Big Bend - Saltwater Paddling Trail Permit Required**

This is a short day along more shallow tidal creeks, but there are several options to further explore the area. From your campsite, you can paddle up Dallus Creek another 1.3 miles to a boat ramp and picnic area where you can hike a 1-mile loop trail. During high tide, you can paddle Dallus Creek past the boat ramp to its swampy origin or take a 3.5-mile loop around Clay Creek (see FWC guide).

The remote campsite is in a grove of coastal live oaks at the end of a cleared trail through black needlerush. Be watchful of rattlesnakes during warm weather. The campsite may be difficult to reach during low tide or possibly inundated during a very high tide. FWC, with Florida Paddling Trails Association volunteers, recently built a couple of camping platforms on the site.

#### **5. Dallus Creek Campsite to Steinhatchee, 8 miles**

### **Big Bend - Saltwater Paddling Trail Permit Required**

Steinhatchee is the largest town in this segment until you reach Cedar Key. Here, you can rent a motel room or campsite, sample restaurant fare, and stock up on supplies. One easily accessible overnight stop in Steinhatchee, and clearly marked from the water, is the Sea Hag Marina (352-498-3008). Another paddler-friendly option is the Good Times Motel and Marina (352-498-8088) on the south side of the river. They have their own ramp conveniently located next to the rental cabins and motel. There are two public boat ramps on both sides of the river (see map).

## **6. Steinhatchee to Sink Creek Campsite, 10 miles**

### **Big Bend - Saltwater Paddling Trail Permit Required**

Sink Creek, one of the more remote spots along the trail, is an island-like spot surrounded by tidal creeks, marsh, and sand flats. The campsite is about a half-mile in from the mouth of the creek on the south bank. A high tide will make accessibility easier.

Behind the campsite at low tide, you can hike the salt flats--an open sandy ribbon between marsh and tree hammocks. Look for evidence of rising sea levels as many cedars and other trees have died, leaving behind their naturally sculpted trunks.

A brackish spring is a quarter-mile upstream near a remote boat ramp. Here, you can take a swim, explore numerous small sinkholes, and hike the back roads for great vistas. The spring area is where mullet fisherman camped and traded salted fish for farm produce and other goods in the early 1900s. A fish house once stood on the shore, but like many of the Big Bend's shoreline areas, storms and rising sea levels have erased the most obvious signs of human existence.

## **7. Sink Creek Campsite to Butler Island Campsite, 14 miles**

### **Big Bend - Saltwater Paddling Trail Permit Required**

From the campsite, Bowlegs Point is a good rest stop, about 2.5 miles away. Past the point, you can only cruise between Pepperfish Keys and the mainland at high tide. Otherwise, stay on the Gulf side. Northern Pepperfish Key is a bird rookery, so keep at least 300 feet (a football field length) from the island so as not to disturb nesting birds.

A good rest stop near the end of the day is a county park in the town of Horseshoe Beach. You can replenish water supplies—enough for two days--and walk a short distance to a convenience store and a restaurant. An overnight option is to rent a room at the El-Seas Fish Camp, accessible by a floating dock along the main canal through town on right (just less than a quarter-mile in from the Gulf). Call (352) 440-2601 for reservations and directions (see map).

Just prior to El-Seas Fish Camp is the Horseshoe Beach Marina. Located on the right, the marina has a small sandy landing spot. The marina store is well stocked with a variety of food and drinks and you may be lucky enough to learn local history if you take the time to chat with the local clientele.

The Butler Island Campsite is 1.7 miles from Horseshoe Point, on the south side of the island. Camping is beneath a canopy of live oaks, palms, and a rare stand of mature cedars, but beware of poison ivy. As with other sites, the low-lying coontie palm grows here, a protected species. The starchy tubers—poisonous if not prepared properly--were once an important food source for Native Americans and early settlers.

### **8. Butler Island Campsite to Anderson Landing River Camp in Suwannee, 11.5 miles**

From Butler Island, you'll pass through a maze of oyster bars across Horseshoe Cove. As you enter the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, several tidal creeks offer scenic paddling opportunities, and Fishbone Creek has an observation tower about 1.5 miles from the mouth. If you want to explore the area further, one option is to stay at the county campground at Shired Island (pronounced Sheered), about 5 miles from Butler Island (fee required). The water is not potable and has a strong sulfur smell. Nearby, a large Indian shell midden about 12 feet high, with sides exposed due to erosion, is worth viewing.

Several islands in the refuge, such as Big Pine Island, offer inviting white sand beaches and palm-lined shores, great for rest stops. Bear in mind that Cat Island, near the mouth of Salt Creek, is privately owned but camping is allowed on an emergency basis and it is an enjoyable rest stop. From Cat Island, follow the GPS point on the map to the canal along the east side of Suwannee and Highway 349. Paddle along the canal about a mile to Anderson Landing. There is a small fee for primitive camping, and a motel is next door at Bills Fish Camp and Motel. For reservations call 352-542-7086. Suwannee has two restaurants within walking distance.

### **9. Anderson Landing River Camp to Cedar Key City Park Beach, 18.5 miles**

Paddle downstream to the river mouth through East Pass, being wary of strong currents and boat traffic. Continuing southeast along the coast, a good rest stop is a small sandy beach on the northeast tip of Deer Island.

Along the route is Shell Mound County Park. The park's ramp is located adjacent to the park pier, and like many locations along the Big Bend, requires planning to avoid attempting access during low tide.

Less than 300 yards from the park's boat ramp, the park offers an inexpensive camping option on the water, but the ramp can be extremely difficult to reach at low tide and airboats use the ramp frequently.

The historic Shell Mound is an interesting destination and a chance to stretch your legs. This five-acre, 28-foot-tall Timucuan Indian mound offers a panoramic view of a Gulf Coast Wilderness. It was primarily built from discarded oyster and scallop shells, possibly during winter solstice celebrations throughout generations that may have spanned 3500 years.

The landing at Cedar Key City Beach Park is at the left end of the beach, by the kayak rental area. The historic town of Cedar Key is well worth a day or two of exploration. At charming Cedar Key, you can buy groceries, eat in a variety of restaurants, visit a museum, and peruse numerous shops. In the late 1800s, Cedar Key was a major port city and processor of cedar logs for the pencil industry. Several factors contributed to its downfall: hurricanes, the emergence of Tampa as a major port, and the depletion of old-growth cedar trees.

Today, tourism is a major industry although the popular destination is amazingly devoid of chain motels or restaurants and maintains a small-town charm. Cedar Key has an important clam industry and is known for its tasty clams.

A good option is to stay at Cedar Key in one of many waterfront motels, many within easy walking distance, and kayak to the scenic islands of the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge. All beaches along the islands are open for public access with the exception of Seahorse Key and Snake Key from March 1 through June 30 due to bird nesting. Atsena Otie Island, a half-mile south of Cedar Key, is the only island where the interior is open for hiking year-round. Here, you can view an explanatory kiosk and the historic ruins of the Faber cedar mill near the dock and walk to the southeastern end of the island to view the historic cemetery.

Seahorse Key is another must-stop when the beaches are open. This former prison for Confederate soldiers has the highest elevation on Florida's west coast, rising 52 feet. Other nearby islands include Snake Key and North Key. The interiors of these islands are closed to the public, and for good reason. They have venomous snakes and thick undergrowth.

Find information on lodging, restaurants, and other Cedar Key offerings, and be sure to take the historic walking tour. Brochures can be purchased from the Cedar Key Historical Society Museum in the old downtown.

## **10. Cedar Key City Beach Park to Turtle Creek Primitive Campsite, 17.6 miles**

Before leaving Cedar Key, be sure to bring enough water for four to five days. After leaving Cedar Key, you will go past one of Cedar Key's major clam farming areas. You will pass by both Hall and Kelly creeks as well as the mouth of the Waccasassa River.

If you decide to camp at Hall or Kelly Creek, these campsites are very hard to get to on low winter tides and are not always well maintained

**Note: It is highly recommended that you contact the Waccasassa Bay Preserve Manager to find out the condition of the Hall, Kelly and Turtle Creek campsites while in your trip planning stage (352-543-5567).**

This open water paddle takes you across Waccasassa Bay and into Turtle Creek. You'll pass numerous small islands on your way to the mouth of the Waccasassa River and Turtle Creek campsite. All campsites in the Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park are available free of charge on a first-come, first-serve basis. The campsites are not exclusively for paddlers, so you may be sharing them with boaters.

For locating the Turtle Creek campsite, follow GPS coordinates into Turtle Creek Bay and proceed inland to an obvious fork. Take the left fork and follow the obvious channel less than a quarter-mile to a small shell landing on a tree-covered peninsula on your right. Camp anywhere near the landing. There is a fire ring. Be careful landing and launching your kayak, the bank can be very slippery. You can stretch your legs by hiking along a nearby unpaved road. Turpentine and salt-making operations were once common in the area. Because the campsite is off the main route, it is still about 13 miles to the Cross Florida Greenway Spoil Island Campsite.

## **11. Turtle Creek Campsite to Cross Florida Greenway Spoil Island Campsite, 13 miles**

It may seem that the wild tidal creeks, marshy vistas, and scenic tree islands will never end as you paddle to the boat ramp near Yankeetown at the mouth of the Withlacoochee River. The town itself is 3.5 miles up the Withlacoochee River where limited supplies can be obtained. B's Marina and Campground in Yankeetown offers tent camping with showers, restrooms, and a small grocery store (352-447-5888). Yankeetown is a picturesque fishing village with old-growth trees and stately homes.

The spoil island campsite is about two miles past the ramp at the western end of SR 40 (see map for GPS point). This island was created by dredging a channel for the now-defunct Cross Florida Barge Canal. Property along the old canal is now primarily managed for recreation as part of the Cross Florida Greenway. Primitive camping is on a first-come, first-serve basis. Rock fire rings are common. The landing is on the southwest side of the island.