



Office of Greenways & Trails

Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail Segment 14 Everglades/Florida Bay

Emergency contact information:

911

Everglades National Park 24-hour search and rescue: 305-247-7272

Collier County Sheriff's Office: 239-774-4434

Monroe County Sheriff's Office: 305-289-2430

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

FPTA Region: G

Begin: Everglades City

End: Long Key State Park

Estimated Mileage: 99.5 miles via the Gulf side; 126.5 miles via the Wilderness Waterway

Special Considerations: It is possible now to select an alternate route from Flamingo to Miami that hugs the mainland shoreline for the most part. If weather conditions are inclement with winds out of the west or north, this may be a more sheltered option. If weather conditions improve then you can consider rejoining the original CT route of Segments 14-16. This option may be found on page 207.

IMPORTANT: The segment from Everglades City to Flamingo is the longest stretch along the circumnavigation trail without a fresh water supply. At Everglades City, you'll need to obtain a gallon of water per day per person for seven to eight days. That is a lot of weight and bulk. Some groups contract with a boat guide in Everglades City or Flamingo to resupply them with water en route.

Raccoons are the biggest threat to your food and water. Raccoons have been known to chew through thin plastic water jugs. When camping, secure your food and water in your kayak compartments and flip over your boat if necessary. Campers have unintentionally contributed to larger raccoon numbers near campsites. In turn, hungry raccoons destroy an estimated 90% of sea turtle nests in the park.

For details on obtaining ENP backcountry permits see the Trip Planning section of this guide.

A GPS unit and good navigational maps are essential in this segment as many unprepared boaters have become lost in the maze of mangrove islands in the Everglades National Park. A compass is essential, too, in case thick mangroves interfere with your GPS unit or your unit malfunctions.

Introduction

Everglades National Park and Florida Bay are two of Florida's natural treasures that attract visitors from throughout the world.

This vast watery wilderness of islands, sawgrass, mangroves, forests, waterways, and open water often appears little different than when dugout travelers fished the waters and set up villages and camps on the islands.

In this segment, you'll see a unique combination of subtropical and tropical plants, marine creatures from both marine and estuarine environments, and the only place in the world where alligators and crocodiles coexist. Birdlife includes roseate spoonbills, ospreys, white pelicans, and wood storks. Sea turtles can often be seen poking up their heads in the Gulf and Florida Bay. If fortunate, you might glimpse a rare sawfish. Its long, flat snout contains 24 or more pairs of sharp teeth that resemble a two-bladed crosscut saw.

From Everglades City, you'll have your choice of taking the 99-mile Wilderness Waterway to Flamingo, or the Gulf route. The Gulf route is shorter and generally has fewer bugs, but weather may be a deciding factor. Campsites range from chickees that have been built on pilings in rivers and bays, ground sites that have been cleared within the mangrove forests, and beach sites. Campfires are only allowed at the beach sites (below the high-tide line). The ground sites tend to have more insects but be prepared for insects anywhere in this region at any time of year.

This guide will focus on the Gulf route across the Everglades National Park (Everglades City to Long Key) to Flamingo then onto Long Key since it is shorter and less known.

There are two routes now from Flamingo to the Keys or an alternate route from Flamingo to Miami, where campsites are spaced a reasonable distance apart.

As always, Leave No Trace principles and practices should be followed for primitive camping.

1. Everglades City to Rabbit Key (ENP), 9 miles

Tides can greatly influence paddling to and from Everglades City. If you can time it properly, take the incoming tide to the Visitor's Center and the outgoing tide to Rabbit Key through Rabbit Key Pass. Park rangers often check for permits, so have it handy in your kayak and tie it onto your tent after you set up camp. Stick to your permit itinerary unless there are extenuating circumstances such as injury or a big storm.

Paddling to Rabbit Key, you'll cross the open Chokoloskee Bay to the small hamlet of Chokoloskee, originally a massive shell mound built by Calusa Indians and now linked to the mainland by a causeway. Take a break at the fascinating Smallwood's Store (see map). Established by Ted Smallwood in 1906, this store was the main trading outpost in the region. Residents and nearby Seminole Indians would paddle or boat to the store to trade or sell hides, furs and produce for dry goods, guns and ammunition. It remained open until 1982 and is now a museum. For a small fee, you can tour the exhibits and view many of the items that were once for sale or trade.

From Chokoloskee, you can wind through a maze of mangrove inlets to Rabbit Key Pass or choose less direct routes. Rabbit Key is perched on the edge of the Gulf, so you'll have the best of both worlds: a view of mangrove islands on one side and open water on the other.

2. Rabbit Key (ENP) to Turkey Key (ENP), 11.5 miles

You can take a direct open water route to Pavilion Key and beyond, or you can duck behind mangrove islands to find shelter from winds and waves. Some of the water will be very shallow at low tide, however. Proceed cautiously across the open water from Pavilion Key to Mormon Key as unfavorable winds and tides have caused numerous small crafts to capsize, some say the highest number of capsizes in the park.

The approach to the beach campsite at Turkey Key is shallow, so a high tide is best. The key was once the site of a commercial fishing operation.

3. Turkey Key (ENP) to Highland Beach (ENP), 12 miles

In the latter part of this segment, you'll be leaving the Ten Thousand Islands and moving along a more continuous shoreline of mangroves, beaches, and bays.

Highland Beach, your destination, is a natural beach with a long shell ridge formed by wave action. Once farmed by the Rewis family, it has a grass prairie, cabbage palms, and other plants to break up the mangrove forests. Highland Beach is best accessed at high tide as the water is very shallow near the beach.

4. Highland Beach (ENP) to Graveyard Creek (ENP), 9 miles

Along this route, you'll paddle through the mouths of the North and South Harney rivers, named for Colonel William Harney, who used the river to cross the Everglades in a surprise raid on the Indian leader Chekika and his band in 1840. The raid was, in part, retaliation for Chekika's raid on Indian Key, in which seven settlers were killed. By 1842, with most Seminoles killed, imprisoned, or removed to Oklahoma, hostilities ceased until re-igniting again in the 1850s.

This shorter day will allow you to explore Graveyard Creek and the many other tributaries along Ponce De Leon Bay. The bay is also known for its good fishing.

Graveyard Creek campsite has characteristics of both a ground and beach campsite. It is best to land at the campsite along Graveyard Creek as the water is deeper. Access is best during high tide. Be sure to have your bug spray and head net available.

5. Graveyard Creek (ENP) to Northwest Cape Sable (ENP) , 11 miles

At low tide, the mouth of Graveyard Creek can be a mudflat. If that's the case when departing, you may want to paddle up Graveyard Creek and wind around into Ponce De Leon Bay, where the water is deeper, allowing you to continue your journey south.

On this day you'll begin your approach to Cape Sable, one of the finest natural shorelines remaining in Florida. A grassy plain borders the sandy beach in most places, with occasional clumps of sabal palms, Jamaica dogwood, and hardwood hammocks. Gopher tortoises and Cape Sable seaside sparrows are among the protected species here, with the Cape Sable seaside sparrow being the only bird restricted entirely to the Everglades environment. They depend upon prairies that both periodically flood and burn.

Before the national park was established in 1947, many attempts to farm, ranch, and develop Cape Sable were short-lived due to its remoteness, insect life, and killer hurricanes.

Because of the remoteness of the Northwest Cape campsite, you'll likely see few other visitors. The extensive beach and prairies make for excellent hiking.

6. Northwest Cape Sable (ENP) to East Cape Sable (ENP), 9.5 miles

The sharp point at Middle Cape, roughly the halfway point, was once the site of an 1850s Army fort established as a base to hunt down Seminole Indians. In the 1880s, a coconut farm once flourished nearby until a 1935 hurricane destroyed the coconut palms. Few signs of human inhabitation are seen here today.

This segment can be very windy. There is an interior route through a series of creeks and canals and across Lake Ingraham that is heavily influenced by tides. With good planning, you can paddle towards the lake on an incoming tide and leave the lake on an outgoing tide.

The East Cape campsite is the southernmost point in the mainland United States. Fort Poinsett was erected here in the 1830s in an effort to prevent Seminole Indians from obtaining arms from Spanish fishermen, but traces of the log fort have vanished.

7. East Cape Sable (ENP) to Flamingo (ENP), 10 miles

Flamingo will likely be a welcome break after six or seven days of paddling. The park service manages a campground and a small store is adjacent to the landing. Canoe and kayak rentals are also available. The campground is about a mile before the marina and is accessible by water at high tide. At low tide, you might have to wade through mud. Reservations should be made ahead of time online or by calling 1-855-708-2207.

Flamingo, named in 1893 for the colorful flamingo birds that once arrived in great numbers from Cuba and the Bahamas, is an isolated town and was formerly only accessible by water. It is notorious for flying insect life during the warm months and early residents relied upon smoldering smudge pots inside their homes and even under baby carriages. When a scarcely passable road was built to Flamingo in 1922, one resident joked, "There were fewer people than ever at Flamingo. They had found a way to get out."

8. Flamingo (ENP) to Little Rabbit Key (ENP), 13 miles

At this point, it is possible to select the Mainland Alternate Route from Flamingo to Miami that for the most part hugs the mainland shoreline. If weather conditions are inclement with winds out of the west or north, this may be a more sheltered option. If weather conditions improve then you can consider rejoining the original Segment 15 route skirting along the 'outside' of the Keys.

Make sure to check the weather forecast at the Flamingo Visitor's Center before embarking. Even though Florida Bay is shallow, you'll be entering the most expansive stretch of open water on the entire trail. For a safer and slightly longer passage, you might want to follow the banks and shallow flats outlined on your navigational charts. Avoid

getting too close to fishing boats poling in the shallows as anglers are often sight-fishing for bonefish, permit, and tarpon on these flats.

A chickee campsite on stilts with a portable toilet near Johnson Key is available about halfway to Rabbit Key, a half-mile off the route (see map). There is also a chickee campsite on stilts near Shark Point 7.5 miles east of Flamingo. From this campsite, it is about 20 miles to Tavernier or Nest Key if following the Alternate Mainland Route. These chickees are attractive to a number of bird species and as a result, the platforms may be covered with their droppings. Bring along a piece of plastic or tarp to establish your tent site.

The clarity of the water around Little Rabbit Key has been described as stunning, and you'll be able to glimpse numerous fish, crabs, and other aquatic creatures. There is no sandy beach at Little Rabbit Key. Tent sites are behind a small dock on the northwest side.

9. Little Rabbit Key (ENP) to Long Key State Park, 14.5 miles

From Little Rabbit Key, you'll have a long stretch of open water paddling broken only by small mangrove islands. Long Key sticks out like a huge boot. Early Spaniards called it "Cayo Vivora," which means Viper Key because its shape is said to resemble a snake with open jaws. At Long Key Point, you'll connect with the Florida Keys Overseas Paddling Trail (Segment 15).

Camping is on the Atlantic side of Long Key State Park where you can reserve one of the park's 60 scenic campsites in the campground (all bordering the Atlantic Ocean). You must make reservations well in advance for the regular campground, but you can call the park headquarters for reserving one of the four primitive tent sites: (305) 664-4815. The park also offers nature trails, an observation tower, and a marked paddling trail through a mangrove paradise (just over a mile in length).

Note: due to Hurricane Irma, the Long Key State Park campground is closed for reconstruction, but the four walk-in tent sites are available. Check the state park website for updates.