



# 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

**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.

**IMPORTANT:** The segment from Everglades City to Flamingo is the longest stretch along the circumnavigational 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 enroute.

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 backcountry permits and local information visit or call the [Gulf Coast Visitor Center](#) at Everglades City, (239) 695-3311. The lobby at the [Flamingo Visitor Center](#) can be accessed 24 hours for backcountry site self-registration during the summer season. Call 239-695-2945. These two visitor's centers are currently the only places where camping permits can be obtained.

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 Ten Thousand Islands. 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 co-exist. Bird life 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 resembles a two-bladed crosscut saw.

Unfortunately, to the detriment of many native creatures in Florida Bay, pumps, floodgates and retention ponds outside the park now largely control the Everglades' life-giving fresh water supply. A multi-billion dollar restoration plan will hopefully fix some of the problems, along with improved timing of water releases.

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 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 Ten Thousand Islands to Flamingo 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, 9 miles**

Before you can camp in the national park, you must obtain a permit at the Visitor's Center in Everglades City (see map) and pay a small fee. Everglades National Park takes no advance reservations by phone; you must arrive in person up to 24 hours in advance of your planned first night's campsite. Plan to have alternate campsites in mind in case your first choices are full. Some campsites have portable toilets while others do not, so plan accordingly.

Since camping at the Flamingo Campground is not part of the permit system, you'll need to make separate [reservations](#) online or call Flamingo Adventures at 1-855-708-2207.

For the long-distance paddler arriving from Whitehorse Key, it is 14 miles to Everglades City so you'll need to spend the night in Everglades City. There is a grocery store and numerous motels and cabin rentals, some of which are accessible by water. Advanced reservations are recommended. The historic Rod & Gun Club is worth visiting for a meal or overnight stay, there is no website so call (239) 695-210. The [Museum of the Everglades](#) in downtown Everglades City is worth a visit, open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

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 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 to Turkey Key, 11.5 miles**

You can take a direct open water route to Pavilion Key and beyond, or you can duck behind mangrove islands in order 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 to Highland Beach, 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 to Graveyard Creek, 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.

#### **5: Graveyard Creek to Northwest Cape Sable, 11 miles**

At low tide, the mouth of Graveyard Creek can be a mud flat, so 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 of 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 sable 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 to East Cape Sable, 9.5 miles**

The sharp point at Middle Cape, roughly the halfway point, was once the site of a 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 luck, 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 to Flamingo, 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 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 number 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 to Little Rabbit Key, 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 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 through Reserve America. 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, Long Key State Park campsites are closed for reconstruction through 2019 and possibly beyond. Check state park website for updates.**