

STATE TRAIL SYSTEM

Introduction



NORTHEAST DISTRICT TRAIL SYSTEM

The Northeast District (District 2) of the Florida Park Service contains four state land trails and a designated paddling trail that connects a system of paddling campsites along the Suwannee River. The five trails include:

- Nature Coast State Trail
- Gainesville-to-Hawthorne State Trail
- Palatka-to-Lake Butler State Trail
- Withlacoochee State Trail
- Suwannee River Wilderness Trail

The four land trails serve as subregional connections within northeast Florida. Further afield, the Withlacoochee and Palatka-to-Lake Butler State Trails continue into adjacent park service districts, including District 3, which encompasses the Central Atlantic Coast and much of Central Florida, and District 4, which encompasses coastal Southwest Florida and much of interior South Florida.

NORTHEAST FLORIDA LAND TRAILS

Nature Coast State Trail

The Nature Coast State Trail branches in three directions from a junction in the unincorporated community of Wilcox, which is situated just north of the town of Fanning Springs and east of the Suwannee River, near the Levy-Dixie County line. The western fork of the trail crosses the Suwannee River at the historic Suwannee River Trestle Bridge and continues along US Highway 19/27/98 to the Dixie County seat of Cross City. The southern fork of the state trail branches in a southeastern direction along U.S. Highway 19/27/98 toward its southern terminus in Levy's largest town, the local transportation hub of Chiefland. The eastern fork of the trail follows State Highway 26 to the Gilchrist County seat of Trenton; the paved section terminates in Depot Park on the north end of downtown Trenton. An equestrian trail parallels 4.5 miles of the paved trail from Old Town to Fanning Springs.

The Nature Coast State Trail provides an opportunity for an immersive long-distance trail experience in the southern reaches of the Florida Big Bend Region. The Suwannee River, the cornerstone of regional cultural and transport history, represents the gateway between the Big Bend Region to the northwest and the Nature Coast region to the south. In the early 1900s, area railroads began to replace Suwannee River steamships and barges as the most efficient way to move freight and passengers through the river valley. Trail visitors may retrace the historic route of the Atlantic Coastline Railroad, which operated from 1901 to 1967. The historic Suwannee River Trestle Bridge and historic railroad depots in the Dixie, Gilchrist, and Levy County hubs of Cross City, Trenton, and Chiefland, add interpretive context to long-distance cycling excursions. The rail depot in Chiefland is now utilized for the Chiefland Train Depot Museum, while the depots in Trenton and Cross City have been targeted by local chambers of commerce as civic event venues and potential regional tourism centers. After crossing the Suwannee River, the trail also passes the main entrance to Fanning Springs State Park. In Chiefland, State Highway 320 to the west provides access to Manatee Springs State Park on the Suwannee Riverfront.

The most historically and architecturally significant site along the trail is the red steel Suwannee River Railroad Trestle Bridge, or Drew Bridge. Built in the early 1900s to shuttle people and goods across one of the largest rivers in Florida, the 1,335-foot bridge operated with a 150-foot plate girder swing span, allowing steamboats to pass beneath. The swing span was manually rotated with a key placed in the gear above a round pier and horses or donkeys were used to help open the bridge.

A cornerstone of Florida's Greenways and Trails System, Nature Coast Trail has also been designated as a national recreation trail. As funding becomes available, the trail will extend approximately nine miles east from Trenton toward the Alachua County town of Newberry. An ideal future extension would connect the Nature Coast Trail, following extension to Newberry, to the Gainesville-to-Hawthorne State Trail and the constellation of state parks surrounding the City of Gainesville, especially Dudley Farm Historic State Park and Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park.

Gainesville-to-Hawthorne State Trail

The Gainesville-to-Hawthorne State Trail connects Boulware Springs Park on the south end of Gainesville to the City of Hawthorne, 16 miles to the east. The western reaches of the trail follow the North Rim of Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park and pass the Sweetwater Overlook, seven-tenths of a mile into the trip, where the waters of Sweetwater Branch and Bivens Arm enter the Paynes Prairie Basin. After leaving the Paynes Prairie area, the trail loosely parallels State Highway 20, passing through several neighboring conservation areas managed by the St. Johns Water Management District. As it travels east, the trail passes through the unincorporated hamlet of Rochelle before terminating on the south end of the City of Hawthorne. The paved trail is paralleled by a grass equestrian trail for its entire length.

Interpretive panels along the trail highlight the history and significance of the area, which was once centered around citrus groves and the establishment of new rail lines. The City of Gainesville's establishment at this location during a picnic in 1854 was also closely tied to new and planned railroad lines. The Alachua County seat was eventually relocated to Gainesville due to the frenzy of new railroad construction.

In 1892, the city purchased Boulware Springs for \$2,500 and built a pumphouse that supplied up to 300,000 gallons daily; the pumphouse is still standing at Boulware Springs Park, managed by the City of Gainesville, at the trail's western terminus. An 1890s-era attraction at Boulware Springs included a zoo, dance pavilion, and a rollercoaster.

Palatka-to-Lake Butler Trail

The Palatka-to-Lake Butler Trail is currently under construction and partially complete. Several remaining sections require paving as of late 2023, especially the section of the trail west of U.S. Highway 301. The western end of the current trail boundary is situated in downtown Lake Butler. The current state trail boundary follows a southeastern bearing, continuing south of Lake Sampson toward the City of Hampton. From Hampton, a connection to the next community along the trail, Keystone Heights, will require close cooperation with the Florida Department of Transportation, as an overpass will be required to cross U.S. Highway 301, a major divided highway that connects Jacksonville to Gainesville and Ocala. In downtown Keystone Heights, Clay County manages the portion of the trail that passes through the city, as well as a spur trail that follows State Highway 21 northeast to Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park. East of Keystone Heights, the trail is fully paved, passing through the communities of Lake Geneva, Putnam Hall, Grandin, and Florahome before arriving at its current eastern terminus, which is situated roughly three miles west of downtown Palatka. When complete, the trail will offer a continuous cycling experience through rural northeast Florida.

The trail will fill a recreational opportunity gap between Jacksonville and Gainesville, and its establishment and ongoing construction has been well-received by this Northeast Florida region due to the enhanced quality of life and economic benefits that the towns and villages in the area are slated to incur. The trail corridor stretches roughly 47 miles along a former Norfolk-Southern Railroad right-of-

way through Putnam, Clay, Bradford, and Union counties. Purchased with Preservation 2000 funds through the Florida Greenways and Trails Acquisition Program, the Rails to Trails Conservancy played a key role in preserving the corridor for conversion to a rail-trail. It was designated as part of the Florida Greenways and Trails System in 2007 and paving is underway segment-by-segment thanks to the efforts of the Florida Department of Transportation.

Withlacoochee State Trail

The Withlacoochee State Trail is a well-developed, interpreted, and maintained paved corridor paralleling the eastern edge of the rolling Brooksville Ridge formation, stretching for 45 miles from the community of Citrus Springs in northern Citrus County to the historical crossroads of Owensboro in northeastern Pasco County. From the Gulf Junction Trailhead in Citrus Springs, the paved trail follows U.S. Highway 41 south through the community of Hernando into Inverness, the seat of Citrus County on the shores of Lakes Tsala Apopka and Henderson. The Inverness Trailhead at Liberty Park, just north of the downtown core of Inverness, is a flagship trailhead and an ideal rest stop, with access to developed park facilities and easy access to downtown Inverness restaurants and shops. The City of Inverness is a designated Trail Town and indispensable partner to the Division of Parks and Recreation with respect to trail development, promotion, and maintenance.

Southward from Inverness, the trail provides direct access to Fort Cooper State Park before passing further south through the Old Florida communities of Floral City, Istachatta, Nobleton, and Trilby. Just northwest of Ridge Manor, motorists crisscrossing West-Central Florida on State Highway 50 encounter the Withlacoochee State Trail as it crosses overhead, occupying a prominent overpass toward its southern terminus in the historic community of Owensboro.

Terrain along the trail is generally flat, with mild undulations in terrain as it meanders along the edge of the Brooksville Ridge. With ample access points, the trail accommodates a wide range of recreational users of all fitness levels in an area of Florida that is seeing strong population growth and economic development. An unpaved equestrian trail also parallels portions of the paved trail. Officially designated as part of the Florida Greenways and Trail System, the trail is also designated as a national recreation trail.

Complementary recreational opportunity areas near the state trail include hiking at Fort Cooper State Park and the Withlacoochee State Forest and canoeing along the Withlacoochee River (South) Paddling Trail. Swimming at first-magnitude Rainbow Springs and exploring the Marjorie Harris-Carr Cross Florida Greenway are recreational opportunities in close proximity to the state trail.

Near the town of Dunnellon, just north of the Withlacoochee River and immediately over the Marion County line, the Cross-Florida Greenway is oriented westward toward Lake Rousseau and the Gulf of Mexico, and eastward toward Ocala and Silver Springs State Park. Historic Rainbow Springs State Park lies just north of Dunnellon and the Cross-Florida Greenway. Logical future paved trail connections exist between all three conservation units; achievement of this goal would be a major development for the regional economy.

NORTHEAST DISTRICT PADDLING TRAILS

Suwannee River Wilderness Trail

The Suwannee River Wilderness Trail is maintained and supported through a cooperative effort between the Division of Parks & Recreation, the Suwannee River Water Management District, and local governments. Big Shoals State Park is the optimal northern launch point, allowing paddlecraft access to five downstream river camps, including Holton Creek, Woods Ferry, Dowling Park, Peacock Slough, and Adams Tract. These five river camps, situated on Suwannee River Water Management District property but managed by the Florida Park Service, include screened, elevated sleeping platforms and restroom facilities that allow for comfortable overnight camping at optimal rest intervals for paddlers.

The platforms accommodate up to eight individuals and include ceiling fans, electrical outlets, hammock hooks, a small seat, and a small table. Spigots with potable water, hot showers, grills, picnic tables, picnic pavilions, and fire rings are also available. Each camp is situated approximately 10 miles from established parks and campgrounds. The Division of Recreation and Parks, Office of Greenways and Trails, offers a thorough online paddling guide and charts boat ramp locations with corresponding river mileages. Several local paddling outfitters are available along the Suwannee River for gear and transportation arrangements.

Further afield, wilderness trail “hubs” complement the five officially designated river camps, allowing paddlers to complete an epic journey from Big Shoals State Park to the mouth of the Suwannee River on the Gulf Coast. Wilderness trail hubs include Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park, Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park, Suwannee River State Park, the Advent Christian Village in Dowling Park, Lafayette Blue Springs State Park, and the towns of White Springs, Branford, Fanning Springs, and Suwannee. Troy Spring State Park, Gornto Springs Park (managed by Gilchrist County), Hart Springs Park (managed by Dixie County), Fanning Springs State Park, Manatee Springs State Park, and Anderson’s Landing (managed from Manatee Springs State Park) are also worthwhile stops further south along the paddling route.

Other Designated Paddling Trails in Northeast Florida

The Suwannee River Wilderness Trail is the sole paddling trail in Northeast Florida that serves as a component of one of the Florida Park Service’s 175 state park and trail units. However, several other designated paddling trails, through inland freshwater and maritime saltwater, are available throughout the Northeast District.

Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

The Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail (or “CT”) follows the entire length of Florida’s coastline, extending into the Florida Bay, Gulf of Mexico, and Straits of Florida as it loops around Key West. The trail route extends 1,515 miles between Big Lagoon State Park in the western Florida Panhandle to Fort Clinch State Park on the Florida-Georgia border, at the mouth of the St. Marys River.

The paddling trail is delineated into 26 segments that pass white-sand beaches in the Florida Panhandle, salt marsh in the Florida Big Bend Region, and hundreds of miles of mangrove islands. These coastal natural communities are interspersed with urban coastal settings, especially in the Tampa Bay and Miami-Fort Lauderdale metropolitan areas. The Florida Park Service’s Office of Greenways and Trails

maintains paddling guides and data for each of the 26 trail segments and continues to ensure that the trail remains a long-term strategic priority for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Eighty Florida State Parks and 20 national parks, national seashores, national wildlife refuges, and national marine sanctuaries are situated along the route, as well as 39 state-administered aquatic preserves. The trail is maintained and supported through the efforts of federal, state, and local government agencies; private businesses; and paddling clubs and volunteers.

Further afield, the route extends into Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia as part of the Southeast Coast Saltwater Paddling Trail.

Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail

Between Aucilla in the Panhandle in Yankeetown at the southern end of Waccasassa Bay, the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail meanders for 160 miles along one of the longest conserved stretches of coastal wetlands in the United States. Avian and aquatic wildlife is abundant along the route, especially eagles, ospreys, pelicans, wading shorebirds, fish, sea turtles, rays, and marine mammals.

The trail's northern 105 miles from Aucilla to the Suwannee River are managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, while the 55 miles between Suwannee and Yankeetown feature Shell Mound Park, managed by Levy County, and three primitive paddling campsites within Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park.

Steinhatchee Blueway

The Steinhatchee Blueway follows the blackwater Steinhatchee along the Taylor-Dixie County line, meandering for roughly 7 miles past limestone outcrops and Steinhatchee Falls in its upper reaches. The river widens significantly as it approaches the Gulf of Mexico. The lower reaches of the river can be significantly affected by incoming and outgoing tides. The paddling trail is appropriate for all skill levels. Excellent fishing opportunities are available on the Steinhatchee.

Withlacoochee River North Paddling Trail

The tannin-rich, spring-fed Withlacoochee River of the North meanders through Twin Rivers State Forest, slowly flowing southward toward its confluence with the Suwannee River. The trail passes Madison Blue Spring State Park before ending at the Suwannee River State Park boat ramp. Suwannee River State Park is a hub on the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, complete with a campground and cabins. A few limited areas of shoals are encountered, but portaging is not required if river levels are above 54 feet.

Withlacoochee River South Paddling Trail

With its source in the Green Swamp wetland northwest of Lakeland, the Withlacoochee River of the South meanders through a relatively undeveloped stretch of the state characterized by sandhill, intermittent lakes, and impressive cypress stands. Much of the river is canopied by surrounding forest. The paddling trail stretches for 76 miles along three sections with multiple access points.

Ichetucknee River Paddling Trail

The put-in for this highly scenic designated trail is located just south of the primary headspring in Ichetucknee Springs State Park. Nine springs feed the river, which remains at a constant 72 degrees. The trail continues for three miles and offers a quieter experience during the cooler months, between

October and April. Restrictions on access and food and beverage possession are in place; interested persons are urged to contact the park in advance.

After the river leaves Ichetucknee Springs State Park, rapids are encountered near the U.S. Highway 27 bridge. Two miles south of the park boundary, the Ichetucknee joins the Santa Fe River. Logjams, overhanging trees, and heavy boat traffic on the Santa Fe River may be encountered further south.

Santa Fe River Paddling Trail

The spring-fed Santa Fe River flows through scenic hardwood forests and several wetland areas in route to its confluence with the Suwannee River south of Branford. The 26-mile paddling route passes through several conservation areas and near several significant springs, including Poe Springs Park, Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park, Rum Island Springs Park, Ginnie Springs Park, and the Gilchrist County Santa Fe River Park. Camping is permitted on Suwannee River Water Management District properties at no charge, though paddlers must contact the local office in advance.

Potano Paddling Trail

The Potano Paddling Trail follows the shores of Newnans Lake, the largest lake in the Gainesville area, and continues south of Florida State Highway 20 (Hawthorne Road) along Prairie Creek until it reaches County Road 234, the eastern boundary of Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park. A full circumnavigation of the lake totals just over 11 miles, while traversing Prairie Creek to County Road 234 requires a roughly 4-mile paddle.

Several conservation lands surround the shores of Newnans Lake and protect its scenic shoreline cypress stands, including the Newnans Lake Conservation Area, Newnans Lake State Forest, Palm Point Park, Earl P. Powers Park, and Owens-Illinois County Park.

St. Johns River Blueway

The St. Johns River Blueway begins in the river's headwaters in western Brevard County, with a popular put-in location on State Highway 50 west of Titusville. The "Upper Basin" requires wayfinding through a winding maze of slow-moving river channels that traverse wetlands and agricultural pastures. The north-flowing river then enters its Middle Basin, marked by the presence of springs (including Blue Spring State Park), then the open waters of Lake George.

The paddling trail enters the Northeast District south of Jacksonville as it passes into the Lower St. Johns Basin, characterized by a broad estuary that enters urban central Jacksonville. Crossing beneath several landmark bridges, including the Buckman, Hart, and Matthews spans, the route splits the high-rise skyscrapers in downtown Jacksonville, passing the city's football stadium, massive oceangoing cargo ships at the Port of Jacksonville, and Mayport Naval Station. The river empties into the Atlantic Ocean in between Mayport, on the south bank, and Huguenot Park, on the north bank. Huguenot Park is an ideal location to end the paddling journey.

St. Marys River Paddling Trail

Similar to the Suwannee River, the source of the St. Marys River is found in Okefenokee Swamp, from which it meanders south, then east, then north, then east again into the Atlantic Ocean between Amelia Island and Cumberland Island, two Atlantic Sea Islands that are situated on either side of the Florida-Georgia border. The designated paddling trail meanders for 60 miles until it reaches its broad estuary, which also receives the Cumberland Sound from the north.

Impressive hardwood forests and snow-white sandbars line the tannin-rich river, which is noted for bream, catfish, and bass. The center of the channel forms the border between Georgia and Florida. Utilizing an outfitter is recommended due to the remote locations of many viable put-ins. Water levels may be especially low in the river's southernmost bend, north of Macclenny in Baker County.

FUTURE CORRIDORS AND CONNECTIONS

The state trail system in the Northeast District is best interpreted as one component of a larger statewide network of land and paddling trails. Multiple state and federal government agencies and private organizations cooperate to bridge gaps between long-distance trails, with a common long-term vision to allow non-motorized cycling and pedestrian movement across the state in a safe and environmentally sustainable manner. The four land trails in Northeast Florida; the Nature Coast State Trail, the Gainesville-to-Hawthorne State Trail, the Palatka-to-Lake Butler State Trail, and the Withlacoochee State Trail, are all units of a larger network of a constellation of trails that are managed and constructed through the efforts of both government agencies and private organizations. The Suwannee River Wilderness Trail and its designated, meticulously mapped paddling corridor forms a natural connection to additional designated paddling trails within the district and further afield, including the Florida Saltwater Circumnavigational Paddling Trail, the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail, the Santa Fe River Paddling Trail, the Ichetucknee River Paddling Trail, and the Steinhatchee Blueway.

Gulf Coast Region

Within the district's Gulf Coast Region, connections between the Withlacoochee State Trail and other existing paved trails further afield remain the subject of large-scale planning discussions. The northern terminus of the Withlacoochee State Trail also serves as the southern terminus of the Withlacoochee-Dunnellon Connector Trail, which meanders through residential subdivisions in the community of Citrus Springs before tunnelling beneath the US Highway 41 roadway. The trail continues northeast, traversing a bridge crossing the stunning cypress-lined Withlacoochee River, before entering Blue Run of Dunnellon Park. The connector trail continues east before terminating adjacent to a tract of the Cross-Florida Greenway. A gap of approximately nine miles lies to the east between Blue Run of Dunnellon Park and State Highway 200, where a paved trail continues to the Santos Trailhead of the Cross-Florida Greenway in the southern exurbs of Ocala. A direct connection between Dunnellon and the Santos Trailhead would offer an additional 23 miles of continuous paved trail in addition to the Withlacoochee State Trail's 45 miles.

From its northern terminus near the Marion-Citrus County line, the Withlacoochee State Trail extends well into Pasco County (Park Service District 4 - Southwest), running roughly parallel to the Suncoast Trail, 12 miles to the west, and the General James Van Fleet State Trail, roughly 16 miles to the east.

The Suncoast Trail runs for 55 miles between Lecanto and the northwestern Tampa exurbs, following State Toll Highway 589, the Suncoast Parkway, for its entire length. The Van Fleet State Trail begins at State Highway 50 near the community of Mabel and continues for an additional 29 miles to the south, through Sumter, Lake, and Polk counties until terminating near Polk City. These two trails, along with the Withlacoochee State Trail, represent three parallel long-distance trails that offer prime, intimate viewing of broad swaths of West-Central Florida.

Establishing connections between the Withlacoochee State Trail, the Suncoast Trail, and the Van Fleet State Trail have already been initiated. At the Croom Trailhead of the Withlacoochee State Trail in the heart of the Withlacoochee National Forest, the Good Neighbor Trail provides a direct spur from the Withlacoochee State Trail to downtown Brooksville, 10 miles to the west. In the City of Brooksville, the

Good Neighbor Trail terminates near the 1885 Brooksville Train Depot, which has been restored as a historical museum, complete with model trains. The establishment of the Good Neighbor Trail provided direct access for the citizens of Brooksville to the Withlacoochee State Trail and brought significant civic excitement following its grand opening in 2019.

The Suncoast Trail and Good Neighbor Trails are also key segments of the Florida Coast-to-Coast Trail, a conceptual paved multi-use trail that is slated to cross the State of Florida from St. Petersburg, on the Gulf of Mexico, to the City of Titusville on the Atlantic Space Coast. After all gaps in the trail have been completely paved, it will become the first state trail of its kind in the United States, spanning approximately 250 miles. The trail will link communities and allow residents and visitors to intimately explore the Suncoast, Central Florida, and the Space Coast. This corridor includes the majority of the 51-mile East Central Regional Rail Trail, the longest single rail-trail corridor ever acquired by the Office of Greenways and Trails. When complete, the trail will be managed by a broad range of state and local community government agencies.

North Florida Highlands Region

The eastern terminus of the Palatka-to-Lake Butler Trail is situated in close proximity to the western end of the Palatka-to-St. Augustine Trail, which connects East Palatka, on the east bank of the St. Johns River, to historic St. Augustine and nearby Anastasia State Park. Partially bridging the gap between the two state trails, the Palatka Urban Trail allows cyclists and pedestrians easy access to central Palatka, including a dedicated bicycle and pedestrian lane that crosses the expansive St. Johns River by utilizing US Highway 17 and Palatka's Memorial Bridge. Trail gaps remain between Hampton and Lake Butler, as well as Interstate 95 and St. Augustine, and prioritizing additional acquisitions and paving trails through these corridors should remain a priority of the Florida Park Service.

Establishing further connections to the Palatka-to-Lake Butler State Trail by acquiring and paving gaps between Keystone Heights and Gainesville or Florahome and Hawthorne would allow for a journey between Florida's First Coast in St. Augustine (via the Palatka-to-St. Augustine Trail) and the Gainesville area. Paved trail connections within the City of Gainesville are extensive and heavily utilized by the dynamic and vibrant local community. Gainesville is a designated Trail Town, as the Downtown Connector Trail allows bicycle and pedestrian access between the heart of downtown Gainesville, Depot Park, the Gainesville-to-Hawthorne State Trail, and Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park. West of Depot Park, the University of Florida Campus Greenway provides a direct paved trail connection to the heart of the university campus. Northeast of Depot Park, which has blossomed into a major trail hub, the Waldo Road Greenway follows State Highway 24 into northeastern Gainesville, oriented in the direction of the towns of Waldo and Keystone Heights. A direct paved trail connection between Gainesville and Keystone Heights would allow for a multi-day cycling adventure between Gainesville and Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park. To the southwest, the Archer Braid Trail begins in the Gainesville suburbs and follows State Highway 24 (Archer Road) southwest to the town of Archer.

Suwannee River Region

The Nature Coast State Trail is currently the most prominent long-distance trail in the Suwannee River Region. Crossing the Suwannee River via the Suwannee River Historic Railroad Trestle Bridge, the trail continues to the Dixie County seat of Cross City, terminating just beyond the historic Cross City Railroad Depot. To the east, the trail connects the Suwannee River Region to Levy County small towns and attractions, including Manatee Springs and Fanning Springs state parks.

The Office of Greenways and Trails maintains "Priority Corridors", potential trail corridors that are targeted for paved trail construction prioritization. A northwestern extension of the Nature Coast State

Trail toward the Taylor County seat of Perry would require a 41-mile extension to the state trail but would offer some of the most remote long-distance cycling in the State of Florida, as only the unincorporated communities of Tennille, Salem, and Athena lie in the lengthy stretch of U.S. Highway 19/27/98 between Perry and Cross City.

Perhaps the most enticing trail extension in the Suwannee River Region would entail a direct connection from the Suwannee River Region into the North Florida Highlands Region, connecting the communities of White Springs, Lake City, and Lake Butler. As advocated by the Suwannee Bicycle Association, a trail connection between Stephen Foster Culture Center State Park, the City of White Springs, and Big Shoals State Park would represent a significant economic boon to the region by attracting throngs of cyclists and long-distance trail enthusiasts. The paved Woodpecker Trail connects the Little Shoals and Big Shoals tracts of Big Shoals State Park. A westward extension of the Woodpecker Trail through White Springs to Stephen Foster Culture Center State Park has the potential to transform White Springs into a cycling mecca, allowing trail users to experience a historic state park, a historic North Florida small town, and dramatic whitewater rapids on the wild and scenic Suwannee River. A southeastern paved trail extension toward Lake City and Lake Butler would open even more long-distance trail connections that would ultimately connect White Springs to historic St. Augustine.

Atlantic Coast Region

There are currently no state trail units in Duval or Nassau, the two counties that comprise the Atlantic Coast Region. Several state parks in the Atlantic Coast Region, including Little Talbot Island, Big Talbot Island, George Crady Fishing Pier, and Amelia Island, are served by the Timucuan Trail, which parallels State Highway A1A. Other paved trails are present in the Jacksonville metropolitan area, including the Jacksonville-Baldwin Rail Trail in western Duval County, and the Black Creek Trail and Doctors Lake Drive Bike Path, both of which serve residents of suburban Jacksonville in northern Clay County. Future plans for connecting Duval and Nassau counties to the broader state trails system would require trail connections to the south and southwest, with Lake Butler, Keystone Heights, and St. Augustine as potential destinations for connecting trails with the Jacksonville metropolitan area.

Trail Network Programs and Organizations

Florida Greenways and Trails Council

The Florida Greenways and Trails Council was enshrined into Florida Law to advise the Florida Department of Environmental Protection on greenway and trail topics, promote cooperation between various government agencies, support private trail development partnerships, identify and recommend trail linkage priorities, and provide recommendations regarding funding. The Division of Recreation & Parks' Office of Greenways and Trails participates in regular meetings with the council.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

The national "Rail-Trail Movement" is spearheaded by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, established in 1986 to highlight the benefits and impacts of trails on local communities. The organization also highlights the passionate advocacy of trail supporters at a national level. The organization assists in securing funding, provides advanced interactive trail network mapping, and works directly with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Florida Department of Transportation to continue developing Florida's paved trail network.

Florida Shared-Use Non-Motorized (SUN) Trail Program

The Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) administers the Florida Shared-Use Nonmotorized (SUN) Trail Program. Established in 2015, the program receives funding from the State Transportation

Trust Fund, which is generated from fees for new vehicle registrations. Funding is geared toward developing paved, non-motorized two-directional paths for pedestrians and cyclists, physically separated from vehicular traffic. Funds are then distributed through a system of competitive solicitation. Both existing and conceptual corridors are included in the SUN Trail program. SUN Trail corridors are classified as either “on-system”, within a DOT right-of-way, or “off-system”, which traverse other lands.

The SUN Trail Program is closely aligned to the Florida Greenways and Trails System’s (FGTS) Land Trail Priority Network, overseen by the Department of Environmental Protection’s Office of Greenways and Trail (OGT). Establishment of wildlife corridors through the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act, when possible, is prioritized. The Florida Wildlife Corridor is a system of conservation lands within the Florida Ecological Greenways Network that prioritizes ecological connections between public and private conservation lands. The corridor is utilized to identify connected ecological landscapes within Florida Forever’s Rural and Family Lands Protection Programs

Florida Paddling Trails Association

The Florida Paddling Trails Association (FPTA) is a volunteer non-profit organization that was established in 2007. On their webpage, the association maintains a Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail (CT) "CT Hall of Fame"; inductees have completed the CT in its entirety. The FPTA website also includes paddling blogs and trip reports. FPTA coordinates the activities of volunteer “Trail Angels”, who provide goods and necessities to paddlers at strategic locations along the trail route.

FLORIDA NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

The congressionally designated Florida National Scenic Trail is one of 11 National Scenic Trails in the United States and stretches for approximately 1,500 miles across the Florida Panhandle and Peninsula. Divided into Panhandle, Northern, Central, and Southern Districts by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service, more than 30 land managers cooperate to maintain the trail. Volunteers are vital to trail maintenance and marketing, especially those affiliated with the Florida Trail Association. The association was formed in the 1960s, leading to the trail’s first blaze appearing in the Ocala National Forest in 1966 and its 1983 official designation as a National Scenic Trail. The association is also instrumental in providing informative public literature regarding the trail, including paper maps and Google Earth and ArcGIS data files.

The northwestern terminus of the trail is situated just east of Fort Pickens on the western end of Santa Rosa Island within Gulf Islands National Seashore. It meanders east through the Florida Panhandle, looping north of Eglin Air Force base, passing through the Apalachicola National Forest and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge before entering the Northeast District in western Taylor County.

The Florida National Scenic Trail passes through a multitude of state park units in the Northeast District. Meandering along the banks of the Suwannee River, the trail passes through Suwannee River, Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center, and Big Shoals state parks before entering the Osceola National Forest and making a sweeping turn southward, further traversing Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park before meandering south to follow State Highway 100 and the Palatka-to-Lake Butler Trail southeastward.

Near the City of Keystone Heights, the trail winds through the sandhill in the southern portions of Camp Blanding, the primary training center for the Florida National Guard. After crossing State Highway 21 to enter Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park, the trail meanders through the park’s pristine sandhill natural community, allowing for a quiet stop at the Devil’s Washbasin, an ancient, scenic sandhill lake in park’s backcountry.

From Gold Head Branch State Park, the trail dives south again, leaving the Northeast District and rejoining the Palatka-to-Lake Butler Trail briefly before entering the Ocala National Forest and District 3 of the Florida Park Service. In following the Marjorie Harris-Carr Cross-Florida Greenway westward, the trail re-enters the Northeast District south of Ocala, this time in the Gulf Coast Region, reaching the outskirts of Dunnellon before turning southward to follow the Withlacoochee State Trail between the Gulf Junction Trailhead and Inverness. From Inverness, the trail veers into the Withlacoochee State Forest, meandering atop the Brooksville Ridge and briefly reconnecting with the Withlacoochee State Trail at the Florida Trail/Croom Rest Stop and Ridge Manor Trailhead.

South of Ridge Manor, the Florida National Scenic Trail exits the Northeast District and continues through the Green Swamp eastward into Central Florida, before turning southward again near Kissimmee toward Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, Lake Okeechobee, and its southeastern terminus at the Tamiami Trail (U.S. Highway 41) in Big Cypress National Preserve.

The Florida Park Service will continue to work with the U.S. Forest Service and Florida Trail Association to maintain, support, and highlight the nationally acclaimed Florida National Scenic Trail, a critical link in Florida's system of greenways and trails.