

BEAR ISLAND in the Big Cypress Off-Road Cycle Tour



The following is an article by FROGG Board Member Dayna Fendrick (*photo shown above is Dana with her husband Andrew taken by her sister Tara Saathoff-Wells*)

For those who want to get off the beaten path, or off the urban bike lane, Bear Island offers a chance to experience a variety of beautiful Everglades' ecosystems and trail conditions.

Bear Island is a 38,000 acre unit of the Big Cypress National Preserve, managed by the National Park Service. There are two access points; one is off of SR 29, 4 miles north of I-75.

There is a gate on the east side of the road which is usually unlocked. Pass through this gate, and there is a second vehicular gate which is locked, unless you have a permit. There is a person/bike gate which is always open. Park here, and take care to not block the private driveway. The second access is off of Turner River Road, 21 miles north of US 41 – this is a lime-rock road; be prepared for dust! There is a Ranger shack at the entry and you can park here – pull off so you don't block the gate.

Primitive camping and hunting is allowed within the Preserve; if you want to do more than a day trip, be sure to fill out a backcountry permit and pay for your campsite, many of which are very scenic and have nice big Live Oaks for shade. Primitive restrooms are also available at the campgrounds. Be aware of the hunting seasons, and be sure to wear high visibility attire if you visit during hunting season! We rode during turkey season and had positive interactions with several hunters (one friendly young fellow found and returned my lost cell phone!). It is recommended that you fill out a backcountry permit even for a day trip of biking – just in case NPS needs to do a sweep of the area in the evening to account for folks who have not returned to their vehicles.

The trails are lime-rock road, with several alternative sections and routes. You can vary the length of the ride from 10-20+ miles depending on which segments you choose to ride. Mountain bikes or hybrids are best suited for this terrain. Your skills for dodging potholes will improve as the day goes on. It is advised to do this in the dry season, as it is quite wet during the rainy season.

The trails traverse a variety of natural ecosystems, with shaded sections of Cypress wetlands & adjacent canals, other areas of open

prairies and some Pine Flatwood/Live Oak uplands. Expect to see wildlife – on our first trip, we spotted a Florida Panther on the trail ahead – he saw us and just casually turned around and sauntered off into the woods' edge. Thrilling, as this was the first panther we had ever seen in over 30 years in South Florida!

You probably will also see lots of different birds, as well as gators sunning themselves along the shoulder, some of which you may come upon unexpectedly in which case our advice is to keep on riding! Pass as far away as possible, even though sometimes you don't even know they are there until too late!

The best parts of the trails are the ORV sections, which are really fun! This is where you get to test your mountain biking skills – lots of big wash-outs, gullies and ups & downs! The ground can quickly switch from mud to hard pack to soft sand, so picking a line, looking ahead, and keeping up momentum are skills that will keep you upright (most of the time). I ended up in the palmettos on one of these gullies! The easternmost trail includes a big hill, which we think was constructed as an ORV challenge; this provides an excellent vantage point to view miles out over the Glades. We opted not to go down the steep side of the hill; we'll save that for the next trip!

All in all, enjoy the beauty and diversity of the Everglades, and you can know that the few people you encounter also value and share the love of this unique environment.

The most up-to-date map of designated trails for all units of the preserve is available at: <https://www.nps.gov/bicy/planyourvisit/designated-trail-implementation.htm>. or call the Big Cypress Swamp Welcome Center at (239) 695-4758.

Trails along U.S. 41

There are many on and off-road options for hiking and bicycling through the various state and national parks.

Collier-Seminole State Park

An original stand of native royal palm trees, coexisting with one of the world's largest mangrove swamps, distinguishes this park; it is also the site of the historic Tamiami Trail "Walking Dredge".

<http://alturl.com/s6nof>

Ten Thousand Islands NWR

Established in 1996, this refuge protects important mangrove and marsh habitats and is the ultimate interface where land gradually gives way to the sea.

<http://alturl.com/dncvm>

Picayune Strand State Forest

Comprised of 78,000 acres, this is Florida's 4th largest state forest and named after the largest of several cypress strands that once occupied its eastern portion.

<http://alturl.com/ezsm8>

Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park

Swamps, prairies, tropical hardwood hammocks and pine rock lands with royal palms and bald cypress trees share the forest canopy with native orchids and bromeliad species. <http://alturl.com/j9ckk>

Big Cypress National Preserve

Big Cypress contains a mixture of tropical and temperate plant communities that harbor many protected species, including the elusive Florida panther.

<http://alturl.com/ma366>

Everglades National Park

The Park is dominated by the world renowned "River of Grass" freshwater prairies, tree islands, and many rare and endangered species.

<http://alturl.com/n2q73>

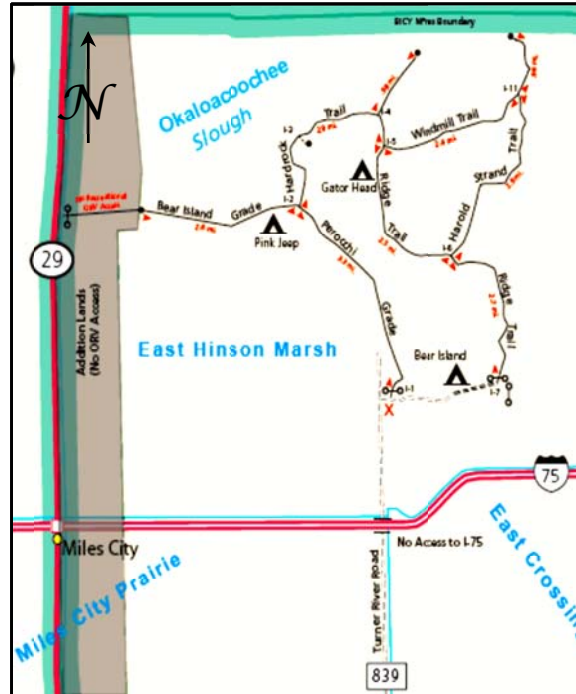
Bear Island in the Big Cypress National Preserve Cycle Tour

Distance: 10 to 20 miles

Bicycle Type: fat tire or hybrid

Road Conditions: dirt road

Level: intermediate



This map illustrates a bike route through the Everglades area. While every effort is made to provide accurate and timely information, keep in mind the bike routes are intended for informational purposes only. No guarantee is made regarding the bike route safety because conditions change. In addition, we cannot guarantee anyone's safety by conforming to safety tips. Please use good judgment and be responsible for your own safety at all times.
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Friends of the River of Grass Greenway

FROGG, a non-profit organization, is committed to establishing the safe use by the general public of US41 across the Everglades between Naples and Miami, focusing on safety and environmental education and stewardship for those hiking, walking, and cycling through south Florida and the Everglades.

www.evergladesrogg.org

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