



Corkscrew Swamp

Florida's Wild Landscapes

By Josephine Matyas and Craig Jones

It's not often the words "wilderness" and "Florida" collide in the same sentence. But they should. In a state known for drive-through fast foods, theme parks, pavement, and shopping malls, there are still a surprising number of easily accessible places protecting Florida's "wilder" landscapes. Many of them are fairly close to the Sunshine State's tourist magnets, making it easy for RV travellers to mix a natural stay with the more developed attractions. Many RVers we know turn their noses up at Florida as being overdeveloped, but we've learned that travelling by RV is actually the perfect way to experience the best of this warm and sunny southern state. It offers the flexibility to get away from the rampant development and connect with nature, find some peace and quiet, mix with the locals and enjoy the solitude of unfiltered night skies (yes, even Florida has some International Dark Sky Parks).

You'd never know it these days but before the developers started pounding in stakes and the condos sprouted up along beachfronts, much of Florida was a mix of swampland and prairie. In much of the state, the swamps were marked as areas of disease and decay, drained, logged bare, paved over and built upon, eventually squeezing out wildlife and their habitats.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a freshwater wetland fed solely by rainwater just northeast of Naples, protects almost 2,900 acres of pine flatwoods and the world's largest stand of sub-tropical, ancient bald cypress forest, where many of the tall conifers date back to the arrival of Columbus. Protected by the National Audubon Society, there are fantastic hiking trails, a four-km boardwalk, interpretive programs and world-class birding.



Sanibel Island



Paynes Prairie



St. George Island State Park

In the United States, 98 per cent of all ancient forests have been logged, so Corkscrew is a rare sub-tropical habitat of large trees, fallen logs and standing dead trees providing wildlife with food and shelter. It's a snapshot of what southwest Florida looked like before civilization took hold. This wooded sanctuary is home to the nation's largest collection of gangly wood storks. In addition to the endangered wood stork, the wetlands are home to more than 200 species, including barred owls, red-shouldered hawks, white ibis, egrets, herons and woodpeckers. It's part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail and a member of the Society for Ethical Ecotourism.

We were travelling in a 25-foot Class C rental and found a wonderful campsite about 50 km away at historic Koreshan State Historic Site just outside Fort Myers. There are 60 wooded sites, all with electricity and water and a shared dump station. The pet-friendly campground is also close to Sanibel and Captiva Islands, a short drive over the causeway.

More than two-thirds of **Sanibel Island** is a protected wildlife area, making it a birding, paddling and shell-collecting paradise. Yes, there is low-rise development in restricted areas, but no towering condos, no theme parks and no asphalt-ringed outlet malls.

Sanibel is home to the J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, a large tract of environmentally sensitive mangrove forest, seagrass beds, mud flats, interior wetland marshes, beaches, and West Indian hardwood hammock. It's also part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail – shorebirds and birds on a migration path flock there by the thousands. We drove the seven-km Wildlife Drive, stopping to look out for birds, alligators, turtles, snakes, and frogs. At low tide, the mud flats are a feeding bonanza for birds like osprey, reddish egret, white ibis, little blue heron, and white pelican. To get a little closer to the action we rented kayaks to paddle the Great Calusa Blueway Paddling Trail, through an estuary – the spot where the fresh water of the lakes and rivers meets with the saltwater tides. With nature preserves (on both land and water) dominating Sanibel, kayaking turned out to be the perfect way to combine wildlife and recreation.

We usually travel in our compact Class B van, so learning to manoeuvre the larger Class C in and out of parking spaces involved a bit of a learning curve. Luckily, the Wildlife Drive allowed for lots of leeway.

Who would think there'd be a wide swath of protected wilderness in central Florida? **Paynes Prairie**



Gulf Islands National Seashore

Preserve State Park near Gainesville protects an original prairie landscape, complete with a small herd of bison, wild horses, American alligators, and more than 270 species of birds, all found along a spiderweb of walking and biking paths. The park has well-secluded, back-in RV sites (maximum length is 58 feet), most with 30-amp electric and a few with 50-amp service, and a centralized dump station.

We spent several days exploring the long trails, climbing the observation tower for a birds-eye view and watching – but staying well back from – the staggering number of alligators. The park is one of the most significant natural and historic areas in the state, protecting more than 20 distinct biological communities including freshwater marsh, savannah, basin swamps of bald cypress, and upland forests.

In the northwest Panhandle region, along Florida’s “Forgotten Coast”, we spent a blissful week at **St. George Island State Park** with its long, dune-lined beachfront and great hikes through pine forest and along the bays. Like many of the more “natural” Florida state parks, it’s popular, so plan ahead to reserve an RV spot. Accessed by causeway near the cute, mainland town of Apalachicola (known for fresh oysters), St. George has 60 sites with electricity, water and a dump station. There are two modern buildings with restrooms and hot showers. Pets are allowed but not on the beach or dunes.

St. George really shines for its end-of-the-road location, birding, biking, kayaking, fishing, astronomy, and seasonal turtle watching. The park is currently in the process of qualifying for International Dark Sky

For more information

www.VISITFLORIDA.com

www.floridastateparks.org

www.nps.gov

www.corkscrew.audubon.org

designation (as a barrier island detached from the larger cities, it is dark at night). Our stay happened to coincide with a Super Blue Moon and the park ranger met us at the beach to explain the rare phenomenon.

Further west along the Gulf Coast are several other excellent barrier island parks including **Gulf Islands National Seashore** – part of the National Park System – a long protected spit of sand with a campground just west of Pensacola Beach. The park itself is largely rolling dunes, beach and a nice stretch of wetlands with fantastic walking trails. Damaged by Hurricane Nate in 2017, parts of the campground are still closed for repair, but it makes an excellent base for exploring the barrier island ecosystem as well as nearby attractions including lighthouses, 19th- and 20th-century forts and the excellent National Naval Aviation Museum (home of the Blue Angels aerobatic team).

It’s these parks and the experience of exploring them by RV that have us often using “wilderness” and “Florida” when we tell others about our favourite, out-of-the-way, southern destinations. 🍁

Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travel with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Class B Roadtrek 210 Popular. Learn more at www.travelswithrigby.com.