

A Self-Guided Tour of Turkey Creek from the Water



General Information

The Turkey Creek is an oasis within the city of Palm Bay. It runs from the Melbourne-Tillman Dam north to the Indian River, approximately 3 miles. The creek is a “lazy river” most days requiring easy paddling. **High water levels or wind can make the paddling a bit more challenging. Always check the weather prior to beginning any kayak trip.** Wear your floatation vest, bring a good hat, sunscreen, bug spray and plenty of water. Pull-out areas with restrooms and/or picnic areas are identified on the detailed maps below. **Be sure to look up, down and listen during your trip!** There is an abundant variety birds in the trees along the creek, mammals on the banks (and water), fish and reptiles. Please take only photos and good memories. **Most importantly, have fun!!**

Geography and History: The Turkey Creek is a major tributary of the Indian River Lagoon. The

creek mouth forms a bay surrounded by palms from which the city was named. The creek is fed by an extensive canal system covering 100 square miles of land, draining into the Tillman Dam. While the creek is normally slow moving, it can become engorged after heavy rains and thus move swiftly.

Turkey Creek is a brackish water creek, whose natural brown coloring comes from tannins in the leaves of oak trees that have fallen in the water. Beneath the wet hammock along the banks of the creek is a unique geological rock strata called the “Anastasia Formation”. Perched on this limestone rock is a bed of fossil bones over 250,000 years old.

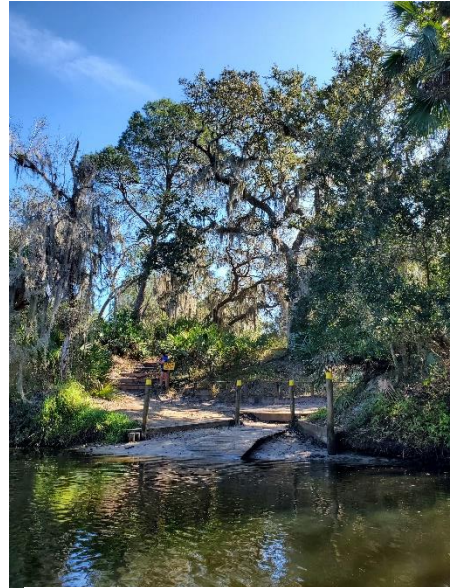
Paddling Route 1: Turkey Creek Sanctuary

Turkey Creek Sanctuary is comprised of 133 acres of wonder, biodiversity and natural resources. The park is part of the Brevard County Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) Program and the East Florida Birding Trail. It was established in 1978 when the land was donated to the City of Palm Bay and the Florida Audubon Society by the General Development Corporation. All plants and animals are protected. No fishing is allowed on this stretch.

Stop 1: Kayak Launch (START OF TOUR)

Parking is available directly south of Port Malabar Blvd on Briar Creek Road. There are no restrooms at this location. You will need to carry your kayak a short distance to the launch.

CAUTION: Please be careful if walking this trail or crossing it to launch your kayak - bikers travel at high speeds through the trail and are many times blind to what is ahead due to terrain or foliage.



Kayak Launch



Male Northern Cardinal
Photo Stock

This area is flush with an abundance of birds. Northern cardinals can be heard and seen moving between the top branches of trees. Unlike many other songbirds in North America, both the male and female sing.

As you leave the kayak launch notice the large, majestic tree to your left. The Live Oak is a huge evergreen broadleaf tree with large, spreading branches and thick, leathery, oval, dark green leaves. Live Oaks are common in this area and are often home to Spanish moss. Spanish moss is the gray, stringy plant hanging from the branches. It is an epiphyte, a plant that grows on other plants, but does not use them for nutrients. Historically it has been used as stuffing for bedding, car seats, and insulation.

You may have a chance at seeing an American Alligator



American Alligator

dozing in the sun on the banks of the creek. If you see one, give it space. They are not typically aggressive unless fed by humans. It is common for them to move away as you approach. Don't be alarmed.



Live Oak Tree

Facts about the American Gator:

- Classified as Threatened, it is a felony to feed (or kill without a special license)
- Live about 50 years in the wild
- Males can be as long as 13 – 15 feet long and weigh 500 lbs
- Females are smaller, averaging 11 feet long and weighing 200 lbs
- Diet: Carnivorous – They eat fish, snails, birds, mammals, frogs
- Habitat: Fresh, slow-moving water, marshes, lakes and swamps
- Tolerate salt water for brief periods only
- Build gator holes along the banks to use when temperatures fall; other animals use these mud holes after they are abandoned
- The ridges on their backs are for temperature control – they absorb and store the sun's heat

Stop 2: Ox-Bow area

Dry Ox-Bow Lake – This grassy area was once a meander of Turkey Creek that was cut off from the main stream. It fills with water during excessive rainfall or creek flooding. **CAUTION:** This is a difficult stretch to kayak due to the narrow creek and fallen trees. Proceed slowly and watch for obstacles under the water. There are many opportunities to view turtles in this area. Look for Cooters, Florida Softshell, and snappers.



Peninsular Cooter Turtles



Peninsular Cooter Turtles

Florida Cooter Facts:

- Turtles are an ancient group of reptiles that have existed for over 200 million years.
- Florida's most common freshwater turtles
- Can be found on fallen trees and each other's backs
- They sit in the sun to regulate their temperature

This area contains some beautiful specimens of **Sabal Palm Trees** (also known as **Cabbage Palm**). **Sabal Palm Facts:**

- Grows up to 65 ft high
- The growing heart of new fronds gives the tree its “cabbage” name
- The new bud is what is commonly called “hearts of palm” and eaten in modern dishes, such as salad
- Removal of the heart will kill the palm
- Remarkably resistant to fire, floods and coastal conditions



Sabal Palms

Stop 3: Sandy Ridge



Sandy Ridge

You will see a tall, white sandy ridge approximately 20 – 25 feet high, as you paddle around an island. This was an **ancient Atlantic sand dune** formed around 11,000 years ago by wind and wave action when the sea level was much higher.

Sand Pines tower above on the sandy shore as well as scrub and turkey oaks. On the island, you will find sabal palms, palmettos and wetland grasses.

Predatory birds like osprey and falcons can often be seen in the tops of dead trees on this cliff. Pileated and red-bellied **woodpeckers** can also be heard and seen on the pine trees.

The **Osprey** is a protected bird. As expert anglers, they are also known as “fish hawks”. They like to hover above the water, locate their prey, then swoop down to grasp their capture in sharp talons. You may see one fly by holding a catfish or mullet from the creek.



Osprey

Photo by Dennis Mayo

Area 4: Canoe Deck

Popular area for viewing manatee, alligator, fish and turtles. Just past the wooden Canoe Deck is a spot where it is possible to pull your kayak. There are 1.85 miles of boardwalk passing through hydric (wet) hammock, mesic (moist) hammock and sand pine scrub environments. The boardwalk has a self-guided tour and 1.5 miles of jogging trails to enjoy. The Visitors' Center is a .7 mile walk from the Canoe Deck. The center offers interpretive exhibits, and environmental education programs as well as a gift shop. You will also find restrooms and covered picnic tables for your convenience.



Canoe Deck

Manatee Facts:



Manatee

Photo by Chris Ludeman

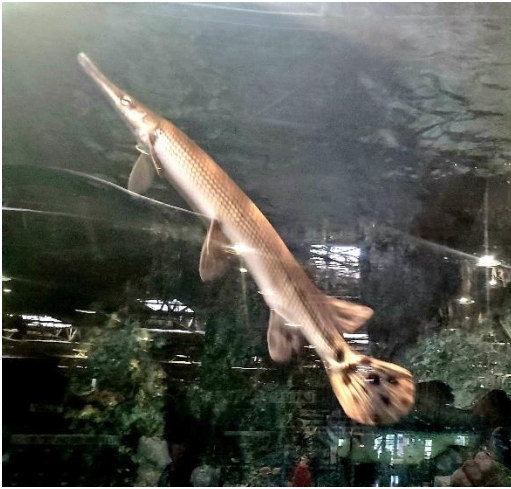
- How do you spot a manatee? Look for the circles in the water left by their tails as they swim along or their snouts coming up to take a breath of air
- They often travel in a family – mother will keep her calf close by her side
- Closest relative is the elephant!
- Weight: 800-2000 lbs.
- Length: 9 – 12 ft.
- Most have scars from propeller blades Manatees are a threatened species – it is unlawful to touch or feed them

Area 5: Melbourne-Tillman Dam

This dam controls the water drained from an extensive canal system through Palm Bay. It is used to control flooding. When dikes are closed off, this is a great spot to view Florida Alligators sunning on the Dam. This area is also rich with various fish: snook, Florida Gar, and mullet.



Dam



Fun facts about the Florida Gar:

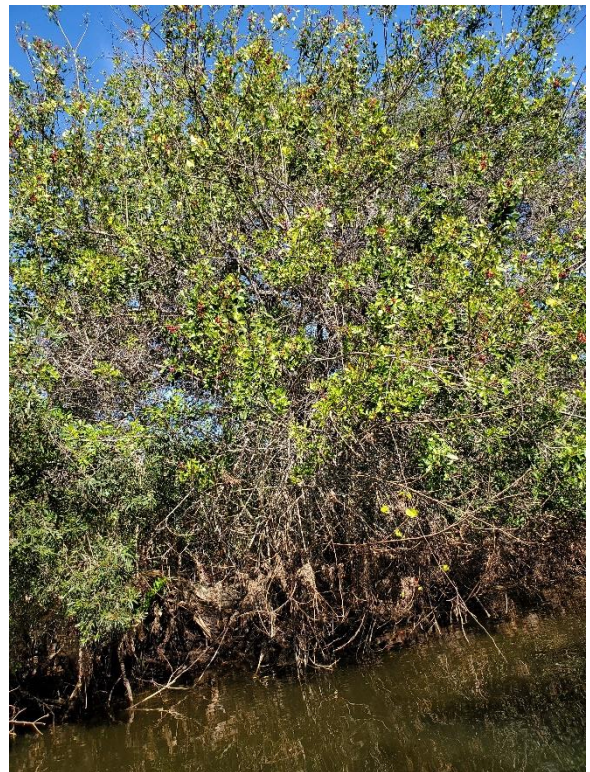
- Avg length 30 inches
- Eggs are highly toxic
- Streamlined body shape, razor-sharp teeth – sometimes mistaken for an alligator
- Prey on other fish
- Beak-like snout, hard bony scales that form a hard armor
- Able to gulp air and live in polluted waters with low levels of oxygen

Florida Gar

Photo by Chris Ludeman

The bushes with red berries on the banks leading up to the dam are the non-native **Brazilian Pepper Trees**. Brazilian peppers are very **invasive**. It is prohibited from sale, transport, or planting in Florida. **Caution:** the sap can cause skin reactions.

THIS IS THE END OF THE TOUR (at the signs for dam). Turn around and enjoy seeing the creek from another angle on your way back to the launch!



Brazilian Pepper Tree

END OF THE TOUR – Hope you enjoyed it!

REFERENCES: UF IFAS University of Florida [Freshwater Systems of Florida](#) by Dr. Martin Main, Turkey Creek Sanctuary, Erna Nixon Park, [Native Americans in Florida](#) by Kevin M. McCarthy, [Crossroad Towns Remembered](#) by Weona Cleveland, McClarty's Treasure Museum



PREPARED FOR THE FMNP BY KAREN LUDEMAN

FEBRUARY 2023

ALL PHOTOS NOT CREDITED WERE PROVIDED BY KAREN LUDEMAN

Padding Route 2: Turkey Creek Sanctuary to Indian River Lagoon

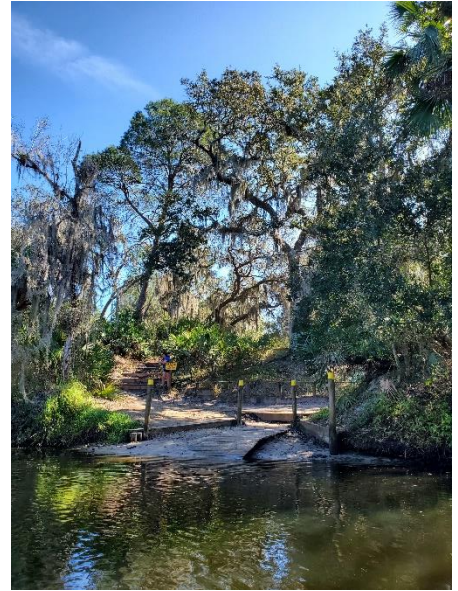
[Link to Detailed Map of Route 2](#)

Turkey Creek Sanctuary is comprised of 133 acres of wonder, biodiversity, and natural resources. The park is part of the Brevard County Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) Program and the East Florida Birding Trail. It was established in 1978 when the land was donated to the City of Palm Bay and the Florida Audubon Society by the General Development Corporation. All plants and animals are protected on park property.

Stop 1: Kayak Launch (START OF TOUR)

Parking is available directly south of Port Malabar Blvd on Briar Creek Road. There are no restrooms at this location. You will need to carry your kayak a short distance to the launch.

CAUTION: Please be careful if walking this trail or crossing it to launch your kayak - bikers travel at high speeds through the trail and are many times blind to what is ahead due to terrain or foliage.



Kayak Launch



Male Northern Cardinal
Photo Stock

This area is flush with an abundance of birds. **Northern cardinals** can be heard and seen moving between the top branches of trees. Unlike many other songbirds in North America, both the male and female sing.

As you leave the kayak launch notice the large, majestic tree to your left. The

Live Oak is a huge evergreen broadleaf tree with large, spreading branches and thick, leathery, oval, dark green leaves. Live Oaks are common in this area and are often home to Spanish moss. **Spanish moss** is the gray, stringy plant hanging from the branches. It is an epiphyte, a plant that grows on other plants, but does not use them for nutrients. Historically it has been used as stuffing for bedding, car seats, and insulation.

You may have a chance at seeing an **American Alligator** dozing in the sun on the banks of the creek. If you see one, give it space. They are not typically aggressive unless fed by humans. It is common for them to move away as you approach. Don't be alarmed.



Live Oak Tree

Facts about the American Gator:



American Alligator

- Classified as Threatened, it is a felony to feed (or kill without a special license)
- Live about 50 years in the wild
- Males can be as long as 13 – 15 feet long and weigh 500 lbs
- Females are smaller, averaging 11 feet long and weighing 200 lbs
- Diet: Carnivorous – They eat fish, snails, birds, mammals, frogs
- Habitat: Fresh, slow-moving water, marshes, lakes and swamps
- Tolerate salt water for brief periods only
- Build gator holes along the banks to use when temperatures fall; other animals

use these mud holes after they are abandoned

- The ridges on their backs are for temperature control – they absorb and store the sun's heat

Stop 2: Port Malabar Bridge

This is a popular fishing spot, be careful of lines in the water! As you pass under the bridge look up and see if you can find a bat. The most common bat in this area is the Brazilian Free-Tailed Bat. They gather in groups and like to sleep under bridges. In the summer at dusk, hundreds of bats have been known to fly out from under the bridge in a big dark wave! They are going out to feed on mosquitoes and other insects. If you miss them here, you can look again at the US1 bridge.



Port Malabar Bridge

Fun Brazilian Free-Tailed Bat Facts:



- Bats eat their weight in bugs every day
- They are the fastest creature in the animal kingdom; reaching top speeds of over 99 mph!
- This bat is native to the Americas
- Live to be around 11 years old

Stop 3: Right Turn at “Outlaw Island”

Make a right turn (eastward) when you see a big Sabal Palm on the right and a retention wall made of stone on the left. The creek is narrow at the turn, so it is easy to miss. If you miss it, just continue on the west side of the island to view the houses along the Turkey Creek (you will skip stop #4, but you can view it on the return paddle). By turning eastward, you will go through a very natural section of the creek and will have the opportunity to see more wildlife. Look closely in the vegetation for resting alligators.

This large island in the creek is known to locals as “Outlaw Island” – legend has it that a pair of thieves escaped and hid on the island many years ago. You can imagine this being an ideal place to hide...or you can believe the less interesting story, that it is named after a development company who previously owned it!

Stop 4: Stretch along East Side of Outlaw Island

This is an untouched area of Turkey Creek. As you float by, you may spot an alligator on the banks, or a large turkey buzzard flying overhead. Look for ferns, wetland grasses and lilies.



Great Blue Heron

The island contains many species of birds: Blue and green heron, egrets and ibis.

Facts about Great Blue Herons:

- Blue-gray coloring and accents of black
- Size: 42 – 52 inches, wingspan up to 6 feet
- Diet: Small fish, frogs, insects, snakes, mice, squirrels
- A predator, who can attack snakes, sharks and other birds
- Flies holding head in “S” shape

Notice the **giant leather ferns** growing on the island and sides of the creek. This fern is native to Florida. There are some large groupings of them along this stretch on the way to Goode Park. The native Indians used this fern to make a body rub for treating high fevers and other ailments. It is also an edible plant. The new leaves, fiddleheads, can be eaten raw or cooked and are said to taste like asparagus.



Giant Leather Fern

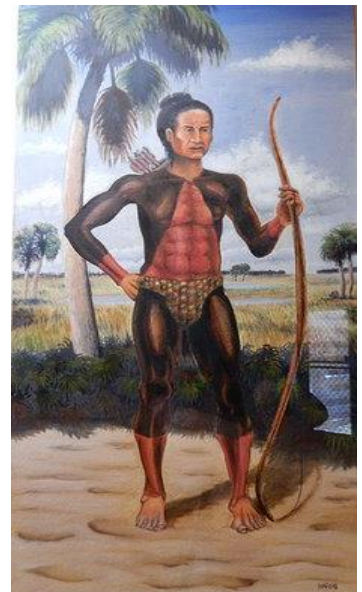
Stop 5: Approach to Ais Trail

There is a wooden overlook to the left, that is the Ais Trail. There is no kayak pull out here, but you may want to visit the trail by car later. Looking up over the brush you will see tall **Long Leaf Pines**. These trees have a conservation status of endangered. Forests of longleaf pines were cleared to make space for development and agriculture. The lumber was used for houses, railroads and ships. Most of the pines were gone by 1920. The state of Florida has a program to encourage farmers to plant more longleaf pines in an effort to bring them back.



Long Leaf Pine Tree

The trail is named after the **Ais Indians** who lived along the Indian River from the 1500s – 1700s. Their territory extended from Cape Canaveral south into Fort Pierce. The Indian River was a major trade route for them and was once called the “River of Ais”. They were considered wealthy, since they took advantage of the Spanish galleon wrecks along the Florida coast. They were also rich in food, since the land in this area was abundant in animals, fish, and berries to eat. So much so, they did not need to farm. The Ais traveled the waterways in dugout canoes with spears to catch fish or game. Jonathan Dickenson once called them “cannibals”, however, after initially greeting Ponce de Leon with arrows and lances, the Ais people later accepted the Spanish.



Ais Indian – from the McClarty Treasure Museum

From this point to the bridge, is good for manatee and dolphin watching.

Stop 6: Goode Park There is a boat ramp here where you can pull up your kayak – just be careful of trucks and boats loading and unloading! The park has restrooms, covered picnic tables, a playground, and fishing Dock. This is a good area to view manatees or watch mullet jumping in the water.

Ibis, blue and white egrets can also be seen on the island nearby.

Why do Mullet Jump?

- To breathe air in water with low oxygen
- during spawning season
- to evade a predator

...or...Perhaps they just like to jump!



Mullet in Turkey Creek

Manatee Facts:



Manatee

Photo by Chris Ludeman

- How do you spot a manatee? Look for the circles in the water left by their tails as they swim along or their snouts coming up to take a breath of air
- They often travel in a family – mother will keep her calf close by her side
- Closest relative is the elephant!
- Weight: 800-2000 lbs.
- Length: 9 – 12 ft.
- Most have scars from propeller blades
- Manatees are a threatened species – it is unlawful to touch or feed them

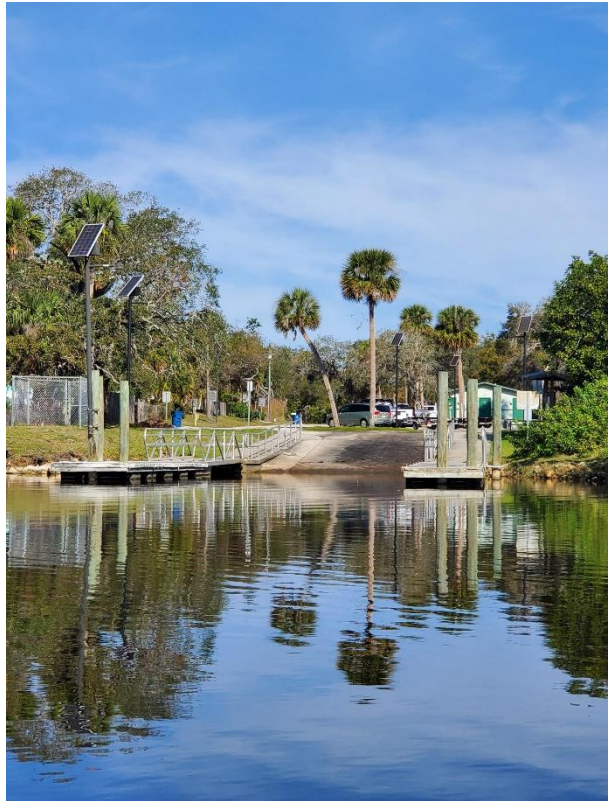
Stop 7: Pollak Park

There is a boat ramp here where you can pull up your kayak – just be careful of trucks and boats loading and unloading! The park has restrooms and covered picnic tables.

In the 1900s settlers were able to gather as many **oysters** as they wanted by raking them from the shore. Unfortunately the quality of the water in the lagoon has significantly deteriorated due to run-off. Today oysters are being used to help restore the quality of the Indian River Lagoon.

Stop 8: Paddling Paradise and US1 Bridge

This is a private business where rental kayaks are available as well as guided tours. As you paddle under the US1 bridge, you will have another opportunity to look for bats!



Pollak Park from the creek



CAUTION: This area can sometimes become congested with larger boats coming and going. Also watch for fishing lines when paddling by a boat with fishermen aboard. **Be cautious heading into the bay, do not proceed if it is windy or the bay is choppy!**

Stop 9: Palm Bay

The first thing you will notice are all of the derelict boats in the bay along the shore. Also note the damaged piers and eroded beaches. These are mostly the result of powerful storms and hurricanes in the area. On your left coming into the bay, you will see a large group of pelicans sitting on a dock. Watch while they soar into the air and dive into the water to catch fish.



Pelican

Fun Pelican Facts:

- There are 2 species of pelicans in Florida – the brown pelican, resident year-round, and the white pelican, that spends its winters in Florida
- Can grow up to 50 inches in length and weigh around 9 lbs
- Have a 7 foot wingspan
- Can live up to 30 years
- Elastic pouch under their bill can hold up to 3 gallons of water
- Can dive as deep as 30 feet to catch their prey (fish)
- Pelican Island, near Vero Beach, became the first National Wildlife Refuge in 1903

The bay is a popular spot for dolphins as well. Keep an eye out for their fins and blow holes. They like to play and hunt here.

Fun Facts about Dolphins:

- They have a very large brain – second only to humans
- Known to be highly intelligent
- Have a wide range of vocalizations
- Cooperate to catch fish



Bottlenose Dolphin in Turkey Creek

Stop 10: Castaway Point and Indian River (END OF TOUR)

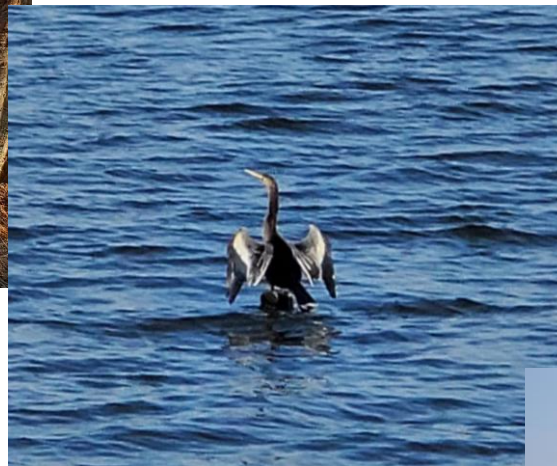
Some of the earliest settlers lived on Castaway Point, enjoying the bounty of fish at this location. Before the settlers arrived, the Ais Indians were known to benefit from this scenic point. The peninsula has one of the only sandy beaches, where you can land your kayak.



Castaway Point

CAUTION: Watch for the rocks under the water when pulling in your kayak. The park has restrooms, covered picnic tables, and two fishing docks. This is a good place to pull out and eat your lunch or just take a break before paddling back.

Watch for: Dolphins, manatees, all kinds of birds - Ibis, woodpeckers, egrets, blue heron, robins, warblers, and anhingas.



Anhinga drying its wings



Great Egret

END OF THE TOUR – Hope you enjoyed it!

REFERENCES: UF IFAS University of Florida [Freshwater Systems of Florida](#) by Dr. Martin Main, Turkey Creek Sanctuary, Erna Nixon Park, [Native Americans in Florida](#) by Kevin M. McCarthy, [Crossroad Towns Remembered](#) by Weona Cleveland, McClartys Treasure Museum



PREPARED FOR THE FMNP BY KAREN LUDEMAN

FEBRUARY 2023

ALL PHOTOS NOT CREDITED WERE PROVIDED BY KAREN LUDEMAN