

All About Alligators Baker Senior Center



Presentation by Paul Pacter

www.paulvisits.com

Two parts to our discussion of the American Alligator:



1. Lots of information about alligators. **Size, quantity, location, habitat, appearance, diet, ectothermy, reproduction, social structure, legal status, etc.**
2. Where we can see them safely in the Naples area.

I am an accountant. Not a scientist.

- Presentation is in layman's terms.
- Might be a few technical inaccuracies.



With one or two exceptions (which I will point out) I took all of the photos.

We'll look at alligators in these places:

- Audubon Corkscrew Swamp.
- Turner River Rd – HP Williams Park.
- Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk.
- Six-Mile Cypress Slough Preserve.
- CREW Bird Rookery Swamp.
- Oasis Visitor Center.
- Naples Zoo.
- Wonder Gardens.

If time permits, a few more places.

To whet your appetite: Corkscrew Swamp
Back Country, Naples, March 24, 2023



American Alligator

Scientific name:
Alligator mississippiensis.

Up to 15 feet.
Up to 1,000 lbs.

Live only in SE USA: From East Texas to North Carolina.



Alligators are aquatic, cold-blooded

- Good swimmers.
- Spend time on land, esp. to get warmth from the sun.
- Valves to close ears and nostrils when submerged.
- Can stay under water 45-60 minutes.



Size

Weight in the wild (more in captivity)

- Average adult: 790 pounds.
- Some are over 1,000 pounds.
- Males 30% larger than females.
- Largest in Florida: 1,043 pounds.



Length

- Average male adult 11 ft. Female 8 ft.
- Largest in Florida: 14 feet, 4 inches.
- Largest 19.2 feet (Louisiana).

Where Are Gators Found in the US?



How Many Gators in the US?

- Estimated 5,000,000 in Southeast United States.
- Largest populations are in:
 - Florida (1,250,000).
 - Louisiana (1,250,000).
 - Texas (500,000).
 - Georgia (250,000).



Freedom Park, Naples

Life Expectancy:

- 30-50 years in the wild.
- 60-80 years in human care.

Habitat

Fresh water.

- Prefer lakes, slow-moving rivers, and wetlands (swamps, marshlands, etc).

Low tolerance for salt water.

- But sometimes found in brackish (mixed salt-fresh) water.



Roadside Drainage Ditch, Naples

Appearance – Color

- Olive-black skin.
- Bony scales (scutes).
- Hatchlings and juveniles are black streaked with pale yellow stripes. Stripes help camouflage. Disappear as adults.



Juveniles - Corkscrew Swamp



Turner River Rd

Mobility

- Mainly swimming (natatorial).
- Can move on land by a variety of means: Walk, run (short distances), and even crawl. *Next Slide*
- Tail: A long, powerful tail helps propel alligators through water.
- Webbed rear feet. Help an alligator swim.

Alligator "High Walk"
Tail always drags
Turner River Road



Buoyancy

- Float just under water. Only eyes & nostrils visible.
- Control buoyancy by inflating and deflating lungs.
- Hide, sneak up on prey.
- Special muscles around lungs to help them float, dive, barrel roll.

Monument Lake Campground
Big Cypress National Preserve



Generalist Carnivores

Diet – Juveniles

- Begin eating insects after birth.
- Then crayfish, small fish, frogs.
- Then other small animals.

Diet – Adults

- Fish, invertebrates, frogs, birds, mammals.
- If gator is big enough, will eat deer, hogs, bear, etc.

Cannibalistic! Eat other alligators.

Use sharp teeth to capture prey:

- Jaws can crack a large turtle's shell.
- But cannot use jaws to chew. Swallow in chunks.
- Strongest laboratory-measured bite of any living animal.

Eating Habits – Adults:

- Lurkers, not hunters.
- Wait for something edible to swim or walk by. Then lunge!

Alligators Are Ectothermic - Cold Blooded.

- Rely on external sources of heat to control body temperature.
- Regulate body heat by:

- Basking in the sun.
- Digging holes in mud to trap heat.
- Moving to areas with warmer or cooler air or water temperatures.



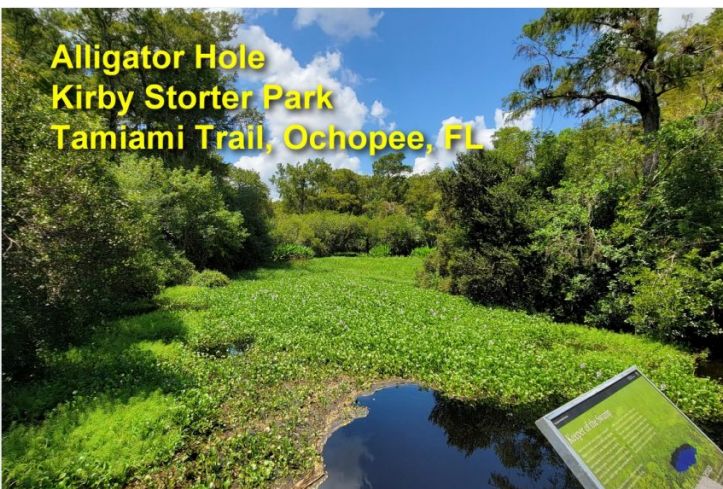
Dormancy

- Alligators are most active when temperatures are between 82° to 92° F.
- They stop feeding when the temperature drops below 70° F.
- They become dormant below 55° F .
 - This dormancy is called **brumation**. Similar to hibernation of mammals. Heart, metabolic, respiratory rates drop.
- Alligators are dormant throughout much of the winter season. *Less so in SW Fla.*

Alligator holes

- Alligators dig holes in marshes and swamps for two reasons:
 - **Insulation when temperatures drop.**
 - **Pool of water during the dry season.**
- Alligators use their snout and tail to clear muck from the base of a pond.
- Tunnels: Alligators also dig tunnels up to 65 feet long to protect themselves from extreme heat and cold.
- Can stay under water 45 to 60 minutes.

Alligator Hole Kirby Storter Park Tamiami Trail, Ochopee, FL



Attitude toward humans:

- Become unsettled. Ignore humans. Or walk or swim away.
- Rarely go after a human unprovoked.
- Can outrun human in first 20-30 feet of exiting water.

1948 to 2021: 442 unprovoked gator attacks on humans in Florida:

- 26 fatalities. 277 non-fatal major bites. 139 minor bites.

Do Not Feed Alligators!
 It's illegal. Why?
 Alligators are wild animals. Naturally afraid of humans. Giving them food only makes them bolder and encourages them to seek out people. Attack for food. Also it alters their natural diet in an unhealthy way.



Do you want to taste alligator?

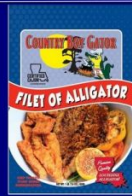
- Cracklin Jacks, Collier Blvd. →
- Deep Lagoon, US41 at Vanderbilt.
- Alice Sweetwater's, Airport Rd.
- Old Naples Pub, 255 13th Av South.
- Mudbugs Cajun Kitchen. Sanibel.
- Everglades City Rod & Gun Club.



Or order on Amazon for a memorable cookout:
Alligator Filets - Farm Raised - Great for Grilling and Frying
\$39.99 for 1 pound



Alligator Tail Meat 5 lbs
\$119.95 (\$23.99 / lb)
Size 1 Pound (Pack of 5)



Elsewhere in the World

Huangsha Market Guangzhou, China



Menu Bangkok, Thailand



Saturday Market Chiang Rai, Thailand



Reproduction

Sexual maturity determined by gator's size (length) rather than age.

Male: 7 feet (ages 8-12).

Female: 6 feet (ages 10-15).

Alligators mate: Once a year.

Normally: April to June.



Alligators Mating
 Big Cypress Bend
 Green Heron Lake

Nesting

- Female builds nest in vegetation next to water.
- Clutch of 20-50 eggs (average 38).
- Incubation 60-70 days.
- Female stays near nest. Fiercely protective of nest and hatchlings.



Hatchling at Corkscrew Swamp

Hikers be especially cautious!



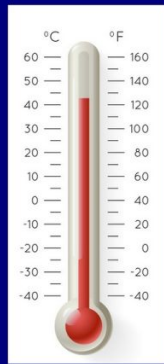
Internet Photo

Sex of offspring

- Temperature in the nest in first 3 weeks after laying eggs determines sex of the offspring.
- Temperatures above 93 degrees will produce males.
- Temperatures of 86 degrees and below produce females.

> 93°F = M

< 86°F = F



Survival

Number of eggs laid by female	38
Number of those that hatch	24
Number of those that live to 1 year	10
Number of those that become sub-adults (> 4 ft long)	8
Number of those that reach maturity (> 6 ft long)	5

Legal status

- By the 1950s: Almost extinct due to endless hunting.
- 1966: Gained protective status under Endangered Species Preservation Act.
- 1980s: Population recovered.
- 1987: Removed from "endangered" list.
- Today: Classified as "threatened" due to similar appearance to a threatened animal, namely the crocodile. This allows state regulation of hunting etc.

Alligator – Crocodile Differences:

Difference	Alligator	Crocodile
Location	SE US Only	Global
Snout	Rounded	Pointy



Differences	Alligator	Crocodile
Quantity USA	5 million	Only a few thousand
Habitat	Slow moving fresh water	Prefer salt water
When Jaw Is Closed	Only 2 teeth protrude down each side	Many teeth protrude up and down



Fun Fact #1

Alligator Teeth

American alligators have 70-80 teeth.

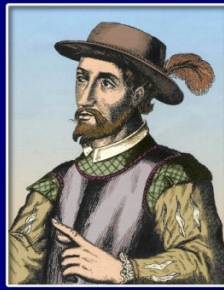
- All pointy (no flat like humans).
- As an alligator's teeth wear down or fall out, new ones come in. An alligator can go through 3,000 teeth in a lifetime.
- Over 2,000 pounds per square inch of bite force.



Fun Fact #2

Origin of the Word Alligator

The word "alligator" is an Anglicized form of el lagarto, the Spanish term for "the lizard". That's what early Spanish explorers and settlers in Florida called the alligator.



Modern Spanish: Aligátor. Caimán. Lagarto.

Fun Fact #3

An alligator's brain weighs only 8 or 9 grams and would take up only one-half of a tablespoon.



Due to lack of brain power, alligators act on instinct, not thought.

If it's hungry, an alligator will eat anything that moves.

Fun Fact #4

Alligators do not have vocal cords.

But can make loud sounds using their throat:

- Open mouth wide and allow air to escape.
- Can hiss, roar, and growl.



Part 2 Some Places Where You Can See Alligators Safely in the Naples Area



Safety

- Always walk at least 30 feet away from an alligator on a footpath.
- Never bring pets to alligator areas.
- Closely supervise children walking or playing around water that may have alligators.



Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

13,000-acre protected wetlands area.

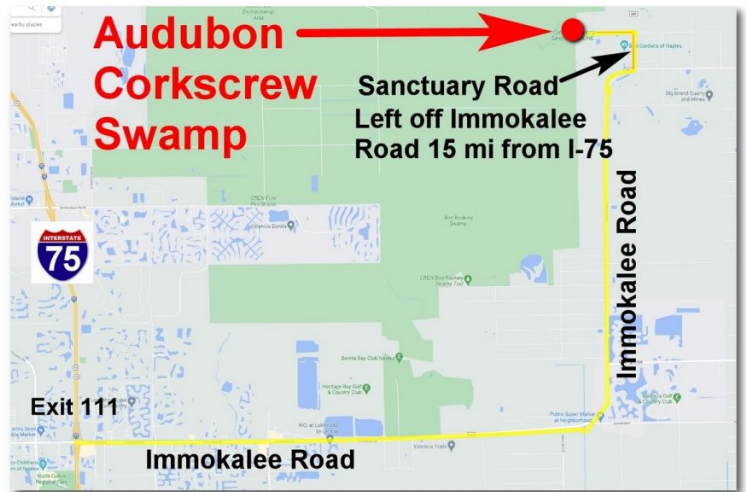
Website: corkscrew.audubon.org/

Where: 375 Sanctuary Rd W, Naples 34120.

Get There: East on Immokalee Road. 15 miles East of I-75, turn left onto Sanctuary Rd. Follow signs.

When: Daily 8:00 am to 3:00 pm.

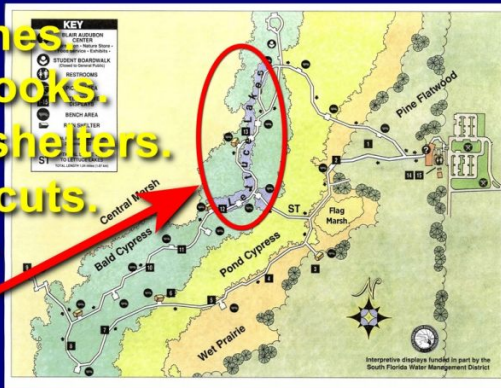
Admission: \$17. College students \$10. Children 6-14 \$6. Book online.



2.2 Miles of Boardwalk

- Benches
- Overlooks.
- Rain shelters.
- Shortcuts.

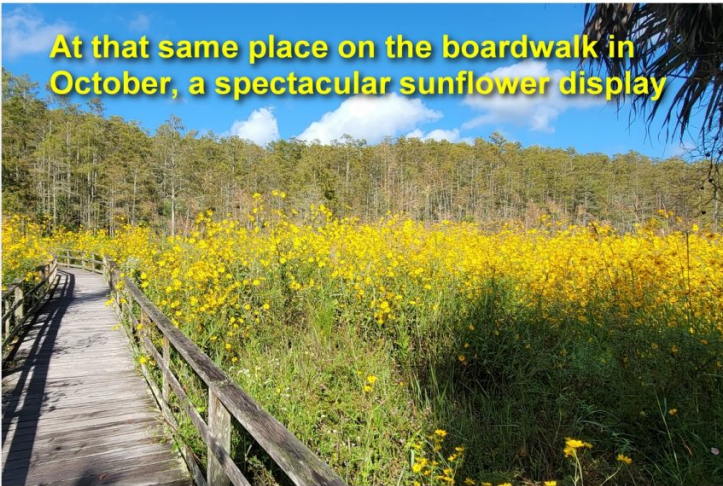
Gator Area



Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Boardwalk and Pond Cypress



At that same place on the boardwalk in October, a spectacular sunflower display



Many of the ancient cypresses at Corkscrew Swamp PRE-DATE COLUMBUS!



1451-1506

OLDER!

Alligator at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary



Alligator Sunning - Corkscrew Swamp





Audubon Corkscrew Swamp
Two Juvenile Alligators

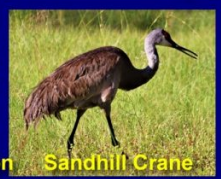
Several of the Many Birds at Corkscrew Swamp



Ibis



Yellow-crowned Night Heron



Sandhill Crane



Anhinga



Roseate Spoonbill



Barred Owl



Lettuce Lakes at Corkscrew Swamp.
- Shallow ponds.
- Covered with water lettuce plants.
- Full of fish and birds.



Alligator in a Lettuce Lake



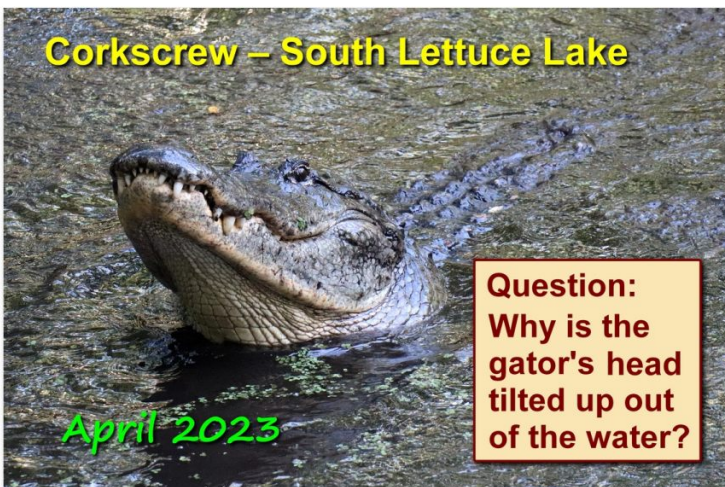
Audubon Corkscrew Swamp
South Lettuce Lake

April 2023



Audubon Corkscrew Swamp, Naples
South Lettuce Lake

April 29, 2023 12 Newborns



Corkscrew – South Lettuce Lake

April 2023

Question:
Why is the gator's head tilted up out of the water?



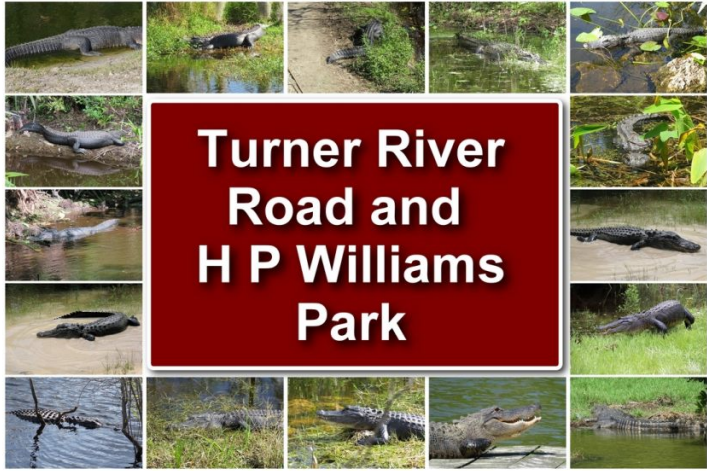
Corkscrew Swamp - South Lettuce Lake
May 2023

Question:
Why is the gator's mouth open?

**Audubon Corkscrew Swamp
Back Country - March 24, 2023**



**Audubon Corkscrew Swamp
Back Country - Naples, Florida**



Turner River Rd & H P Williams Park
Websites: hp-williams-roadside-park.htm
 and www.nps.gov/bicy/planyourvisit/

Where: Ochopee, Florida.

Get there: US-41 Tamiami Trail 30 miles east of Collier Blvd.

From there: Turner River Road runs 21 miles due north to I-75.

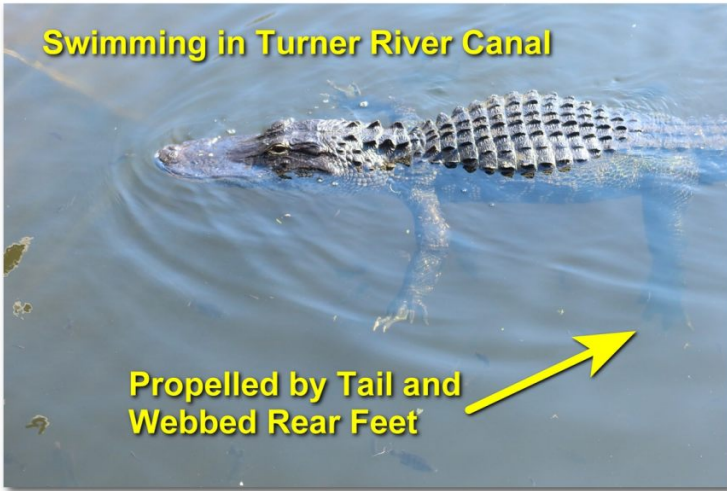
Admission: Free.

What: H P Williams Park boardwalk. Safe viewing of gators swimming.

From there: Can drive north on Turner River Road (unpaved but good) 21 miles to I-75. Canal with gators on the right. Drive first 4 miles is usually enough.

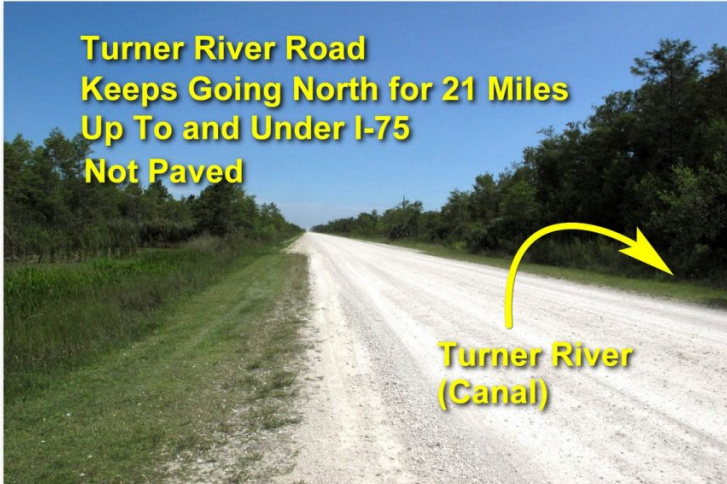
- Do not feed the gators.
- Except at boardwalk, be cautious getting out of car.





Swimming in Turner River Canal

Propelled by Tail and Webbed Rear Feet



Turner River Road Keeps Going North for 21 Miles Up To and Under I-75 Not Paved


Turner River (Canal)



Behind the bathrooms next to the boardwalk

If you do decide to drive up Turner River Road to see wildlife, some tips:

- It's a dirt and gravel road. Dusty.
- River & wildlife on the right driving north.
- 2 or 3 miles is usually all you need.
- Be very careful if you get out of your car.
- Best to take photos from the car window.
- Good photo ops where you see these signs
- **Obey the sign!**



Often plenty of these to see



Turner River Road



Taken from the Window of My Car

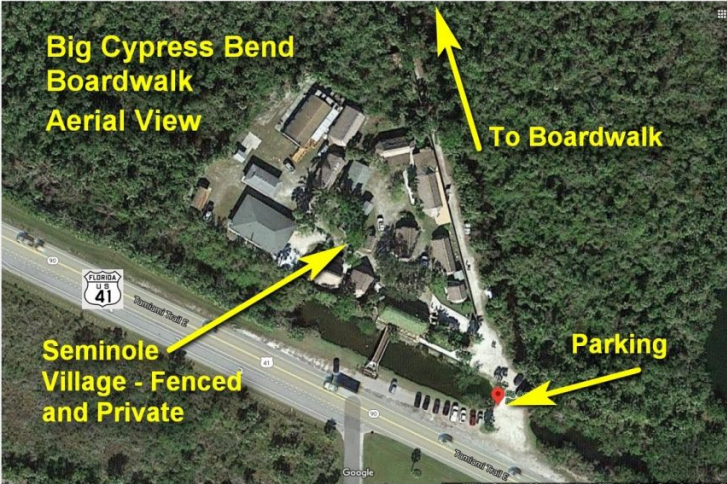


In the Canal Along Turner River Road



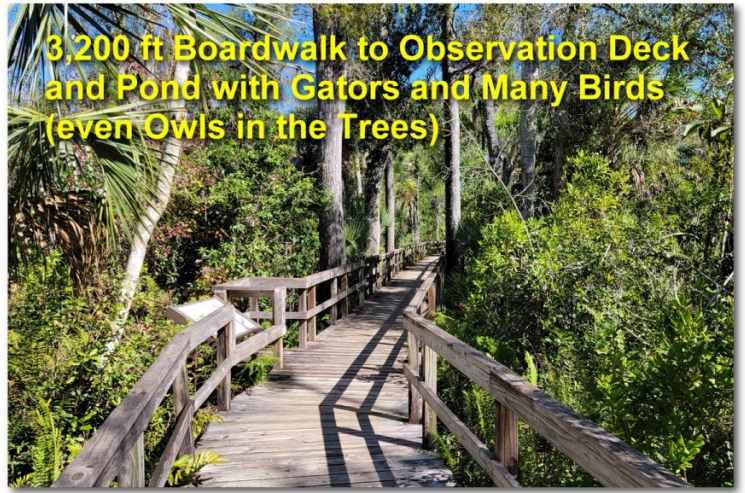
Big Cypress Bend
Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve
Website: www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/fakahatchee-strand-preserve-state-park
Where: US-41, Copeland FL 34137.
Get There: US-41 East 17 miles from Collier Blvd intersection.
When: 8am to sunset.
Admission: \$3 donation.

What: Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is the largest State Park in Florida (out of 175 parks).
Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk is one feature of the Preserve.
1,000' gravel path. Then 3,200' boardwalk.
 Winds through a beautiful, pristine section of Fakahatchee Strand swamp.
 Ends at an alligator pond and observation deck.





...or just sunning



3,200 ft Boardwalk to Observation Deck and Pond with Gators and Many Birds (even Owls in the Trees)



Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk
~~Ibis~~ This is an Egret, not an Ibis

- Ibis
- Beak curves down.
 - Orange legs.

- Egret
- Beak points straight.
 - Black legs



Pond at the End of the Boardwalk
One of the most beautiful spots in or near Naples!



View from Observation Deck at the End of the Boardwalk

Barred Owl

Alligator



Barred Owl Looking Down on the Pond



Sometimes Two Barred Owls



Big Cypress Bend Observation Deck Benches to Sit and Watch



**Big Cypress Bend
Gators Cuddling**



Large Alligator Sunning in the Pond



**Big Cypress Bend
Two Juvenile Alligators**



**Six-Mile
Cypress Slough
Preserve**

Six Mile Slough Preserve "Sloo" = Fresh water swamp

Website: www.leegov.com/parks/preserves/sixmilecypress

Friends of Six Mile Slough:
www.sloughpreserve.org/

Where: 7751 Penzance Blvd at 6 Mile Cypress Pkwy, Fort Myers, FL. 33966.

Get There: I-75 Exit 131 Daniels Pkwy. West 2.7 mi to 6 Mile Cypress Pkwy. Right onto 6 Mile Cypress Pkwy. Then 1.8 mi to entrance, on right.

Admission: Free. Parking is \$1 per hour max \$5.

Trail hours: Daily dawn to dusk.

Interpretive Center: Tues-Sun 10-4.

Closed Mondays. *(Trail is open Mondays.)*

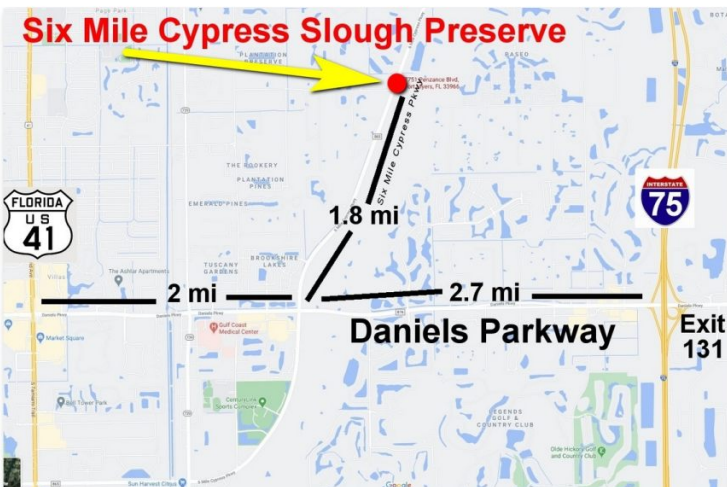
Guided nature walks:

– Twice daily Jan-Mar.

– Daily Apr, Nov, Dec.

– Approx. once a week in other months.

Check website of Friends.



What's there:

– 3,500 acres of protected wetlands.

– Approx. 11 miles long, 1/3rd mile wide.

– **2-3 feet of water in wet season.**

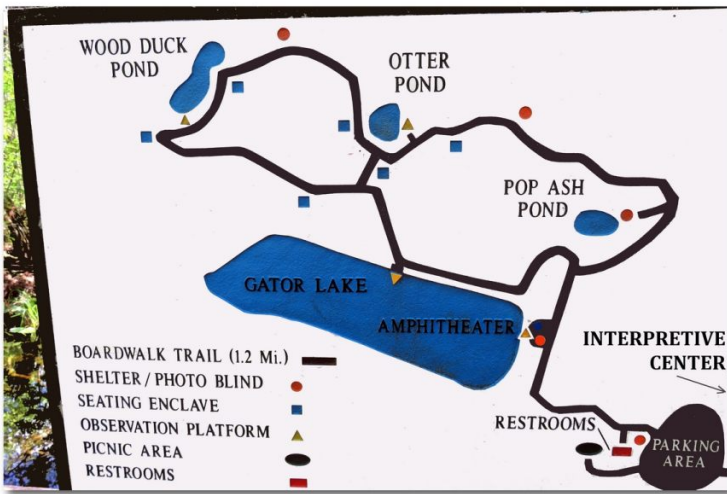
– **Still mostly wet in dry season.**

– 1.2-mile boardwalk over the water.

– Fully accessible.

– Four viewing platforms onto lakes.

– Many benches and shelters along the boardwalk.





CREW Bird Rookery Swamp

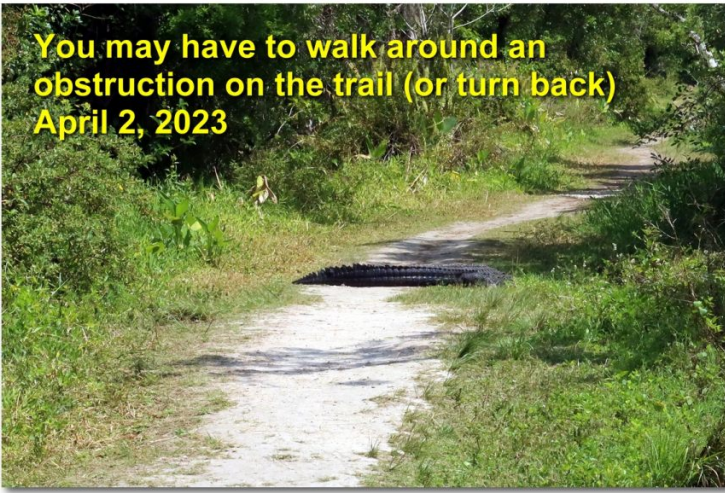
Crew Bird Rookery Swamp Trail
 (CREW = Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed)
Website: <https://crewtrust.org/bird-rookery-swamp-trail/>
Where: 1295 Shady Hollow Blvd W, Naples 34120.
Get There: Immokalee Road then left (shortly past County Fair Grounds) on Shady Hollow Blvd. On the right shortly after Shady Hollow becomes gravel.

When: One hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset.
Admission: Free. Don't walk dogs even on leashes.
What: 12 miles of hiking and biking on nature trails, including a 1,500-foot boardwalk with wheelchair access. The trails are actually old logging tram roads.
 Alligators likely, otters, deer, more. Lots of birds, including songbirds, raptors, barred owls, and kites.



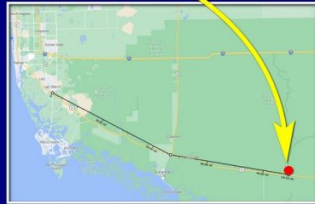


You may have to walk around an obstruction on the trail (or turn back)
 April 2, 2023



Oasis Visitor Center
 Big Cypress National Preserve

Big Cypress National Preserve
 Oasis Visitor Center
 33100 Tamiami Trail East
 Ochopee, FL 34141
Info and exhibits, plus...
 Great boardwalk to see lots of alligators swimming in a canal.
 On US-41
 45 mi East of Collier Blvd.
 Website: nps.gov/bicy



Big Cypress National Preserve Boardwalk

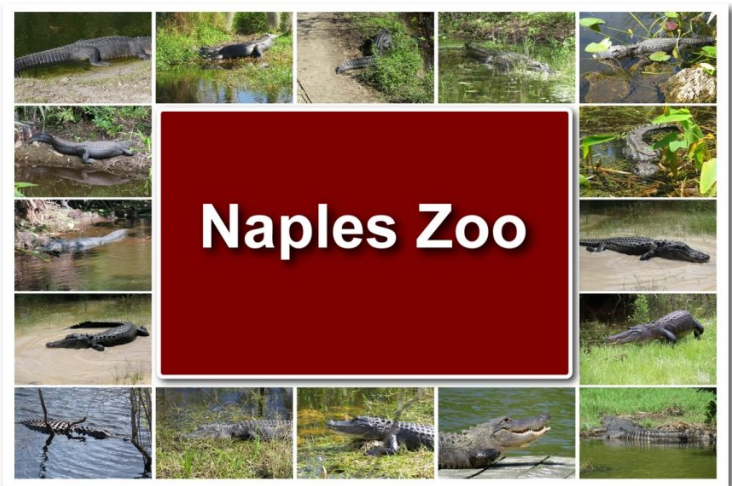


Big Cypress Preserve
 Oasis Visitor Center



Views from the Boardwalk





Naples Zoo
Website: www.napleszoo.org/
Where: 1590 Goodlette Rd, Naples 34102.
Get There: Just south of Golden Gate Pkwy on Goodlette Road.
Admission: Adults \$23. Children 3-12 \$15. Free parking. 9 am to 4:30 pm daily.
Formal name: The Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens.
What: 43-acre zoo and historic botanical garden. 70 species. 375,000 visitors/year.



Wonder Gardens
Website: www.wondergardens.org
Where: 27180 Old 41 Rd, Bonita Springs, FL 34135.
Get There: I-75 Exit 116 Bonita Beach Rd. West 1.75 miles to Old 41. North on Old 41 one mile.
When: Daily 10am to 4pm.

Attractions:

- **300 resident animals:**
 - Birds, including peafowl, ibis, flamingos, ducks, parrots.
 - Reptiles, including alligators, tortoises, iguanas, snakes, tegu.
- **Banyan trees and other plantings.**
- **Small museum.**
- **Admission \$12. Seniors \$10.**

Wonder Gardens Bonita Springs



Wonder Gardens Entrance on Old 41



Wonder Gardens Juvenile Alligator



Wonder Gardens Argentine Black and White Tegu



Adult up to 4.5 feet long

Wonder Gardens Green Iguana



Est. 20,000 in Florida
Males up to 6 foot length incl. tail

Wonder Gardens - Alligators



Wonder Gardens Alligator



Let's Finish with a
Few Photos of
Alligators in Several
Other Places Around
Naples

**Freedom Park
Across the road from
Coastland Mall
Naples**



**Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife
Refuge – US41, 11 Mi East of Naples**



Turtle? Tilapia? In Mouth

**Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge
US-41 11 Miles East of Collier Blvd., Naples**



**Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge
Sanibel Island**



**Eagle Lakes Park
US-41 Just West of Collier Blvd
East Naples**



**Roadside Canal Along Tamiami Trail
East of Naples**



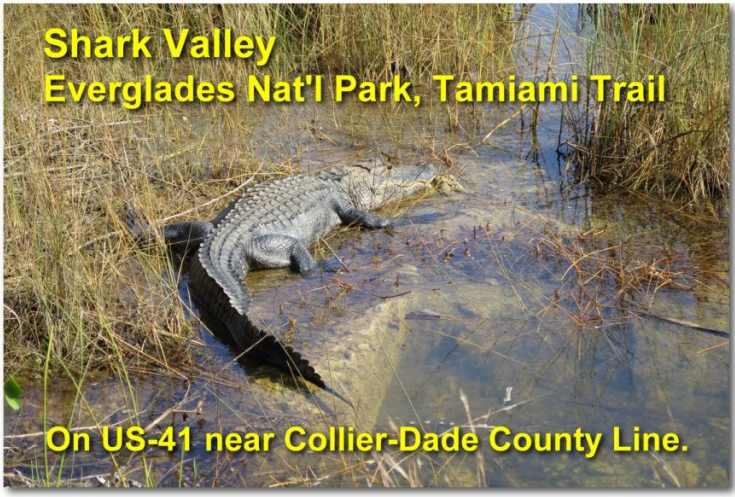
**Corey Billie's Airboat Rides
US-41 Tamiami Trail - Ochopee**



Calusa Nature Center, Fort Myers



**Shark Valley
Everglades Nat'l Park, Tamiami Trail**



On US-41 near Collier-Dade County Line.

 Big Cypress Bend	 Bird Rookery Swamp	 Bird Rookery Swamp	 Six-Mile Cypress	 Shark Valley
 Big Cypress Bend	THE END Thanks for Joining Us! ppacter@gmail.com www.paulvisits.com © Paul Pacter, All Rights Reserved			 Corkscrew Swamp
 Corkscrew Swamp	 Turner River Rd	 Turner River Rd	 Turner River Rd	 Turner River Rd
 Turner River Rd	 Turner River Rd	 Turner River Rd	 Six-Mile Cypress	 10,000 Islands NWR