



## Blackwater Creek Preserve

### General Description

Size: 1,982 acres. The original “core” parcel of this preserve was purchased by Hillsborough County (ELAPP) in 1997, with joint funding from the Florida Communities Trust. Three more small parcels purchased later added an additional 32 acres and fine-tuned the site boundary. Named after the creek that bisects it, which flows into the Hillsborough River, the preserve forms part of a habitat corridor linking together much larger tracts of public land. Across highway 39 lies the County-owned Cone Ranch, a 13,000 acre conservation area. Just west of the preserve is an even larger tract of private land known as the Two Rivers Ranch. The wetland corridor along the creek ensures a permanent connection will remain under regulatory protection, providing a habitat link with the adjacent Hillsborough River State Park and the Lower Hillsborough Flood Detention Area.

### Location and Access

The site is located on the west side of State Road 39, on Blackwater Creek, approximately 1 mile south of the Pasco County line. The main public access point is at the end of Patrinoastro Road, which is about 3/4 of a mile south of the Blackwater Creek bridge. A parking area with scattered picnic tables is located along the roadside, and wooden steps provide access over a barbed wire fence to a hiking trail. This site is leased for cattle grazing, so hikers should expect to encounter livestock along the trail.

### Environmental Significance

Blackwater Creek flows across the preserve from east to west, creating a wetland corridor composed of hardwood swamp forest and bordered with hardwood hammock. The creek itself features limestone outcroppings and usually clear or lightly tannin colored water. Beyond the creek corridor, the majority of the site consists of open flatwoods with scattered cypress domes and narrow strips of trees along small seasonal streams that flow into the Blackwater. The quality of the habitat on this site is exceptional and results from the management practices under the previous owner. The site was being managed as native range for cattle grazing, and prescribed fire was used to maintain the vegetation in an early stage of natural succession. Frequent low intensity burning prevents woody vegetation from becoming established and promotes native grasses and herbaceous vegetation. Not only does this practice provide good grazing conditions for cattle, it also results in better habitat for native wildlife species and maintains plant diversity. In conjunction with a grazing plan that incorporated best management practices to avoid negative impacts such as overgrazing and soil erosion, the property was being managed in a way that was highly compatible with conservation objectives. Once the County acquired the site, a decision was made to continue the cattle lease agreement. The result has been favorable, as the site’s habitat quality is being maintained with very minimal cost to the taxpayers of Hillsborough County.

### Recreational Opportunities

In order to avoid interfering with the cattle grazing operation, recreational access to the site has been limited to hiking and day use only, and dogs are not allowed on the preserve. A hiking trail has been developed using existing roads and trails, with markers and a trail map leading visitors on a 5.75 mile trek through open flatwoods, oak hammock, and hardwood swamp. Wildlife often encountered along the way includes deer, turkey, Sherman’s fox squirrels, gopher tortoises, dusky pigmy rattlesnakes, and Eastern bluebirds.

### Volunteer Opportunities

The County requests that site visitors report unusual plant or wildlife observations, especially of protected species. Volunteers are needed for trail maintenance and other site management activities not covered under the cattle lease agreement.

### Contact Information

Hillsborough County Parks, Recreation and Conservation Department, Conservation Services Office, 10940 McMullen Road, Riverview, FL 33569. (813) 672-7876.