



## Camp Bayou Outdoor Learning Center

### General Description

Size: 152 acres. The original 120 acres of this site was purchased in 1990 by the Hillsborough County ELAP Program. Several smaller tracts have been added since to bring the site up to its present size. Part of the preserve is a former RV campground, and some of the existing buildings have been renovated to provide restrooms, office space and a security residence. The preserve is named after a horseshoe shaped channel that connects to the river at both ends. When the County acquired the site, a decision was made to make the old campground facility available to the public as an ecotourism destination. An open invitation was put out in an attempt to attract a private, non-profit group that would be willing to use the site free of charge. The Ruskin Community Development Foundation came forward, and an agreement was developed that allows the group to operate the site as an environmental education center. Today the old campground is home to the Camp Bayou Outdoor Learning Center, and a second group as well, the Paleo Preserve. Both groups offer educational programs for school groups and the public. Additional buildings have been added, including classrooms and an outdoor pavilion, and the center has become a significant educational resource for our community.

### Location and Access

Camp Bayou is located at the south end of 24th Street SE, about three miles south of College Avenue, in Ruskin. The site is bordered on the south by the Little Manatee River, on the east by the Little Manatee River State Park, and on the west by the Little Manatee River Preserve. The nature trails and canoe/kayak launch are open everyday during daylight hours, but the Outdoor Learning Center is only open to the public on Saturday from 9 to 3. Both the Outdoor Learning Center and the Paleo Preserve are available for groups at other times on a reservation basis.

### Environmental Significance

This preserve is relatively small, but it is nestled between two much larger tracts of public land along the river corridor. The State Park is over 2,000 acres and lies just upstream, while the Little Manatee River Preserve, with over 1,000 acres, is adjacent on the downstream side. The majority of the Camp Bayou Preserve, other than the old campground that now holds the educational center, contains natural habitat, including pine flatwoods, oak hammock, hardwood swamp forest, freshwater marsh and sand pine scrub. It is this high diversity of habitat that makes it such an ideal location for an outdoor educational facility. The river itself is an Outstanding Florida Water, a State of Florida designation reserved for natural water bodies of exceptional quality. The river empties into Tampa Bay in an area known as the Cockroach Bay Aquatic Preserve, another exceptional natural resource that makes protection of the Little Manatee River system a high priority.

### Recreational Opportunities

The site contains two short trails, one on each side of 24th Street. The trail on the east side starts next to the classroom buildings and circles through oak hammock and pine flatwoods habitat, while the trail on the west side leads downstream to an old wooden structure on the river that may be converted into an observation platform in the future. The canoe and kayak launch is one of the best around, providing access to a beautiful section of the river that splits into several channels. A Canoe Outpost facility located upstream at the HWY 301 bridge offers rentals and shuttle service.

### Volunteer Opportunities

The Camp Bayou Outdoor Learning Center is very interested in working with volunteers for all aspects of their operation. The Paleo Preserve can provide opportunities in conjunction with its educational programs. Hillsborough County is responsible for habitat management, including exotic plant control, prescribed burning, and site security, and can use volunteer help as well.

### Contact Information

Camp Bayou Outdoor Learning Center, 315 Tamiami Trail, Ruskin, FL 33570. (813) 641-8545. (<http://campbayou.org>) Paleo Preserve, PO Box 1075, Ruskin, FL 33570. (813) 641-6853. Hillsborough County Parks, Recreation and Conservation Department, Conservation Services Office, 10940 McMullen Road, Riverview, FL 33569. (813) 672-7876.