



Little Manatee River Preserve

General Description

Size: 1,186 acres. This preserve includes lands on both sides of the Little Manatee River, running downstream from the State Park to beyond the Interstate 75 bridge, a shoreline distance of almost 5 miles. Most of the land was acquired through a partnership between Hillsborough County and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. The District has ownership of the preserve, which is managed by the County through a lease agreement. A smaller parcel known as Camp Bayou, which lies between the preserve and the State Park, was purchased with County ELAPP funds only, and is treated as a separate site.

Location and Access

The main access point to the stretch of river within the preserve is from the canoe and kayak launch at Camp Bayou, at the dead end of 24th Street SE in Ruskin. Other access points are upstream in the Little Manatee River State Park, and downstream at the Wildcat Creek Park boat ramp. Land based access to the preserve is currently unavailable, but future plans will include a new road entrance on 21st Ave. SE.

Environmental Significance

The preserve includes undeveloped shoreline habitat along a 5 mile stretch of the Little Manatee River. Water quality in the river is very good, and it has been designated an Outstanding Florida Water. Permanent preservation of the lands bordering this stretch of the river, as well as the majority of the river corridor upstream, will help ensure that this high water quality is maintained in the future. Some of the protected habitat along the river includes extremely rare sand pine scrub, along with the many endangered and threatened species that depend on this natural community for survival, such as Florida golden aster, Curtiss's milkweed, southern bald eagle, Florida scrub jay and a great many gopher tortoises. The endangered West Indian manatee is often sighted in this stretch of the river. Other sections of the preserve were used for high intensity agriculture in the past, and were purchased to provide a protective buffer from the residential development that is now overtaking the region. These former agricultural areas are undergoing habitat restoration. The river itself is a beautiful and unspoiled natural resource, where visitors can get lost in a maze of waterways lined with high scrub bluffs, tidal marshes, and giant leather fern. This section of the Little Manatee River provides a contrast with other area rivers, offering wide open vistas, sparkling water and abundant sunshine in place of heavily shaded bottomland forest. Visitors will enjoy the abundance of wading birds, alligators and the occasional manatee.

Recreational Opportunities

Within the preserve itself, the river is the main recreational resource. Boaters are welcome to go ashore and explore, but there are no marked trail systems at this time. Canoes and kayaks can be rented at the Canoe Outpost on HWY 301 and the river. The canoe and kayak launch at Camp Bayou is one of the best you will find anywhere, with a gently sloping sandy beach. From this launching point, boaters can easily paddle upstream as far as the State Park, or travel a circular loop using a network of natural channels extending downstream as far as the interstate. Parking is limited, however, especially on weekends. Once a separate entrance is developed on 21st Avenue west of I-75, the site will feature parking, picnicking and hiking trails.

Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers are needed for exotic plant control, habitat restoration, and monitoring and recording site conditions and wildlife observations, especially of listed species such as the Florida scrub jay and the Florida golden aster.

Contact Information

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