



## Tampa Bay Coastal Complex

In one very real sense, every site included in this booklet is a functional part of the Tampa Bay Estuary, since all are located within the 2,200 square mile watershed of the bay. But each of the sites in this Tampa Bay Complex are treated as part of a distinct group because they are located on the Tampa Bay shoreline, and either contain significant amounts of highly productive estuarine habitat, or are actively being restored to create more highly valuable coastal habitat. Tampa Bay is the largest open-water estuary in the State of Florida, covering an area of almost 400 square miles. Estuaries, where fresh and salt water meet and mix, are among the most productive natural systems in the world. Rich with nutrients, they serve as nurseries for many marine species, over 70% of which spend at least some portion of their life cycles in these shallow coastal waters.

The Tampa Bay Estuary has suffered greatly from man's activities in the past. Deep channel dredging for shipping, dredge and fill for industrial and residential development, and pollution from sewage effluent and stormwater runoff have all combined to destroy or degrade vast amounts of critical estuarine habitat and water quality. Fortunately, over the past several decades, a massive effort has been undertaken to reverse this damage, and a remarkable recovery is underway. A major part of this restoration consists of the preservation of the last remaining stretches of natural shoreline, and where feasible, the re-creation of natural wetland and upland shoreline habitat.

In addition to the incredibly rich biological resources they contain, these coastal preservation areas provide some of the finest recreational opportunities in the region. Excellent fishing, canoeing, kayaking, camping, birdwatching, hiking and picnicking experiences abound for area residents and visitors. Several marked canoe trail systems lead through mangrove islands reminiscent of the Everglades. More adventurous paddlers can explore extensive unmarked areas on their own. Educational displays await the curious visitor at nature centers in Upper Tampa Bay Park and Weedon Island Preserve. Volunteers can sign up with half a dozen different agencies to help with tasks ranging from trail maintenance and exotic plant removal to leading guided walks along nature trails.

One of the most unusual and scenic natural features found in these coastal sites occurs as an open zone between the mangrove shoreline and the higher coastal uplands. Known as salt barrens, saltern or salt flats, this is an area covered by very high tides where water pools and evaporates, leaving higher concentrations of salt where few plants can grow. These unique conditions also provide breeding habitat for salt marsh mosquitoes, and as a result, most salt barrens habitat has been eliminated by mosquito ditching. Rare remnants can still be seen at Upper Tampa Bay Park, Weedon Island, Mobbly Bayou, Wolf Branch, Cockroach Bay and Terra Ceia.