

Chassahowitzka Wildlife Management Area



A Self-Guided Driving Tour

Florida Fish and Wildlife
Conservation Commission
MyFWC.com





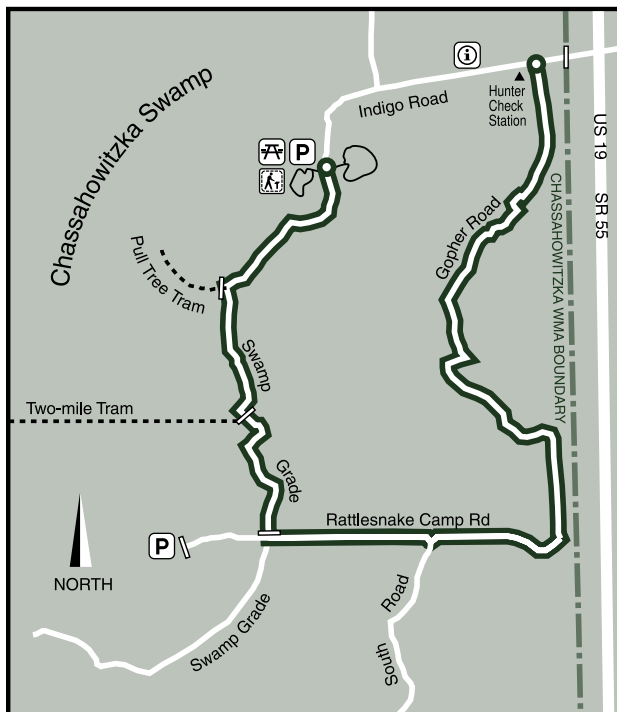
Welcome to

Chassahowitzka Wildlife Management Area

We hope you enjoy this 8-mile driving tour. We have designed the tour to help you understand this unique and wild landscape, and some of the stories it holds.

If you take a look at the map on the right, you'll notice that between this trailhead and the Gulf of Mexico lies the largest forested coastal wetland south of the Suwannee River—Chassahowitzka Swamp.

From here, you'll travel through a sampling of most of the area's natural habitats. Watch for numbered posts on the right hand side of the road as you drive; they will be keyed to the interpretive stops in this guide. By the time you finish your tour, you may come to recognize the quilt of native plant communities that cover the landscape of Chassahowitzka.



Touring Tips

Plan at least 1.5 to 2 hours for this driving tour, allowing time to stop and take short walks as suggested.

If you visit during hunt seasons, wear orange vests or hats while hiking.

Stay alert and drive slowly; this will increase your chances of seeing a variety of wildlife, especially at dawn and dusk.

Please enjoy wildlife from a distance: don't feed or disturb. Don't remove wildlife or plants from this area, nor release wildlife here from other places. If you suspect a wildlife law violation, call 1 (888) 404-3922.

CAUTION: The driving tour follows an unpaved single-lane road; you may encounter stretches of loose sand or standing water. Please do not drive off-road to avoid such areas. Not recommended for large recreational vehicles.



Here at the Indigo Road trailhead, you stand about 5 miles as the crow flies from the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico. But it's only been several hundred thousand years, not so long in geologic terms, since salty Gulf waters covered the Chassahowitzka Swamp. At that time, this parking lot was beachfront property!

About ten thousand years ago, centuries before Europeans arrived in North America, Native Americans hunted, fished and gathered wild plants all along Florida's Gulf Coast. Evidence of ancient burial grounds and campsites have been found on the high and dry sand ridge east of the Chassahowitzka Swamp.



1



In 1985, the land included in the Chassahowitzka WMA was purchased through the State of Florida's Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) program. Several smaller tracts have been added in the last 20 years.

Now, the challenges of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission are:

- to actively restore and manage the land, to ensure the survival of the full complement of its native species; and
- to provide recreational opportunities for a wide range of users.



2

Young longleaf pine



On Chassahowitzka's hilltops, open pinelands called sandhills thrive. One hundred years ago, longleaf pine trees stood like natural pillars here, as well as across a quarter of the state of Florida. Sunlight filtered through the open canopy, nurturing carpets of wildflowers and grasses. Low-intensity fires, ignited by lightning every two-to-five years, kept the sandhills healthy.

But for many decades, naturally-burning fires were excluded from these sandhill pinewoods. You can see how oaks have invaded the open, airy woodlands, shading out longleaf pine saplings and wildflowers.

You can also see that we are knocking back the oaks with a chemical treatment, so that prescribed fire can be reintroduced. In time, a diverse flush of vegetation including grasses, wildflowers, and low-hardwoods, will return to this longleaf pine-sandhill ecosystem.



3



Gopher tortoise and burrow

If you park your car and venture just a short distance from the road, you'll likely see shady burrows dug deep into the dry, well-drained soil by gopher tortoises. These burrows also provide home or shelter to a host of other animals, some common and some rare, including the Eastern indigo snake, the pine snake, the Florida mouse, and the gopher frog. Throughout Florida, habitat for gopher tortoises is shrinking because the high, dry ground they need for burrows is also desirable for residential and commercial development. As the gopher tortoise declines, the web of life begins to unravel.

Here at Chassahowitzka WMA, it is the goal of our land managers to burn about 2000 acres every year with prescribed fires.



4



Saw palmetto

Notice how the land tilts subtly downhill, and the high sandhill ridges give way to Florida's most widespread natural habitat, the pine flatwoods. Early European settlers coined this term to emphasize the community's characteristic low, flat topography. Plants that live here must endure wet roots during long rainy seasons and dehydration during drier times of the year. Longleaf or slash pines form an open canopy with saw palmetto, gallberry, fetterbush, blueberry, tarflower, and grasses below.



5

Hydric hammock visible through the open pines



As you travel on, you continue to move almost imperceptibly downhill. Ahead and off to your right, notice what appears to be a “wall” of trees through the open pine flatwoods. This is a plant community we call hydric hammock. The trees that grow here tolerate a wetter soil, and it is this moisture that stops prescribed burns from moving across thousands of acres at a time. The hammock is the first sign you are entering the edge of the swamp that defines Chassahowitzka. You’ll see a great variety of trees: dahoon holly, cedar, sweet bay and southern magnolia, sweet gum and cabbage palm, to name just a few.



6



Red-shouldered hawk

Ancient bald cypress trees once dominated the vast, low-lying Chassahowitzka Swamp. Virtually all the enormous cypress were logged out during the early 1900s; over the intervening years, a much younger forest of red maple, cedar, gum, bay, and cabbage palm has regrown.

You may see migrating and resident songbirds darting between the trees, and otters and raccoons are a regular sight. Listen for the calls of red-shouldered hawks and barred owls ringing across the swamp, as well.



7

Take a stroll on Pull Tree Tram

Park your car and walk down this shady path, an abandoned logging roadway that fingers deep into the swamp. This was one of the many spurs or trams that were built to retrieve the felled cypress trees. Here you'll gain a strong sense of the lost world of the ancient cypress. Huge stumps will give you a sense of the circumference of the mighty trees that once dominated the forest. About 10 minutes down the trail you'll notice an enormous fallen cypress trunk on the right, filled now like a planter with a variety of ferns and palmetto.

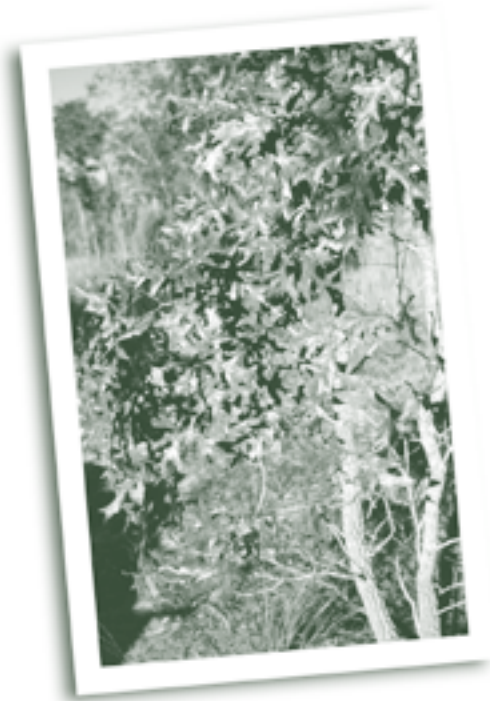
Even with all the cypress and cedars logged from its interior, this forested wetland still works hard, replenishing the drinking water aquifer below the land's surface; sheltering a diversity of wildlife; and providing clean, fresh water to the productive marshes to the west.



8



The raised trams you walk and drive on were originally constructed to support railroads that transported the enormous trees to mills further inland. It's almost impossible to imagine how challenging they were to build. First, hardwood trees were cut and laid parallel, end to end, the length of the planned tramway. Cypress cross-ties were placed across the hardwood trunks, and then steel rails were anchored to the cross-ties with spikes. "Sand cars" backed down the cross-ties, pouring sand amongst the trees and ties to stabilize the tram. At that point, railroad cars were able to motor into the swamp along the tram system to drag the enormous cypress back to the logging camp.



Turkey oaks

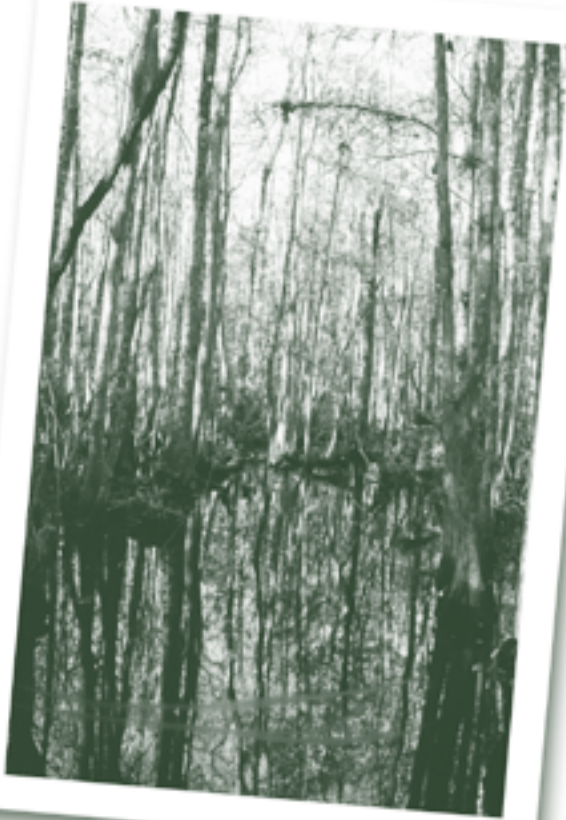


Now you are entering Florida's version of a desert, the sand pine scrub. Clumps of shrubs, mostly oaks and blueberry relatives, are interspersed with open patches of bare sand. Lichens often dot the ground. Isn't it phenomenal what a difference just a few feet in elevation make, in terms of plant communities?

Although scrub receives as much rain as the other habitats on the area, its exceptionally well-drained sand allows water to pass through rapidly, forcing plants to evolve special strategies for efficiently gathering and retaining moisture. Small leaves, with less surface area exposed to the drying heat and often coated with wax, are one of the ways plants have adapted to the desert-like conditions. Below ground, extensive root systems seek out deep water tables and thick roots store ephemeral rainwater.



10



Take a hike into the swamp

Ready to stretch your legs? To your right is a long abandoned logging tram that heads directly west, deep into the heart of Chassahowitzka Swamp. You can walk almost 2 miles (one way), and then return back here to your car (or take a shorter hike, as you prefer). Look and listen for brilliantly-plumaged wood ducks, and keep an eye open for alligators sunning on the raised edges of the canals.



11



Florida black bear

If you're going to catch a glimpse of a black bear, this might be the place! Actually, bears are rarely seen here, but we often encounter signs of their passage—tracks, heavily-scratched tree trunks, or a splintered cabbage palm (bears like to eat swamp cabbage just as we do!). Bears favor the edge of the swamp, although they tend to den in the dense, slightly higher flatwoods. Wildlife researchers have learned that the Chassahowitzka (or West Central Florida) black bear population—less than 20 individuals—may be the smallest known bear population in North America. Prior to the 20th century, an estimated 12,000 bears roamed Florida; they've been dramatically reduced due to habitat loss. Highway mortality, or roadkill, is a very serious threat to our Chassahowitzka bears.



12

Pine plantation



After all the longleaf pines were harvested, the previous landowners converted the native pine forests to pine plantations, for pulpwood production. We are in the process of harvesting these young pines, so that we can restore the native longleaf forest. Can you see evidence of how the trees were planted in rows or raised beds, like an agricultural crop? This type of production works well for those who harvest the trees, but the row-cropped pine plantations are essentially wildlife “deserts,” since very few native species can prosper there. Fire cannot perform its natural cleansing functions, nor can sunlight penetrate to the forest floor.



13

Gopher frog



Seasonal ponds like the one just visible through the woods on your left dot the upland landscape of Chassahowitzka. These small marshes and ponds fill with water during the wet season; they often lack trees and usually are dominated by grasses and herbs. Seasonal ponds are extremely important breeding grounds for amphibians like the gopher frog and for several species of toads and tree frogs. They are also important watering holes for many mammals and birds inhabiting the surrounding dry uplands.



14



Centralia ruins

Early settlers in Florida used the forests to fuel a variety of industries. Resin was extracted from old-growth longleaf pines and used to produce tar, pitch, turpentine, and rosin. You may spot some trees that still bear v-shaped scars where their trunks were tapped for turpentine-producing sap. Rot-resistant and impervious to salt water, wood from longleaf pines was valued for boat building and housing construction. To process the felled trees, hungry lumber mills were built and flourished during the early part of the century.

Just to the south of where you stand, between 1910-1922, Tidewater Cypress operated a lumber mill at Centralia, a town of 1500 laborers and their families. The laborers were a mix of ethnic groups, including Greeks, Irish, and Germans. Centralia Mill, one of the largest in the state, could produce 100,000 board feet of lumber each day during peak periods. But by 1938, after the loggers had stripped the swamp of its best timber, the railroad ceased operation and Centralia became a ghost town.



15

Longleaf pine sandhills



The beautiful, wide-open longleaf pine sandhills on your left represent what we'd like to bring back on our uplands, as we continue our restoration efforts.

One of the reasons this habitat is so important to this region's human population is because these sandy soils allow rain to drain into the ground recharging the deep Floridan aquifer, a primary source of our drinking water. This is critical in fast-growing Florida; water levels of the underground Floridan aquifer just to the south and west of here have been rapidly dropping in the last decade. Protecting natural upland communities like this one is vital to sustaining our water supply.



16



You've reached the end of the interpreted portion of the Chassahowitzka Driving Tour. Continue north 1.5 miles to the area exit on Gopher Road. Drive slowly and keep an eye out for wildlife. And now that you've learned about Chassahowitzka's plant communities, practice identifying them as you leave the area.

Unless you'd like to refer to it later, please drop off this guidebook in the marked box at the hunter's check station for others to reuse.

–Thanks for visiting!



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