LAFAYETTE THROUGH TIME

For centuries prior to European conquest, Lake Lafayette was a favored settlement of Florida's native peoples. At least 40 mounds and middens are still located around the lake's periphery, mute testimony to the connections humans have always had with these lovely and productive waters.

In 1825, the U.S. Congress gave the French Marquis de Lafayette a full township of land, including a portion of this lake's shoreline, in gratitude for his assistance during the American Revolution. Lafayette established a colony of Norman peasants on the shores of the lake, intending to cultivate vineyards, olive groves, mulberry trees, and silkworms. But the colony quickly failed "due to the ravages of the climate," and cotton and other agricultural production became the economic mainstay for these lands, and much of newly-established Leon County.

For thousands of years, the interconnected wetlands of Lake Lafayette functioned as a single unit, drying and refilling in response to rainfall and drought. In 1909, geologist Eli Sellards investigated what he dubbed the "disappearing lakes" north and east of Tallahassee: Iamonia, Jackson, Miccosukee, and Lafayette. Eventually, it was understood that all of the lakes were governed by seasonal rainfall and one or more sinkholes connected to the aquifer. For example, during times of high water or flood, Lake Lafayette would flow east and spill into the St. Mark's River. But in a dry spell, much of the lake water would drain west and disappear into the underground aquifer through Lafayette Sink, a large sinkhole in the northern reaches of the lake.

Lake Lafayette was so frequently dry and grassy, early settlers used it to graze their cattle, and knew it as the "Prairie Lake." During these droughty periods, the lake bottom would be cleansed—that is, its plant matter would oxidize and be reduced. Lightning-ignited fires sometimes crept down from surrounding marshes and pinewoods, burning the lake's organic, mucky soils. The lake would refill with clear water when the rains returned, and its hard, sandy bottom would once again offer good habitat for aquatic plants and animals. Such cycling was indispensable to the health of the lake.

The problems for Lake Lafayette—the most hydrologically-disturbed lake in northwest Florida—began in the 1820s, when the entire length of the lake's northern shore was separated from Alford Arm and stabilized so that the CSX railroad might be built close to the water's edge. In 1948, the owners of Piney Z Plantation built earthen dikes in the middle of the lake. The lake was alternately farmed and flooded for duck hunting. Over time, the lake was further fragmented by numerous dikes into the artificial basins you see now.

Ironically, the artificially-stabilized water levels attracted the largest rookery of endangered wood storks in north Florida. Ospreys, wood ducks, anhingas, great blue and green-backed herons, and a handful of other wading birds, nest here and raise their young. Frogs bellow, and Eastern kingbirds, red-winged blackbirds, and boat-tailed grackles noisily stake out breeding territories.

But thousands of houses now hug the boundaries of upper Lafayette and Piney Z, sending their nutrient-laden stormwater runoff into the lake. These, then, are the challenges to this wonderful in-town lake system: too many nutrients and dams, and too little natural flow. State and local government agencies hope to develop strategies to improve the health of the lake, and sustain its endangered wildlife and unique recreational opportunities.

LAFAYETTE PASSAGE
PADDLING TRAIL

Lafayette PASSAGE

How To Get There

Lake Lafayette/Piney Z Trail
(7.8 miles round-trip)
Travel east out of Tallahassee on Highway 27 beyond Capital Circle. Turn left on Doyle Conner Boulevard and continue one-half mile. Turn right on Heritage Park Boulevard and drive through Piney Z Plantation to parking area at the City Park.

Lake Lafayette Trail
(6 miles round-trip)
Travel east of Tallahassee on Highway 27 to Chaires Cross Road and turn left. Drive about 1 mile and turn left on the Road to the Lake, just before the railroad track. Launch your boat at the unimproved ramp at the end of the road.

For more information about the Lafayette trails, go to:
www.talgov.com/parks/lafayette.cfm

Let Us Know
To report aquatic plant problems along the trails, call the Bureau of Invasive Plants (Department of Environmental Protection) at (850) 245-2830, or City of Tallahassee Parks and Recreation Department at (850) 891-5340.

The Trail is a cooperative project of the City of Tallahassee Parks and Recreation Department and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. A special thanks to Michael Hill, Jess Van Dyke, Chuck Goodheart, Susan Tanski, Liz Sparks, and David Godwin for their vision and hard work in the creation of the Lake Lafayette Paddling Trail. Photography by David Moynahan, text by Susan Cerulean.

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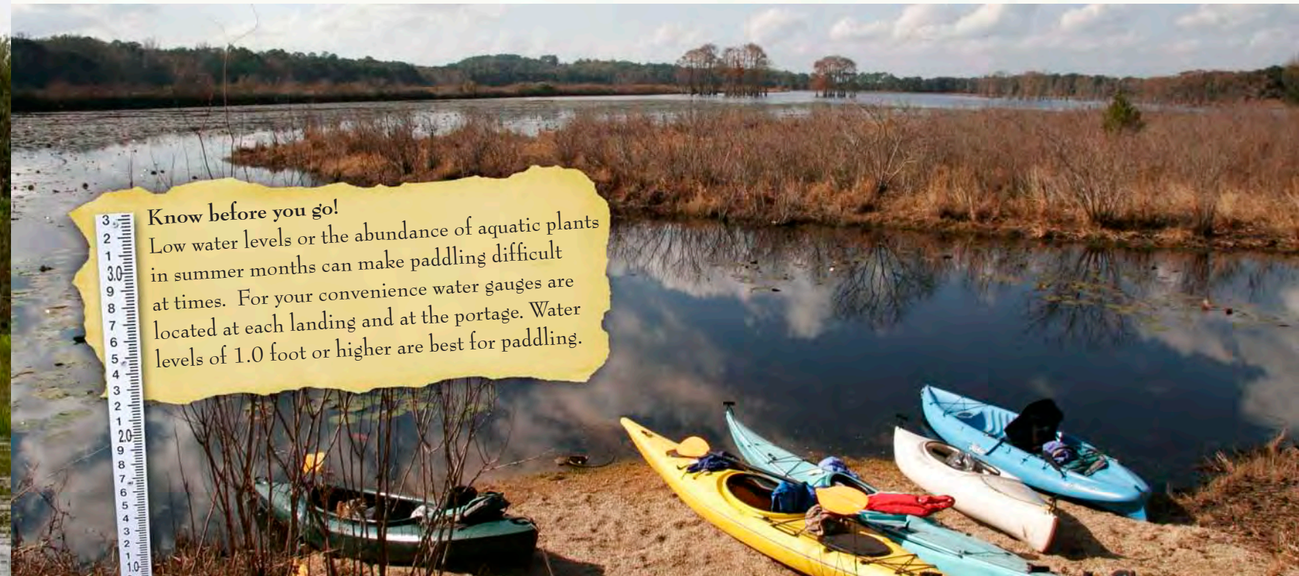


Know before you go!
Low water levels or the abundance of aquatic plants in summer months can make paddling difficult at times. For your convenience water gauges are located at each landing and at the portage. Water levels of 1.0 foot or higher are best for paddling.

Lafayette
PASSAGE

What About the Gators?

We humans have shared Florida's waterways with alligators for centuries. But for safety's sake:

- Don't swim in the lakes.
- Alligators favor small prey: closely supervise your children and pets.
- Never feed alligators. "Fed" alligators may become aggressive.
- What to do if you find yourself boat to snout with an alligator? Stop, back up, and give the animal time to swim away.

Enjoy the many pairs of osprey nesting and fishing in the Lafayette chain of lakes.

Upper Lake Lafayette

J. R. ALFORD GREENWAY

Alford Arm

CITY PARK

Heritage Park Blvd.

Doyle Conner Blvd.

Piney Z Plantation

Piney Z Lake

0.9

Portage

0.6

CSX RAILROAD

Chaires

1568

Lower Lake Lafayette

North Branch

South Branch

0.9

0.3

1.0

Heather's Hairpin

Michael's Meander

Cypress Pond

0.4

0.7

1.0

0.5

Van Dyke Cut-off

0.5

Boat Ramp Loop

0.3

Road to the Lake

Chaires Cross Road

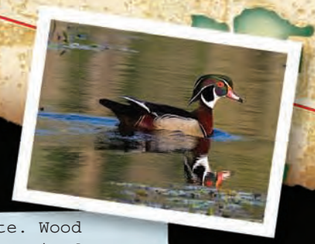
Apalachee Parkway

27

L. KIRK EDWARDS WILDLIFE AND ENVIRONMENTAL AREA

Piney Z Lake is the most productive of Lafayette's segments for fishing. In 1996, it was pumped dry, exposing its bottom for the first time in half a century. Two feet of accumulated muck were scraped off the bottom and sculpted into five spoil islands and six earthen "fishing fingers." Now bream and bass can construct the beds they need for egg-laying in the enhanced, sandy bottom.

Iridescent purple gallinules commonly nest on Lake Lafayette. Watch for them skating from lily pad to lily pad, picking aquatic insects from undersides of floating leaves.



Waterfowl hunting is a traditional activity on Lake Lafayette. Wood ducks, blue- and green-winged teal, or ring-necked ducks are prized. Duck hunting takes place in late September, and from mid-November through January. During these times, be aware that hunters may be about, especially at dawn and dusk. Wear brightly-colored clothing if you paddle during hunting seasons.

Keep your eyes open for endangered wood storks, Florida's largest native wading bird. The L. Kirk Edwards Wildlife and Environmental Area was established to protect and sustain the Lake Lafayette wood stork colony (the largest in northwest Florida).