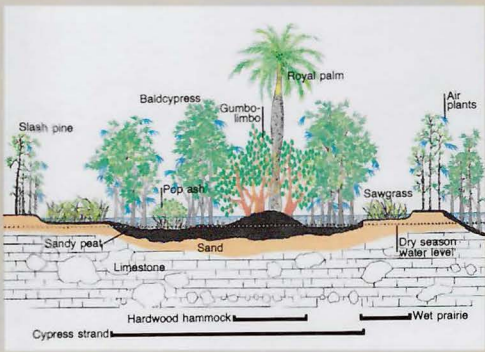


Big Cypress

National Preserve
Florida

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Young alligators (1) sun themselves on a culvert, which holds warmth on cool days. Gators, predatory fish, and wading birds find culverts prime fishing spots. They wait below culvert openings for the current to channel fish to them!

The cross section of Big Cypress ecosystems (2) shows seasonal water levels. Cypress trees (photo above) can grow in the water; most trees would drown. Baldcypresses (5) border a pond in the Bear Island area; the foreground shows typical grasses and sedges. A closer look in Big Cypress reveals a green lynx

spider (3) inspecting a morning glory, or this imperial moth (4) which put down near the Oasis Ranger Station.

NPS photos by Glenn Van Nimwegen (above) and Kevin Peier (left).

Vast Wilderness Watered by Tropical Summer Rains

Big Cypress Swamp. "Big" refers not to the tree's size, but to the swamp's extent of more than 6,200 square kilometers (2,400 square miles) in subtropical Florida. "Swamp" is a misnomer, for the land consists of sandy islands of slash pine, mixed hardwood hammocks (tree islands), wet prairies, dry prairies, marshes, and estuarine mangrove forests. Still, "swamp" somehow fits. At its best the swamp should be seen by any of us who dream of the world as it was before we humans arrived. Airplants, both bromeliads and orchids, perch on the cypress and hammock trees like strange bird nests. An occasional Florida panther leaves impressive paw marks in wet marl. Black bears claw crayfish from the sloughs, or rip cabbage palmetto apart for its soft fruits.

Big Cypress is about one-third covered with cypress trees, mostly the dwarf pond cypress variety. Broad belts of these trees edge wet prairies; cypress strands line the sloughs; and occasional cypress domes dot the horizon with the symmetry of paint bubbles. Giant cypresses such as those pictured in the large photograph above are nearly gone. They are the great baldcypresses. Today's few remaining giants, escapees of the lumber era, embody antiquity; some are 600 to 700 years old. Their bulbous bases flare downward and outward to root systems loosely locked in rich, wet organic peat. Their girths outstretch the combined embrace of you and three long-armed friends. The big cypress trees stand safe now, here in this national preserve, from earlier fates as gutters, coffins, stadium seats, pickle barrels, and the hulls of PT boats. It's reason enough for alligators, also protected, to grin.

We humans have tried most everything with this grand swamp in our own short past here. The Miccosukee and Seminole Indians subsisted here in tune with nature. Then grand schemes sought to drain vast regions: meandering rivers were gutted to straight canals; sawgrass prairies became sugarcane and citrus plantations. Loggers came. Oil rigs came. Land speculators descended. Then came roads, and drainage canals that parched extensive tracts. But the main resource turned out to be water, not land, not trees, not oil, but freshwater wending slowly seaward, requiring a day to flow across 0.8 kilometers (a half mile) of the land's incredibly unrelieved flatness.

With completion of the Tamiami Trail in 1928, the Big Cypress became easily accessible; economic exploitation began in earnest. Lumbering boomed in the 1930s and 1940s and small settlements at Ochopee, Monroe Station, and Pinecrest attracted rugged people. Many lived on here as hunters, fishermen, guides, plant collectors, and cattlemen—latter day frontiersmen fleeing urban restraints. Florida's first producing oil well was drilled in 1943 north of the present-day preserve, near Sunniland. During the 1960s drainage of the Big Cypress began as land development and speculation schemes blossomed. Thousands invested sight unseen in land that was under water much of the year. Public interest burgeoned when jetport plans were unveiled in 1968 for the swamp's eastern edge. The threat posed to the watershed of Everglades National Park sparked establishment of the Big Cypress National Preserve. The 1970s brought more enlightened attitudes toward watersheds and wetlands, and today Florida is

much involved in environmental protection efforts. Now we are back simply to trying nature's way while allowing for recreational enjoyment.

A reporter once overheard a south Florida native say: "If California had our water, they'd think they'd gone to heaven." One hundred fifty centimeters (60 inches) of rain fall in an average year, beginning as clouds stacked up over the Gulf of Mexico. The rain falls and falls during a season of thunderstorms that usually begins each year in May. The rains flood the cypress strands and prairies before flowing slowly to the south through Everglades National Park. It's a slow drainage upon which creatures great and small have learned to depend. Only man was quite slow to realize his dependence. The land slopes but 3.1 centimeters per kilometer (2 inches per mile) to the Gulf of Mexico, causing a delayed drainage of the wet season's watery bounty, its lifeblood. The gradual drainage extends the wet season by two to three full months after the rains taper off in October. And it provides a steady mix of freshwater and saltwater in the estuaries along the coast of Everglades National Park. This nutrient-rich mix supports marine animals such as pink shrimp, snook, and snapper, all important to Florida's fishing industry. The swamp also provides vital water for several southwest Florida cities. During the wet season much of the landscape may flow with water belly-high to a great blue heron.

Most out-of-staters come here in the dry season, winter, to escape the rigors of snow and ice elsewhere. In the dry season

water evaporates or flows into the estuaries downstream and the swamp's aquatic life concentrates in the remaining deeper pools and sloughs. To these come stately wading birds, the herons and egrets and the unique wood stork. And with some luck you may see alligators, red cockaded woodpeckers, wild turkey, deer, mink, or the bald eagle, as though the drying up of the water reduced these creature's hiding places. But that is illusion, life simply concentrates at its source, water. Amazing things have been seen here. A gar might flash silver-gold in the amber water under a bunch of ghost-orchid flowers. Herons and ibises were once measured here not by count but by the number of acres their numbers covered at one sighting. For sounds try the wild and unsettling wailing of the long-legged, long-billed, limpkin. And use your other senses, too. Feel the saw grass, not a true grass but a sedge, and in that feeling touch one of the oldest green growing forms of this world.

Two worlds of beauty confront us here: the beauty of broad sweeps and limitless horizons; and the beauty of infinite miniature and interrelated worlds. One is the aerial view, perhaps of the swallowtail kite; the other is the view from a self-propelled canoe, or the view of a gator with only eyes and snout protruding from the water. That's Big Cypress Swamp.

Access

Two major highways cross the preserve, Alligator Alley (Rt. 84) and Tamiami Trail (US 41). With Rt. 29 to the west, they enable you to explore the Big Cypress. The fascinating Loop Road (Rt. 94) from 40-Mile Bend to Monroe Station is paved for only 13 kilometers (8 miles). The graded-dirt Turner River Road (Rt. 839) connects Tamiami Trail and Alligator Alley. Drive unpaved roads with caution; they can be dusty or muddy and rough.

Administration

Big Cypress National Preserve is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Congress set aside about 40 percent of the Big Cypress Swamp, 231,000 hectares (570,000 acres), in 1974 as a national preserve, a new category of lands deserving federal protection. The preserve's wild country is protected, but certain pre-existing human uses, not allowed in most National Park System areas, are permitted to continue here.

Hunting continues under special joint federal and state regulations. Several landowners maintain homes and cabins on private property throughout the preserve. Off-road vehicles licensed by the National Park Service are allowed (see "Regulations"). Oil and gas exploration continue, regulated to ensure minimal impact. Existing cattle grazing continues by permit. Man continues to use and enjoy the area, but with more planning and care.

Park rangers are here to help you enjoy your visit. Don't hesitate to ask for their help or guidance. Please report any fire, accident, violation, or unusual incident to them.

Information

National Park Service visitor information is provided at the preserve's park headquarters and at the Oasis Ranger Station. Stop by for information or write: Big Cypress National Preserve, Star Route Box 110, Ochopee, FL 33943. You can also call park headquarters, (813) 695-2000 or (813) 262-1066, or the Oasis Ranger Station, (813) 695-4111, for information.

Regulations

What we do today becomes our legacy for tomorrow. National Park Service regulations are designed to protect Big Cypress as Congress intended. They are given here briefly; more detailed information is available at park headquarters and at the Oasis Ranger Station.

Plants, animals, and other features are generally protected against collection and injury. However, hunting, fishing, and trapping of game animals are permitted under federal and state regulations and

are managed by the National Park Service and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Special Florida Game Management Area regulations apply in the preserve. Check with a park ranger or state wildlife officer for information. Licenses are required. Collecting archeological artifacts or disturbing historic sites or Indian mounds is prohibited; they are protected by the federal Archeological Protection Act.

Check with a park ranger before you begin an off-road

vehicle or hiking trip. All off-road vehicles, including swamp buggies, airboats, ATVs, and tracked vehicles, must have a permit from the National Park Service for travel in the preserve. Park Service regulations require certain safety features. The area between the Loop Road (Rt. 94) and the Tamiami Trail (US 41) is closed to all off-road vehicles. The Florida Trail, the marked hiking trail between Alligator Alley and the Tamiami Trail, is also closed to all vehicles. Vehicles may cross the Florida Trail but they

may not traverse it. When hiking or riding off-road vehicles, watch for muck soil, sharp-edged pinnacle rock, and holes. **The terrain makes off-road travel hazardous except for specialized vehicles.**

If you leave the roads in the preserve to explore by off-road vehicle or on foot, to camp, or to hunt, remember that some land remains in private ownership or may be temporarily closed. Please respect private property owners' rights and honor closure signs.

Use fire with care. In some seasons fire can burn more than ground cover. Dry organic soils can burn down to limestone bedrock.

Watch for poisonous plants (poison ivy and poisonwood) and poisonous snakes (coral snakes, water moccasins, and diamondback and pygmy rattlers).

Facilities and Services

Lodging is available in Naples, in Everglades City, and throughout the Miami area.

There is one campground in the preserve, a private campground just east of Ochopee. In addition, private campgrounds are located 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) west of the preserve on Alligator Alley; at Everglades City; at Collier-Seminole State Park; and near Naples. To the south, Everglades National Park has two campgrounds, one at Long Pine Key and another at Flamingo. The preserve also has

several designated areas for primitive camping. Two campsites have drinking water; the rest of the sites have no facilities. See map for locations.

There are other places of interest in Big Cypress Swamp in addition to the preserve that you may want to visit, including Indian villages along Tamiami Trail and the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a National Audubon Society refuge located northwest of the preserve. Boardwalk trails and additional information on the area are available at these sites.

Big Cypress

Color key to ecosystems

Cypress	Pinelands	Fresh Water Slough	Mangrove	Developed or disturbed land
Hardwood Hammocks	Fresh Water Marl Prairies	Coastal Prairie	Marine and Estuarine (all blue tones)	

