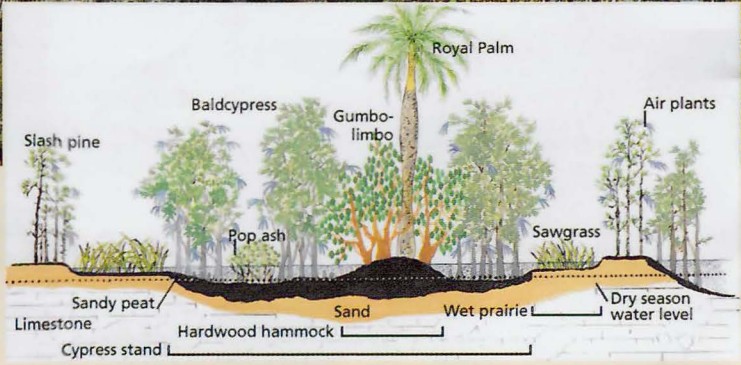




Young alligators sun themselves on a culvert, which holds warmth on cool days. Gators, predatory fish, and wading

birds find culverts prime fishing spots. They wait below culvert openings for the current to channel fish to them!



The cross-section of the Big Cypress ecosystem shows seasonal water levels.



A closer look into Big Cypress reveals a green lynx spider inspecting a morning glory.



An imperial moth rests near the visitor center.



Bald cypresses border a pond in the northern part of the park.



While most trees would drown, Cypress trees (above) can grow in water.

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 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), prairies, cypress domes and strands, marshes, and estuarine mangrove forests. Still, “swamp” somehow fits. The vast wildness of it tickles our fears of snakes, spiders, and unknown danger, yet its beauty beckons us into the knee-deep water. Air plants, 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 out 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 where deeper water prevails; and occasional cypress domes dot the horizon like hills on a vast plain. Giant cypresses (*top photograph*) are nearly gone. They are the great bald cypresses. 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.

In our own short past here, we humans have tried almost everything with this grand swamp. The Calusa, Miccosukee, and Seminole Indians subsisted here. Escaped slaves may have sought refuge here. Later grand schemes sought to drain vast regions: meandering rivers were gutted to straight canals, and sawgrass prairies became sugar cane 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 fresh water wending slowly seaward, requiring a day to flow across a half mile of the land’s incredibly unrelieved flatness.

With completion of the Tamiami Trail in 1928, the Big Cypress became easily reached, and 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—hunting, fishing, collecting plants, raising cattle, or leading tours—latter day pioneers 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. 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.” Sixty inches of rain fall in an average year, beginning as clouds stacked up over the Gulf of Mexico. The rain falls every afternoon 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 is a slow drainage upon which creatures great and small have learned to depend. Only humans were quite slow to realize our dependence. The land slopes only two 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 fresh water and salt water 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. With luck you may see alligators, red-cockaded woodpeckers, wild turkeys, deer, mink, or bald eagles, as though the drying up of the water reduced these creatures’ hiding places. But this is an 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 blooming bromeliad. Herons and ibises were once measured here not by count but by the number of acres their numbers covered at one sighting. They continue to survive at Big Cypress, their presence echoing through the swamp in eerie calls. For sounds try the wild and unsettling wailing of the long-legged, long-billed, limpkin. Use your other senses, too. Feel the sawgrass, 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 minature 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.

A National Preserve

Visiting the Preserve
In 1974 Congress set aside about 45 percent of Big Cypress Swamp as a national preserve. Expanded in 1988, the preserve totals 729,000 acres. Its wild country is protected, but some preexisting human uses not allowed in most national park areas are permitted here. Hunting, off-road vehicle use, and oil and gas exploration continue (*see Recreational Activities at right*). There are homes and cabins on private property. People continue to use the area, but with planning and care to assure minimal impacts.

Getting to the Preserve
Big Cypress National Preserve extends from Everglades National Park northward to seven miles north of I-75. U.S. 41 provides direct access to the park visitor center and other points of interest. The Oasis Visitor Center is open daily except December 25.

More Information
Big Cypress National Preserve
33100 Tamiami Trail East
Ochopee, FL 34141-1000
239-695-1201 (visitor information)
239-695-2000 (park headquarters)
www.nps.gov/bicy

Recreational Activities

Hunting
Plants, animals, and other features are generally protected against collection and injury. Hunting of game animals and fishing are permitted under federal and state regulations issued by the National Park Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Special Florida Game Management Area regulations apply in the preserve. For more information on hunting, contact the visitor center.

Off-road Vehicle Use
All off-road vehicles including swamp buggies,

airboats, ATVs, and 4x4s must have a permit from the National Park Service for off-road travel in the preserve. Special regulations apply to off-road vehicle use within the preserve. Ask at the Oasis Visitor Center for details.

Hiking
Short Walks at Kirby Storter Roadside Park and Tree Snail Hammock Trail provide a glimpse into the various habitats of Big Cypress Swamp. Kirby Storter Trail is west of Monument Lake Campground and is accessible. Tree Snail Hammock Trail is across from the education center on

Loop Road. Accessible wildlife viewing platforms are at H.P. Williams Roadside Park and Oasis Visitor Center. The Fire Prairie Trail along Rte. 839, a bicycle and hiking trail, follows an old road bed that once led to an oil pad. No vehicle traffic is allowed on the trail. The preserve includes more than 30 miles of the Florida National Scenic Trail, a 1,400-mile trail through Florida. Hikers should be prepared for wet areas that can be from ankle-to-waist-deep. There are primitive campsites but no potable water. Backcountry permits are required.

Canoeing
The park’s canoe trails take five to six hours to paddle. The Turner River Canoe Trail begins at U.S. 41 and ends in Chokoloskee Bay. Take-out points are at Chokoloskee or the Everglades National Park Gulf Coast Visitor Center. The Sea-grape Drive is the launch point for the Halfway Creek Canoe Trail. You can paddle on this trail south past Plantation Island or loop through the mangrove channels. The take-out points beyond Plantation Island are along the causeway leading to Chokoloskee or at the Gulf Coast Visitor Center.

Bicycling
A series of limerock trails offers a scenic bicycle trip through the backcountry. These trails are also used by off-road vehicles and hikers.

Camping
Improved campsites are at Monument Lake and Midway campgrounds. There are designated sites and both allow tents and motor homes. Restrooms and water are available. A fee is charged from mid-December through mid-April. Primitive campgrounds are along Loop Road, Burns Road, and at the northern end of Turner River Road in the

Bear Island Area. These campgrounds are free. They have no water or improved facilities. All can accommodate tents and most accommodate small motor homes. Dump stations with potable water are at Dona Drive and Midway Campground. Fees apply.

Sightseeing by Car
From car windows winter visitors can view birds and alligators in roadside canals, where wildlife congregates during seasonal low water. Loop Road scenic drive passes through different plant habitats. Look carefully for hard-to-see animals such as deer and

otter. This 26-mile, one-lane road with an unimproved surface is open to 2-wheel-drive vehicles. The road is passable all year, but watch for potholes and water flowing over the road.

Canals along U.S. 41 attract wading birds. Alligators sun themselves along the rocky banks.

Rte. 839 and Birdon Road form a U-shaped, 17-mile drive through open grass prairie dotted with slash pine and bald cypress. This graded-dirt drive is ideal for viewing wildflowers in the prairies and along the canals.

Safety and Regulations

Please use caution and observe the following:

- Alligators and venomous snakes (including water moccasins) are found almost everywhere in the preserve. They are protected by federal law: do not harm them. Watch where you walk, sit, or reach. It is illegal to feed alligators or any wildlife within the preserve. Fed alligators become nuisance alligators that can be dangerous.

- Poison ivy and poison wood are plentiful in the hammocks. Learn to identify them and keep your distance. All plants

are protected by federal law; please leave them for others to enjoy.

- Wildfires pose a danger year-round, especially in the drier winter and spring seasons. Never discard burning materials or leave campfires unattended. Use extreme caution when driving off improved roadways; hot catalytic converters can ignite fires. Uncontrolled fires endanger lives, property, and resources.

- Big Cypress National Preserve is located in a remote area of south Florida. Limited visitor services are found out-

side the park. Be sure to fill your gas tank before entering because there are no gasoline stations or food services within the park.

- Federal law prohibits collecting archeological artifacts or disturbing historic sites or Indian mounds.

Warning! Vehicles on U.S. 41 travel dangerously fast. Parking along the highway is hazardous. If you must stop, pull completely off the road—do not block traffic. Pedestrians must use extreme caution.

Big Cypress

Color key to ecosystems

Cypress	Pineland	Freshwater Slough	Mangrove	Developed or disturbed land
Hardwood Hammock	Freshwater Marl Prairie	Coastal Marsh	Marine and Estuarine	



Legend for symbols and water depths:

- Interpretive trail
- National Park Service campground
- National Park Service primitive campsite
- State Park campground
- Private campground
- Picnic area
- Lodging
- Food service
- Gas station
- Boat launch and canoe launch
- Canoe launch
- Unpaved road
- Hiking trail
- Distance indicator
- Water depths: 0-3 feet (0-1 meter), 3-6 feet (1-2 meters), More than 6 feet (more than 2 meters)