

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Lower Suwannee

*National Wildlife Refuge*  
*Dixie Mainline Trail Guide*





*Lower  
Suwannee  
National  
Wildlife Refuge  
Dixie Mainline  
Trail Guide*



*This goose,  
designed by J. N.  
“Ding” Darling,  
has become  
the symbol of  
the National  
Wildlife Refuge  
System.*

## **Trail Information**

Welcome to the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge and the Dixie Mainline trail! The Dixie Mainline is a nine-mile trail ideal for driving, bicycling, and walking. This brochure identifies several areas of special interest near the trail and includes information that corresponds to the numbered markers along the trail. Please keep the following in mind as you drive:

- The trail is a narrow lime rock road, but it is open to two-way traffic and all passenger vehicles.
- There are turnouts and parking areas along the road.
- The trail is subject to closure during wet conditions.
- The speed limit is 25 m.p.h. Remember to watch for bicyclists and wildlife.
- Gated roads are closed to vehicles but are open to bicycle and foot traffic.
- Biting insects can be a nuisance especially during the summer months.
- The refuge is open to managed hunts during certain times of the year (a separate brochure/permit is required).
- Private property borders parts of the Mainline; please respect landowner rights.

You are welcome to take this trail guide with you or you may **recycle** by returning it to the brochure boxes located at either end of the Dixie Mainline.



*Biking the Dixie Mainline*

### Trail History

The Dixie Mainline was constructed in the 1920's as a tram road (narrow gauge railroad) to transport timber out of the swamps and forests.

After logging ended around 1940, the road was not maintained until the 1960's, when another timber company refurbished the road and wooden bridges. These bridges later deteriorated and the road again became impassable. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the land in 1979 to establish Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge. In 1998 the bridges were replaced and the road was opened to the public.



*Aerial view of the Suwannee River*

### Refuge Information

Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge was established for the purpose of protecting, maintaining, and enhancing a rare and beautiful ecosystem. The refuge encompasses 52,935 acres in

Dixie and Levy Counties. Habitats include cypress swamps, flood plain hardwoods, oak hammocks, freshwater and saltwater marsh, and upland pine forests. The refuge supports very diverse plant and animal communities. Each of these communities contributes to making Lower Suwannee one of the largest undeveloped river delta-estuarine systems in the United States.





### Hints for enjoying your visit:

- Start early and stay late. You are more likely to see wildlife activity in early morning or late afternoon.
- Bring your field guides and binoculars. They are helpful in identifying plants and animals.
- Bring insect repellent if you are going to do any walking, bicycling or be out of your car for extended periods.
- Bring water if bicycling or hiking. A compass is recommended if walking off the main trail.



*Bald eagle*

### Points of Interest

In addition to the numbered stops, there are several unique points of interest near the Mainline. These are identified on the map.

#### A. Salt Creek

Salt Creek is tidally influenced and flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The road leading to the creek curves through pine forests, salt marsh, and skirts the edges of a few ponds. At the end is a parking area and a trail that leads to a handicap accessible fishing/observation pier overlooking the creek and salt marsh. Bald eagles are occasionally observed here. They nest every year on the far island northwest of the pier. You may also want to explore some of the surrounding forests by foot.

*Chicken turtle*





*Swallow-tailed Kite*

### **C. Fishbone Creek**

The road to Fishbone Creek, off County Road 357, passes through a beautiful oak hammock before meeting a tidal creek. At the end is a parking area, observation tower and small boat launch. This

is a great place to bank fish or launch a canoe or kayak. Swallow-tailed kites nest in the area and are often seen soaring between March and August.



*Shired Island*

### **D. Shired Island**

If you follow County Road 357 south to its end, you will be at scenic Shired Island. Adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico, this area is comprised of a vast salt marsh with numerous tidal creeks. You will find a public boat launch, county campground, small beach area, places to bank fish and a few unmarked trails. A variety of shorebirds, wading birds and ducks (during winter months) are common visitors.



*Bird watching on the Canoe Trail*

## Trail Guide

### Paddling Information

There are several good launching areas at Shired Island and Fishbone Creek. On the Mainline, Shired Creek Bridge and Johnson Creek Bridge are excellent access points. In addition, there is a marked refuge canoe trail near the town of Suwannee. Information may be obtained from the refuge office.

### 1. Upland Sites

Most of the upland areas along the Dixie Mainline consist of slash pines. These are pine plantations that were planted by a timber company prior to purchase of the land by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The stand of trees you see in front of you has been thinned and burned. Thinning increases growth and establishes a more desirable stand by reducing competition between trees for space and nutrients. It also encourages growth of plants that provide food and cover for wildlife by allowing more sunlight to reach the forest floor.



**Upland  
Pine  
Forest**

**Cypress  
Dome**

**Hardwood  
Hammock**

**Tidal  
Creek**

## *Communities found along the Dixie Mainline Trail*

The refuge forestry program is dedicated to restoring and enhancing the natural communities that were once found in this area.

### **2. Life on the “Edge”**

An edge is where two or more plant communities meet. Typically, these areas are diverse in both plant and animal species. Here, a pine forest meets a small wet area. Many wildlife species use these areas because they provide them with more than one type of habitat. One area may provide food or water while another provides cover. By living along edges, animals

do not have to travel as far to meet their needs. As you travel the Mainline, you will recognize many edges between different communities like the ones illustrated.



*Bruce Colin*

*Water lilies*

### **3. Wetlands**

The area you see here is an example of a wetland. As you drive along the Mainline, notice all the different types of wetlands. From roadside ditches to meandering creeks and vast swamps, these all serve important purposes. Wetlands are essential components of our natural environment. At little cost to us, they provide many benefits. Wetlands control floods by storing and slowly releasing excess water. They act as filters for silt and chemicals, thereby reducing pollution in our water supply. They also provide essential habitat for many species of fish and wildlife such as waterfowl, wading birds, amphibians, beaver and other mammals. Finally, they provide recreational opportunities for humans.





#### 4. Swamp Things

As you travel through the swamp you may notice several interesting features.

- Cypress "knees" are the woody root-like protrusions scattered about the swamp. Though some believe they aid in respiration, their true function is unknown.
- Another characteristic of cypress trees is their wide or buttressed trunk. This condition, often referred to as "buttswell," was thought to increase stability, but may have other purposes.
- Large cypress stumps that you see throughout the swamp are evidence of logging that occurred here during the early 1900's.
- Barred owls are year-round residents that commonly inhabit swamps and bottomland areas. Occasionally, you will see them during the day and you can often hear them at night calling, "who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all."
- You will also notice several types of epiphytes in the area. Epiphytes are plants that use other plants for support.



*Cypress knees*



*Barred Owl*

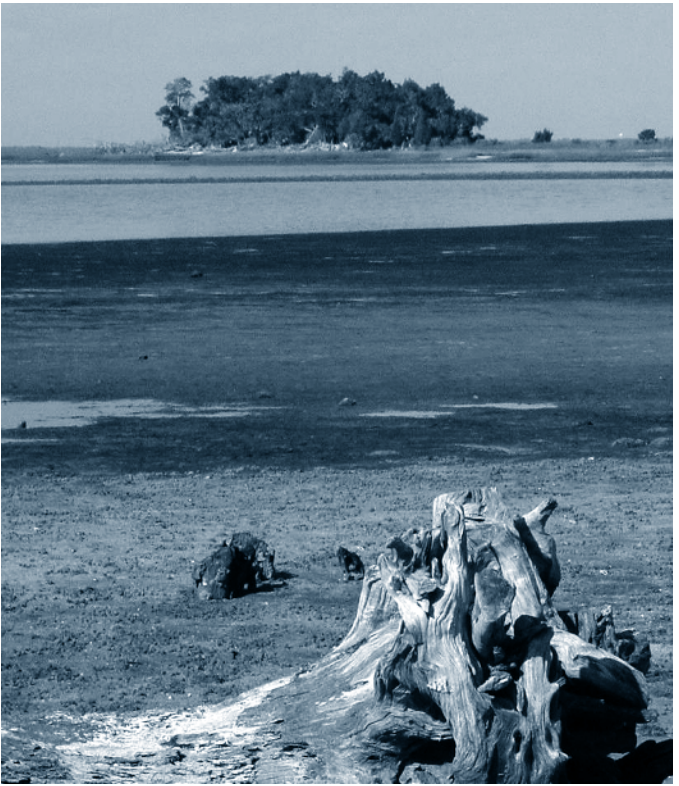
*American Alligator*

For example, notice the grass-like air plants growing on the sides of many trees. The Spanish moss you see hanging from limbs is another example. These plants get their nutrients from falling leaves and rainwater, using the host tree only for support.

## 5. Marsh Grasses

Along these brackish creeks there is a noticeable change in vegetation. As elevation decreases and soils become wetter, there are more grasses and shrubs and fewer large trees. This change creates another “edge” and provides habitat for other wildlife species.

*Black-crowned night heron*

*Great blue heron**Great egret**White ibis*

Some common plants you will see here include sawgrass and needle rush. These wetland grasses can tolerate saltwater from tidally influenced creeks.

## 6. Hammocks

These spots, just a few inches higher in elevation than the surrounding area, are called hammocks. Different species of trees such as live oaks, bay trees, sweetgum, cabbage palm and pines grow here due to the slightly higher and dryer elevation.

## 7. Birds of the Marsh

Many wading birds such as herons, egrets and white ibis can be found here, as well as belted kingfisher, osprey and other coastal birds. These birds use the area for feeding on fish, crabs and aquatic insects.

## Threatened and Endangered Species

*A threatened species has the potential to become endangered. An endangered species is in “danger” of becoming extinct. Both are important to the communities in which they occur and often indicate the overall health of the ecosystem. The refuge supports several of these species including bald eagles, wood storks, manatees and gulf sturgeon. There are also endangered marine sea turtles present in the nearby Gulf of Mexico. In addition, several species that occur on the refuge are considered species of special concern in the state of Florida. These include swallow-tailed kites, gopher tortoises, white ibis and little blue herons.*

### 8. Prescribed Fire

Historically, naturally occurring wildfires and those set by Native Americans would burn through the longleaf and slash pine forests. However, modern day suppression of wildfire

has stopped this natural process, changing forest composition and allowing the build-up of hazardous fuels. Controlled burning simulates the natural process and promotes growth of beneficial herbaceous plants by removing thick understory trees and shrubs that block sunlight. It also reduces the amount of fuel in the forest, decreasing the chance of devastating wildfire. Controlled burning is an important tool in wildlife management.



*Gopher tortoise*



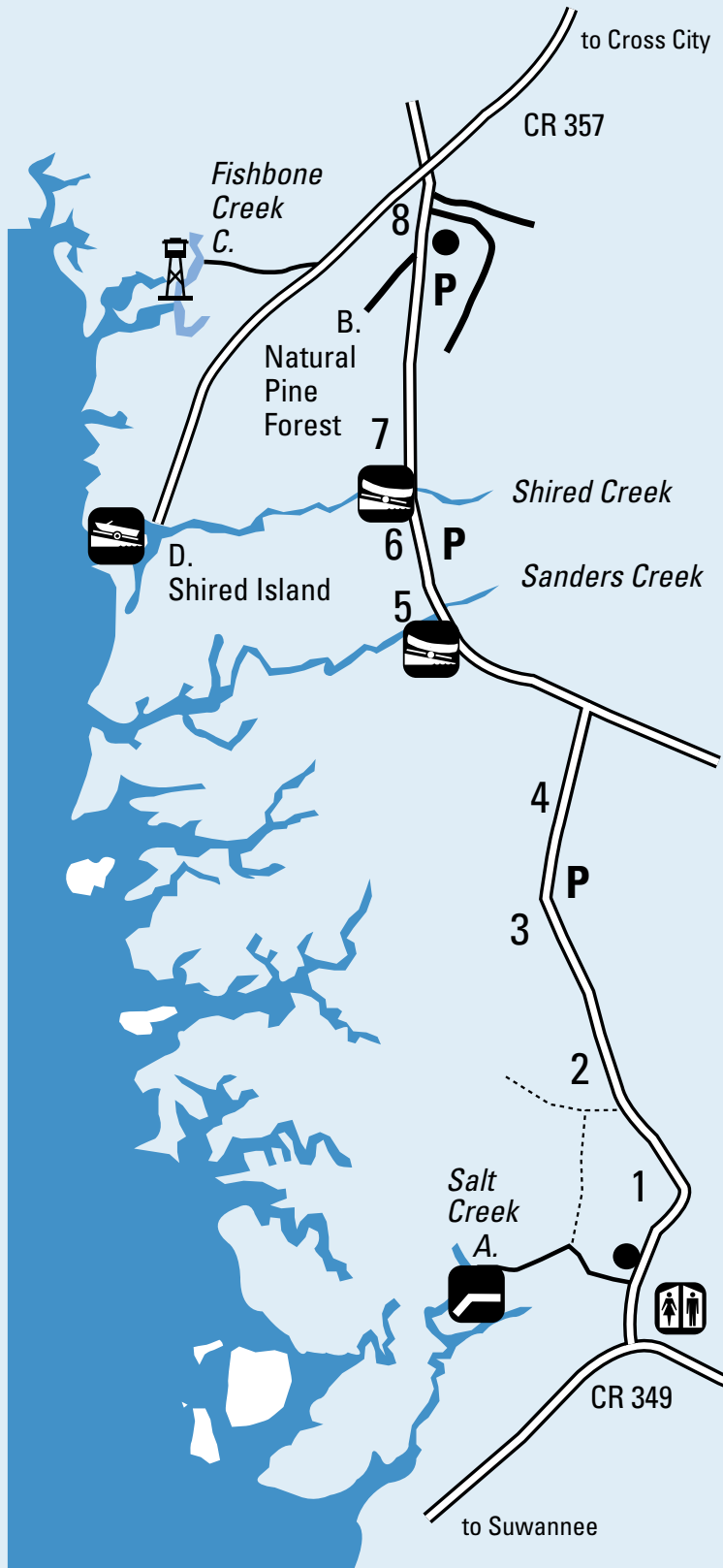
### **The National Wildlife Refuge System**

Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge is one of over 540 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The mission of the system is to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plant resources of the United States for the benefit of present and future generations. The refuge system encompasses over 93 million acres administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In addition to the refuge system, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for the endangered species program, National Fish Hatcheries, migratory birds, certain marine mammals and other wildlife programs.

### **Visit Again !**

We hope you enjoyed the Dixie Mainline and learned about the different habitats and wildlife that occur on Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge. We encourage you to make future visits to the refuge and other National Wildlife Refuges around the country. There is always something different to see. For more information, contact the Refuge Manager, Monday through Friday, 7:30 am to 4:00 pm. Or visit our web page at:  
<http://www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee>





to Cross City

CR 357

Fishbone  
Creek  
C.

8

P

B.

Natural  
Pine  
Forest

7

Shired Creek

6

P

Sanders Creek

5

D.  
Shired Island

4

P

3

2

1

Salt  
Creek  
A.



CR 349

to Suwannee

# Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge Dixie Mainline Trail

## Legend

● Beginning/Ending Point

**P** Parking

**1** Interpretive Stops

**A** Points of Interest

⋯ Gated road



Observation Tower



Boat Launch



Canoe Launch



Boardwalk (accessible)

to Old Town

**Lower Suwannee  
National Wildlife Refuge  
16450 NW 31 Place  
Chiefland, Florida 32626  
352/493 0238  
<http://www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee>  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
1 800/344 WILD**

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