

# Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve Boardwalk Trail Guide



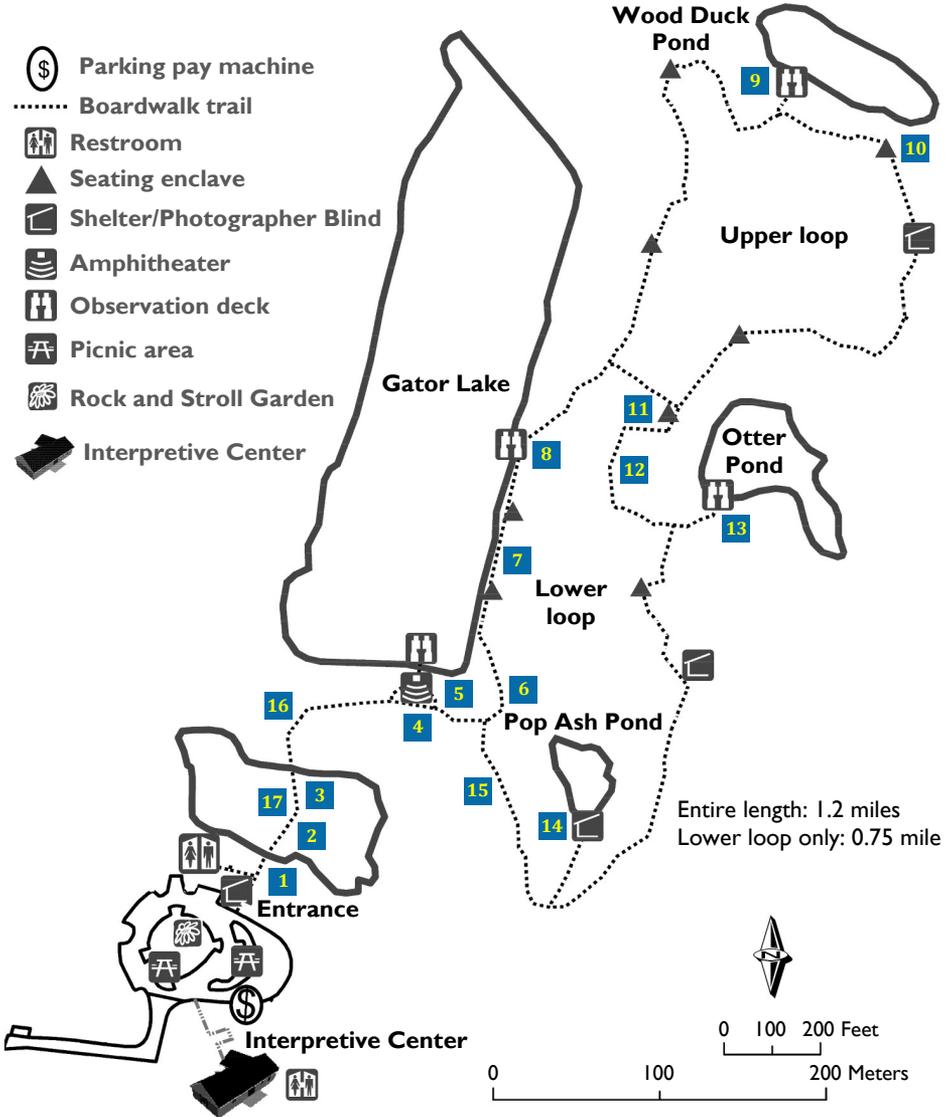
7751 Penzance Blvd., Fort Myers, FL 33966 | (239) 533-7550 | [www.leeparks.org](http://www.leeparks.org)



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instead on your phone



# Boardwalk Trail Map



**Boardwalk is open daily, dawn to dusk.**

The boardwalk is fully accessible. Wheelchairs are available upon request.

**Admission is FREE.** Parking fee is \$1/hour or \$5/day.

Interpretive Center hours:

Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. (closed Mondays and major holidays)

# Boardwalk Trail Etiquette

## RESPECT ALL SLOUGH LIFE

Every creature living in the Slough is protected. Please **do not harass** any wildlife or birds, or collect any natural resources, such as plants. Do not mimic animal calls to lure wildlife. **Fishing and pets are not allowed.**

## RESPECT OTHERS

Many people come to the Slough for a relaxing experience in nature. Please be respectful of others by refraining from making loud noises and limiting phone calls to emergencies only. **Smoking is not permitted on the boardwalk.**

## BOARDWALK IS FOR WALKING ONLY

The boardwalk is intended for walking only. **Running, power walking, bicycling and roller skating are not permitted.** If you must pass someone, simply let them know you are passing on either their left or right side.

## DO NOT FEED WILDLIFE

Animals living in the Slough can feed themselves. Do not provide food to any wildlife. This can make them sick. In some instances, this can also result in dangerous interactions between animals and people.

## EAT IN DESIGNATED AREAS ONLY

The Slough is a fantastic spot for a picnic lunch or afternoon snack. However, food is not allowed on the boardwalk. Please use the picnic tables in the parking area to enjoy your food. **Alcohol is not allowed.**

## LEAVE NO TRACE

Leave the Slough how you found it, and take only pictures. Secure your items so they do not fall beneath the boardwalk. Do not climb over the boardwalk for any reason. If an item you dropped must be retrieved, please locate a staff person to assist you.

# Tips and Tricks for Spotting Wildlife



Follow these helpful tips and tricks to spot wildlife and birds along the boardwalk:

- **Walk slowly.** If you walk too fast, you are likely to miss lots of wildlife and birds. Walk at a slower pace instead to really take in the wonders of the Slough and discover the fascinating creatures who live here.
- **Look up, look out, and look down.** Keep your eyes moving in all directions. Wildlife can be above you, in front of you, behind you, and beneath you. Wildlife will also try to hide in your blind spots. Use your wide angle vision to scan the landscape from top to bottom and in all directions.
- **Be as quiet as possible.** Loud noises generally scare away animals. Speak softly with others in your group (pretend you are in a library) and walk with gentle footsteps on the boardwalk. Soft noises are less likely to disturb wildlife.
- **Stand still or sit in place for a few minutes.** You may be surprised how much wildlife will reveal themselves to you.

# What is a Slough?

1



Follow the matching numbered signs along the boardwalk and use this guide to learn more.

A **slough** (pronounced “slew”) is a type of forested wetland with slowly flowing freshwater. Water in Six Mile Cypress Slough eventually flows into Estero Bay and then the Gulf of Mexico. The Slough is important because it stores water during heavy rain storms and cleans pollutants from the water. The Slough is also a sanctuary for many plants and animals.



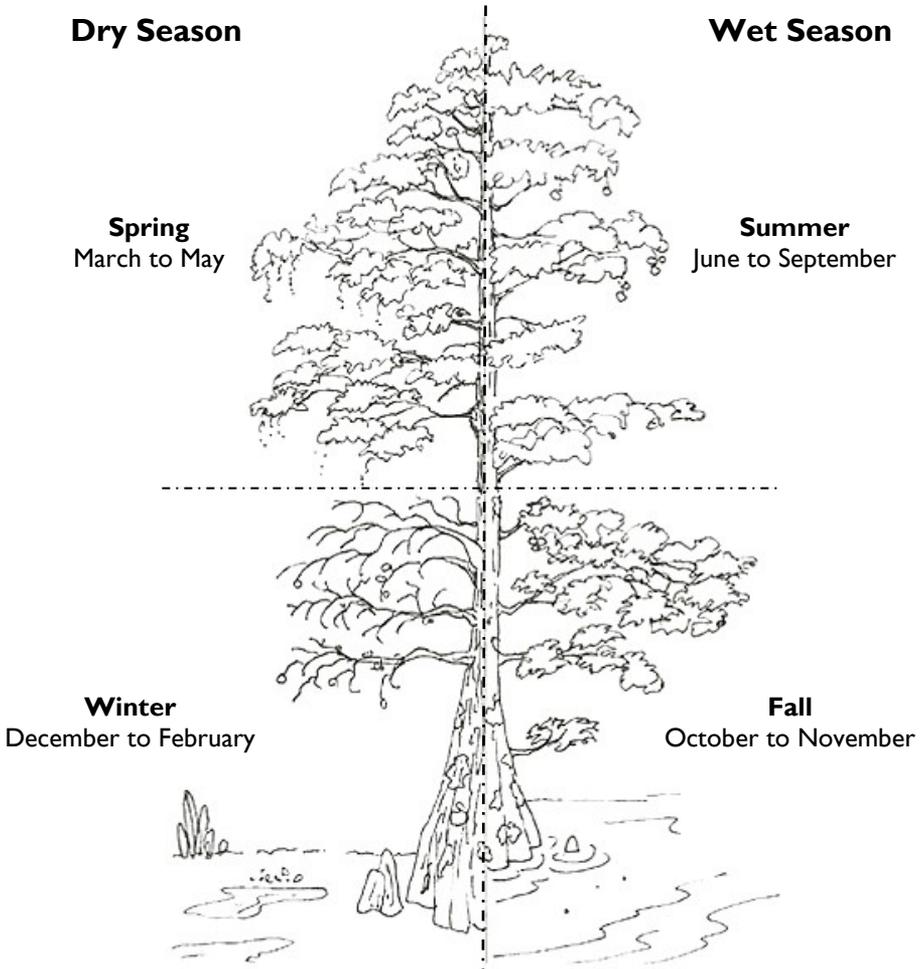
Only 6 more miles!



Are we there yet?

Where did the name “Six Mile Cypress Slough” come from? In the early 1900s, travelers in wagons on their way to Fort Myers would get stuck in a low, swampy area (what is today the Slough). From experience, they knew when this happened that it was six more miles to town.

## Seasons at the Slough

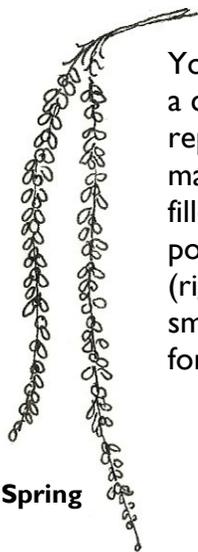


### Bald Cypress Tree

Depending on the time of year, it may be either difficult or obvious to tell why these trees are called “bald” cypress. Every year during the fall, the needles of cypress trees turn an orange-brown color and drop from their branches. Look for new lime-green needles to emerge in the early spring. Read the display for more details about the wet and dry seasons in Florida.

# Cypress Tree Adaptations

3

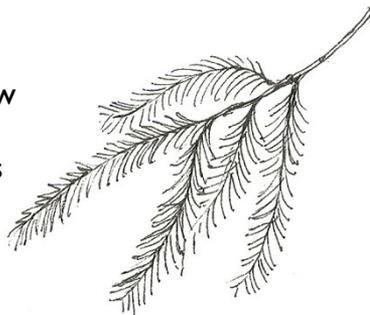


You will never see a flower on a cypress tree. Instead, they reproduce by making small male cones, or **catkins** (left), filled with pollen. After pollination, a female cone (right) will grow larger than a small gumball to develop seeds for the next generation.



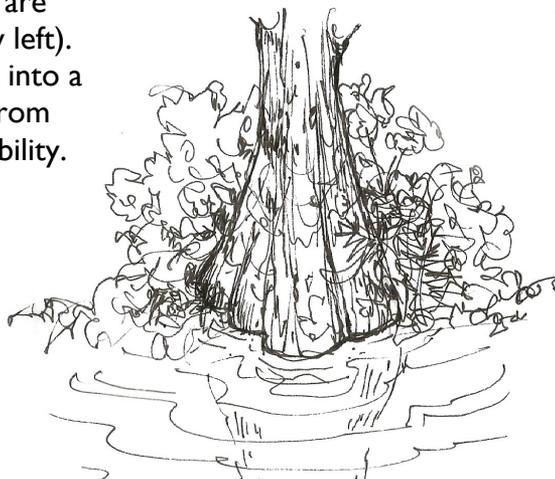
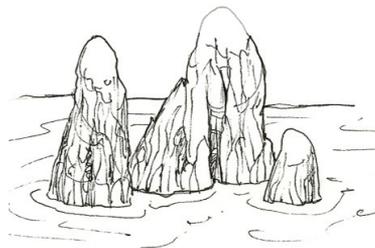
**Summer: green**  
**Fall: brown**

Feathery needles allow strong winds to blow through cypress trees without breaking branches.



**Spring: bright lime-green**  
**Summer: green**  
**Fall: red, orange and brown**

Cypress trees must be able to stay upright in soggy conditions. The swollen base of the tree, called a **buttress** (below right), helps to anchor the tree in place. The pointy objects surrounding the base are called **cypress knees** (below left). Although these will not grow into a new tree, the knees pop up from the root system for extra stability.



## Amphitheater Kiosk



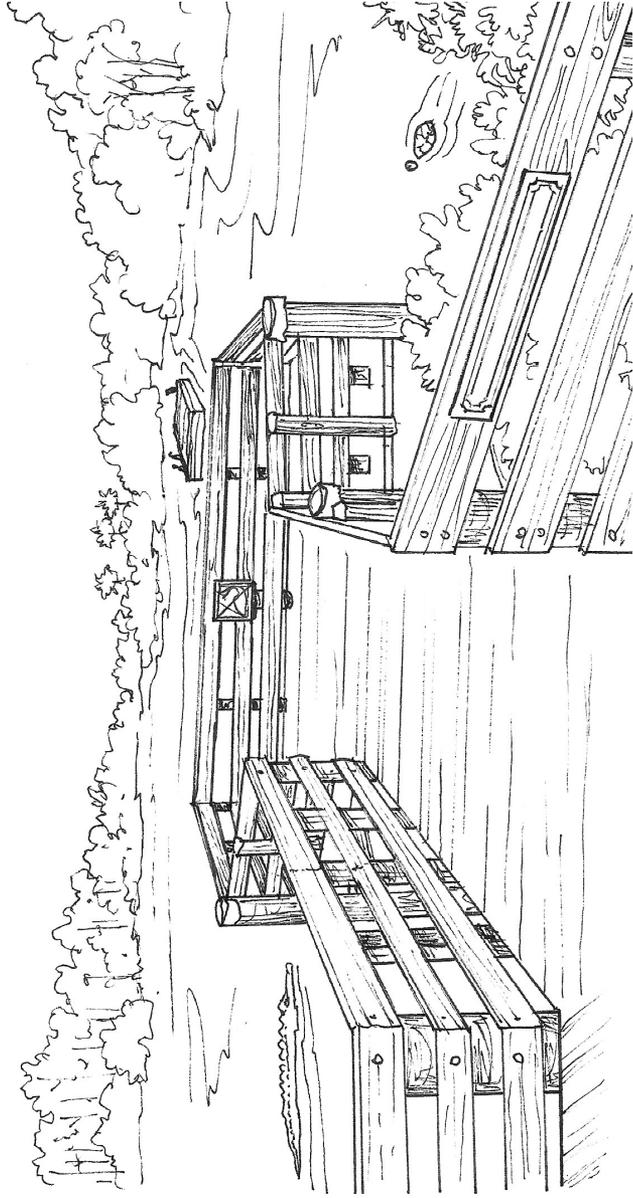
Visit the amphitheater kiosk to learn more tips for spotting wildlife in the Slough. How can you find animals that aren't moving? What are some of our other senses that can help us to find animals? Read about the **7 Secrets to Slough Sightings** to find out.

Study the maps to see the shape of Six Mile Cypress Slough. The preserve is more than 3,500 acres in size, but can you find out how long it actually is? *Hint: the Slough is more than six miles long.*

## Gator Lake

Scan the cypress trees for birds such as Great Egrets and White Ibis. Between October and March, visit just before dusk to watch these magnificent birds fly in to roost for the evening in the trees. Look for nest-building activity in early spring.

Another way to look for animals is to use binoculars to scan the edge of the lake. Look closely for a change in color or pattern to reveal a resting animal. Look also at the floating rafts for alligators and turtles warming themselves in the sun.



**Don't forget to look in the water!** You might see large fish, swimming birds, or even an alligator.

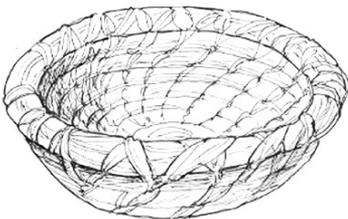
## Transition Area

Florida is considered “**the land of inches**” because the average elevation is only a few feet above sea level. This also means slight changes in elevation can create entirely different natural areas and habitats. Transition areas like this one often have a greater diversity of plants and animals. This is because an increase in the types of plants in an area means there is food to attract more kinds of animals. Take a moment to look from the forest floor to the tree tops and consider all the ways animals can live in this space.



Remember, this is a slough and not a zoo. Animals may be hiding from you until they feel comfortable to move again. Stand or sit quietly in one spot for a couple minutes and count how many animals you see. Birds and insects count, too!

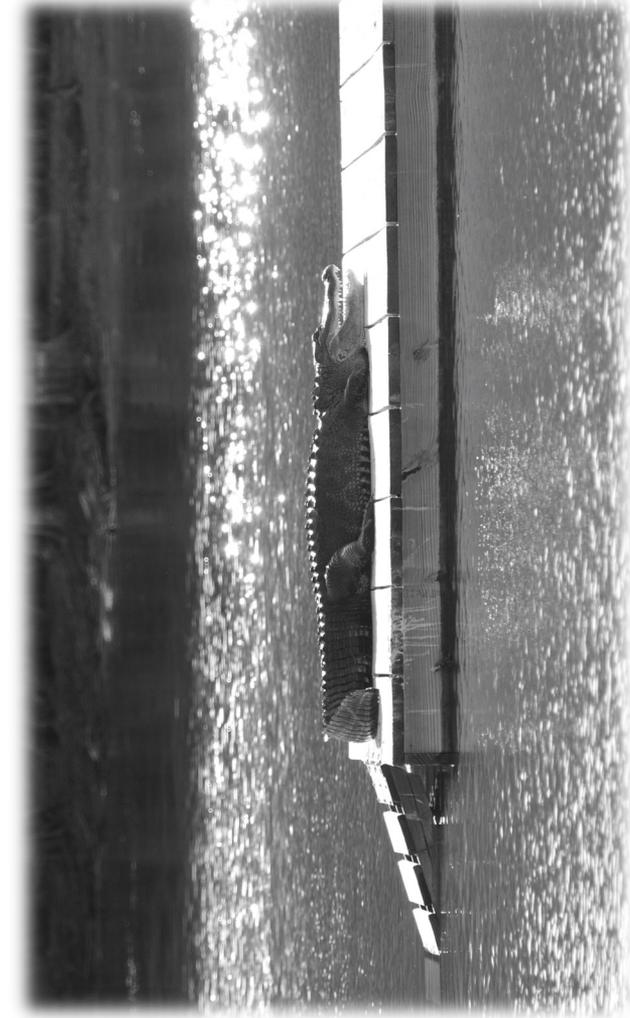
**Slash pine trees** grow in areas of the Slough that are higher and drier, like this ridge. Unlike bald cypress trees, slash pines retain their needles year-round. Slash pines are often visited by the largest woodpecker in the Slough, the **Pileated Woodpecker**. Look for this bird with its bright red crest as it glides from tree-to-tree to flick off pieces of bark and peck into the wood in search of carpenter ants and other insects to eat.



Did you know indigenous peoples, such as the Calusa, made baskets from fallen pine needles? Look for brown needles on the ground and imagine how bunches of these needles might be used to make a basket.

## Where are the alligators?

Many visitors come to the Slough with hopes to see an **alligator**. Most days, your chances are good to see an alligator. When the weather is cooler, alligators haul themselves out of the water to bask in the warmth of the sun. This helps to increase an alligator's body temperature and fuels their activities, such as swimming and feeding.



If the weather is overcast, alligators typically stay underwater (and out of sight) to keep warm. Basking is less important to alligators during the hot summer months, but you may still catch an alligator swimming from one side of the lake to the other.

Did you know alligators can be present in any body of freshwater in Florida? No crocodiles live in the Slough, however. Crocodiles prefer tropical, saltwater habitats.

Natural ponds, like Wood Duck Pond, occur throughout the Slough. These areas of lower elevation collect water that can persist through the dry season. **Wood Ducks** prefer to live in forested wetlands, like the Slough, and are very shy birds. If you spot a Wood Duck today, congratulate yourself on being very quiet and observant!



Wood Duck Pond is also known as a “flag pond” because of the presence of an aquatic plant called **alligator flag**. Alligator flag grows in areas of deeper water, especially alligator holes. When you see these large green leaves waving in the air like flags, it is very likely that alligators are present or nearby. Look closely. Perhaps there is an alligator resting on a log in the distance?

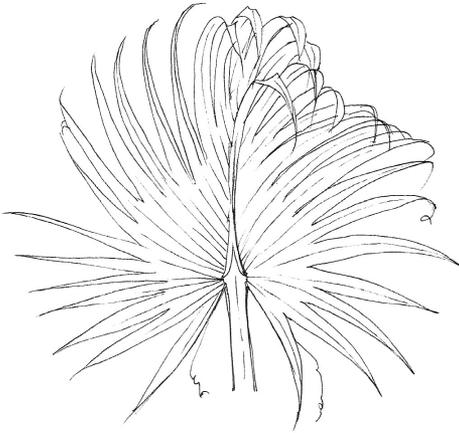
## “Grandmother Tree”

This large tree is fondly called “**Grandmother Tree.**” Although most of the bald cypress trees in the Slough were logged in the 1920s and 1940s, a few old-growth specimens remain, including “Grandmother Tree.” Can you see how the presence of this tree allows other trees to start their lives?



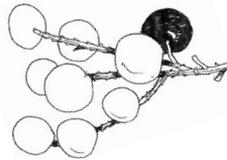
Inspect the branches of “Grandmother Tree” for a chance to see a **Barred Owl.** Use your patience and observation skills to discern the brown-and-white striped breast feathers of the owl from the background. Barred Owls are sometimes active during the day, so you may even be lucky to observe this owl in flight.

This natural hammock is the perfect place to rest. In southern Florida, the word “hammock” is used to describe an area of higher ground that is shaded by trees. A hammock is almost like an island inside the Slough – the plants you find in the hammock don’t typically grow in the lower, wetter areas.

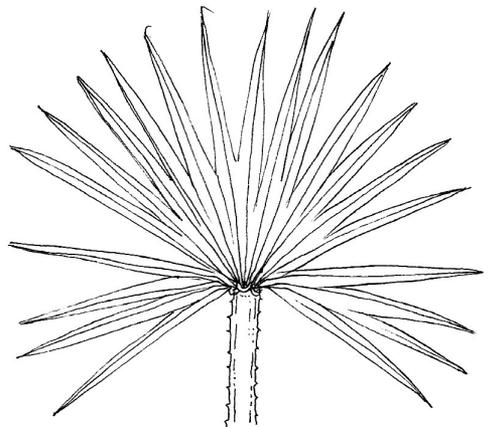


**Sabal Palm**

One shade-providing tree in this hammock is Florida’s state tree – the **sabal palm**, or cabbage palm. Have you ever eaten hearts of palm? If so, you’ve eaten the growing tip of a sabal palm! The black fruits that develop on this tree also provide food to other animals, from warblers to Florida black bears.

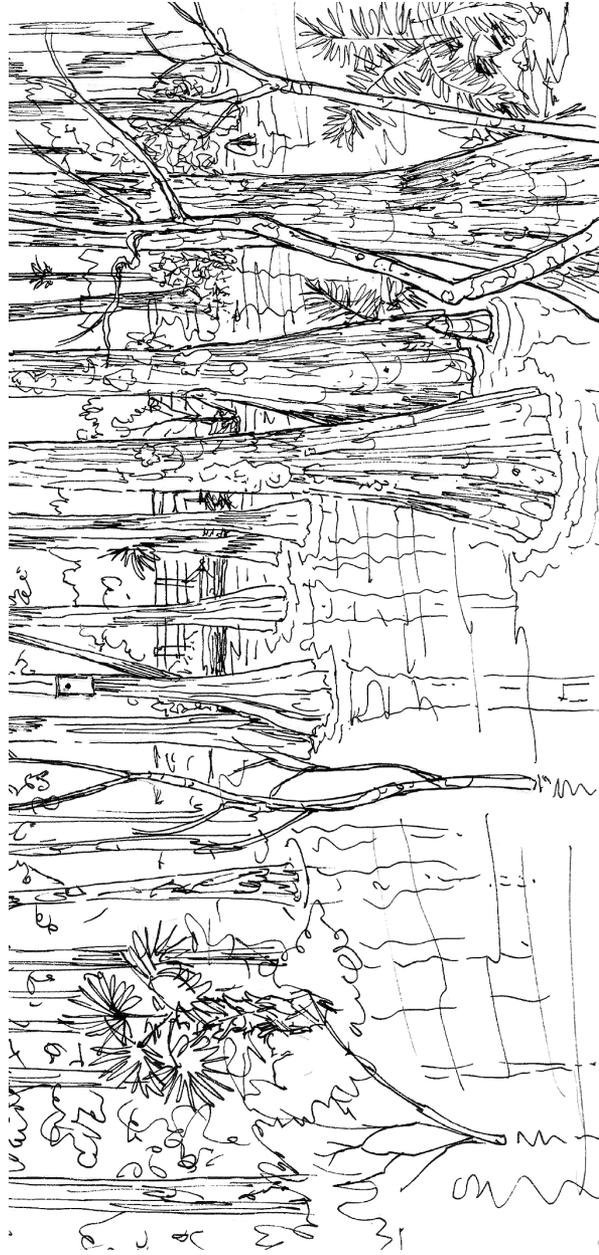


The sabal palm has a close cousin nearby, but it does not typically grow tall enough to provide shade for people. This short-statured palm is known as **saw palmetto**. This is because its leaf stems have very sharp, saw-toothed edges.



**Saw Palmetto**

Gaze into the calm waters of the Slough. Can you see a reflection of the trees in the water? What about the color of the sky or the tree canopy? Take a moment to reflect on the things you are grateful for in life. Here at the Slough, we are grateful for the group of students who in the 1970s helped to protect the Slough from development. For more information about the history of the Slough, turn to page 18.





For many visitors, the most thrilling wildlife sighting at the Slough is a **river otter**. Although this place is called Otter Pond, otters can be observed anywhere in the Slough. Listen for splashing sounds and scan the surface of the water for ripples, or even a surfacing otter!



Many animals that live in the Slough possess special features that help them live in the water. Webbed feet act like scuba flippers, and protective, clear eyelids act like swim goggles! Otters, turtles and even some diving birds, such as the **Anhinga** (above), share these adaptations.

## Pop Ash Pond

On your way into Pop Ash Pond shelter, did you ask yourself, “Why do those trees look so fuzzy?” If you look closely, you will notice there are tufts of plants growing on the pop ash trees. The furrowed bark of the pop ash is a perfect place for an airborne seed to land and grow into an **air plant**. Although these plants require more than air to survive, they do not harm the trees in any way.



Do the leaves of the air plants remind you of pineapple tops? Many of these air plants, also known as bromeliads, belong to the same plant family as pineapples!

In the springtime, Pop Ash Pond can be the site of a “feeding frenzy.” Check out the interpretive signs inside the shelter to learn more about when and why wading birds arrive here in large numbers.

Scan the curving trunk of this tree to see the fronds of tiny ferns. During dry conditions, this fern may appear withered, brown or dead. But when rains return, the fronds unfurl to become lush and green again. This ability to “come back to life” is why this plant is named **resurrection fern**. Do *you* feel rejuvenated after walking in the Slough?



Resurrection ferns are nature’s rain gauge. By looking at the resurrection fern, you can get a sense of how recently it has rained. Did you know resurrection ferns can lose up to 90% of its water and still stay alive?



**Daily rains**



**No rain for days  
or a few weeks**



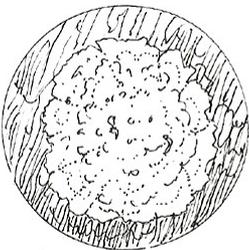
**No rain for several  
weeks or months**

Have you been noticing trees with peculiar white and pink spots? These spots are called **lichen** (pronounced “liken”), which is a combination of two living organisms — algae OR bacteria and fungi — working together in a symbiotic relationship. Fungi provide the “housing” while algae or bacteria (depending on the type of lichen) make food through photosynthesis. Some other lichens are known to have a third symbiont, yeast cells. Like the air plants near Pop Ash Pond, lichens do not harm the trees on which they grow.



Search the trees for lichen in a variety of colors, including white, pink and green. Besides appearing in an array of colors, lichens exist in three main shapes. Can you find them all?

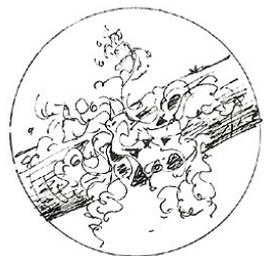
*Crustose*  
 (“crusty”)



*Foliose*  
 (“leafy”)



*Fruticose*  
 (“bushy”)





Before the Slough became a preserve, exotic (non-native) trees called melaleuca were growing in this spot. Melaleuca trees are considered invasive in Florida because they outcompete native trees for space, nutrients and water. Unfortunately, exotic plants invading natural areas in Florida have become a problem so great that it now costs millions of dollars annually to manage.



In the early 1990s, the invasive melaleuca trees were removed and these bald cypress trees were planted instead. This process of returning the land to its natural state is called **mitigation**. The bald cypress is a native resident of the Slough. Do you notice anything about these trees that indicate they were all planted at once?

## *History of the Slough*

Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve is one of Lee County's earliest protected conservation areas. In 1976, Lee County voters approved a ballot initiative to purchase the land to protect the Six Mile Cypress watershed and maintain it as a preserve for wildlife habitat. The initiative was led by a group of Lee County high school students, known as the "Monday Group," who met after classes on Mondays to study the critical role of wetlands in Florida. The students decided to take a field trip to explore the Six Mile Cypress Slough and learn more about the forested wetland in their own backyard. They immersed themselves in the cool, freshwater of the Slough and instantly fell in love with this magical sliver of Old Florida.

Meanwhile, land development in Fort Myers and Lee County was beginning to accelerate at a rapid pace. Fearing that the Slough could be drained for development, the students organized to take action. They lobbied local officials to support using tax dollars to purchase the land and knocked on doors to collect enough signatures to qualify their initiative for the ballot. The initiative ultimately passed with majority support from Lee County voters, protecting the Slough for future generations.

Fifteen years later, in 1991, the boardwalk opened to its first visitors. Since then, millions of people from across the world have visited the Slough to explore the wonders of this enchanting place.

Today, the preserve is more than 3,500 acres. The size of the Slough has expanded over the years with the acquisition of additional parcels of undeveloped land adjacent to its boundary through the county's Conservation 20/20 program. Launched in 1996 through a voter referendum, this land acquisition program protects more than 30,000 acres of conservation land across Lee County.

Inspired by the success of the "Monday Group," the citizens who proposed this program coined the term "Conservation 20/20" to symbolize a vision for the future of Lee County balanced between growth and development, and the protection of natural spaces.

# Interpretive Center & Programs

Visit the Interpretive Center to enjoy our educational and interactive displays. Volunteer naturalists and Slough staff are available to answer your questions about the plants and animals of the Slough.

**The center is open Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (closed Mondays and major holidays).**

The Interpretive Center opened to the public in 2008. At the time, it was the first ever “green” public building constructed in Lee County. The U.S. Green Building Council certified it as a LEED building (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) for using equipment and materials to reduce the impact of the center on the environment. Learn more about the sustainable features of the building by reading the informational display near the restrooms.



The Slough also offers a variety of programs for both youth and adults. This includes guided walks, yoga, children’s summer camp and special themed tours. For a schedule of current programs, visit [www.leeparks.org/sixmilecypress](http://www.leeparks.org/sixmilecypress).

Don’t forget to explore the Rock and Stroll Garden in the center of the parking lot. The garden is maintained by the Friends of Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve and is planted with native plants to attract butterflies. To learn more about the Friends, including membership and educational programs, visit [www.sloughpreserve.org](http://www.sloughpreserve.org).

# Trees & Plants of the Slough



Bald Cypress



Slash Pine



Sabal Palm



Red Maple



Saw Palmetto



Cardinal Air Plant



Resurrection Fern



Swamp Fern



Strap Fern

Photographs by Jason Boeckman

# Trees & Plants of the Slough



Climbing Aster



Virginia Creeper



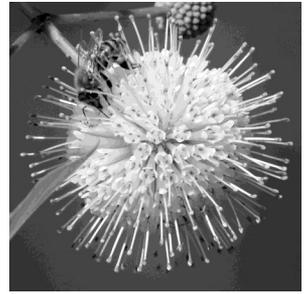
Poison Ivy  
**Do not touch**



Alligator Flag



Blue Flag Iris



Buttonbush



Dahoon Holly



Pond Apple



Florida Butterfly  
Orchid  
(blooms May-August)

# Birds of the Slough



Red-shouldered  
Hawk



Osprey



Barred Owl



Great Egret



Great Blue Heron



Wood Stork



White Ibis



Anhinga



Limpkin

## Birds of the Slough



Black-crowned  
Night-heron



Green Heron



Double-crested  
Cormorant



Pileated  
Woodpecker



Red-bellied  
Woodpecker



Belted Kingfisher



Blue-gray  
Gnatcatcher



Carolina Wren



Black-and-white  
Warbler

# Mammals, Reptiles & Amphibians of the Slough



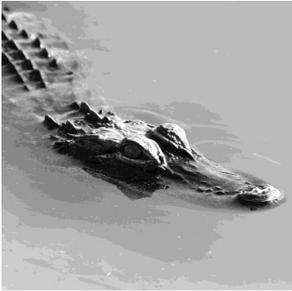
River Otter



Raccoon



Eastern Gray  
Squirrel



Alligator



Water Moccasin  
**Venomous**



Banded Water  
Snake



Green Tree Frog



Florida Redbelly  
Turtle



Mud Turtle

# Tips for Photographing Wildlife

## **Be familiar and confident with your camera settings.**

Read your camera manual and be familiar with its basic settings and modes. You do not need to know everything at first. But equipping yourself with this knowledge in advance will be beneficial, especially when you must make quick adjustments to compensate for changes in lighting and the movements of your subjects. A telephoto lens or camera with powerful zoom are recommended for photographing birds and wildlife in the distance.

## **Do your research in advance.**

The best photographers always do their homework before going out into the field with their camera. Here are some of the questions they consider: *What are good locations to observe wildlife? What kind of wildlife am I looking to find? What habitats will I find these creatures in?* Many photographers will also scout a location in advance to become familiar with the landscape and identify interesting vantage points.

## **Early morning and late afternoon are typically the best times during the day to encounter birds and wildlife.**

Birds and wildlife are typically most active early in the morning around sunrise and later in the afternoon closer to sunset. Plan your photography trips around these times of day.

## **Photograph wildlife from a respectful distance.**

Always keep a respectful distance between yourself and any bird or wildlife. Although these creatures may be aware of your presence, it should not cause them to change their behavior. If a bird or animal stops doing what they were doing before you arrived (foraging for food, caring for young birds in a nest, etc.), you are too close.

## **Remember to tell a story.**

Some of the best photographs are ones that tell a unique story. When composing your images, attempt to tell a story through the scenery, interesting behavior, lighting, and interactions with other subjects. Don't be afraid to get creative, try something new and break a few photography rules. The goal is always to capture an image that no one else has photographed before.

## Nearby Parks and Preserves

If you enjoyed your visit to the Slough, consider exploring these additional Lee County parks and preserves with hiking trails.

### **Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve North**

1140 Lockett Rd., Fort Myers, FL 33905

Located directly to the north of the Slough, this preserve with 8 miles of trails provides a crucial hydrologic link for water to flow into the Slough.

### **Buckingham Trails Preserve**

8790 Buckingham Rd., Fort Myers, FL 33905

More than 7 miles of hiking and equestrian trails through pine flatwoods.

### **Caloosahatchee Regional Park**

19130 North River Rd., Alva, FL 33920

Several miles of hiking, equestrian and mountain biking trails.

### **Hickey Creek Mitigation Park**

17980 Palm Beach Blvd., Alva, FL 33920

Five miles of primitive trails, with a chance to see gopher tortoises.

### **John Yarbrough Linear Park**

A linear park in Fort Myers with a 6-mile paved multi-use path.

Access the park near the intersection of Metro Pkwy/Daniels Pkwy.

### **Lakes Park**

7330 Gladiolus Dr., Fort Myers, FL 33908

A large regional park with paved trails that are excellent for birding.

### **Prairie Pines Preserve**

18400 N. Tamiami Trail, North Fort Myers, FL 33903

Seventeen miles of hiking trails, including an easy 1/4-mile loop.

### **Wild Turkey Strand Preserve**

11901 Rod and Gun Club Rd., Fort Myers, FL 33913

A large preserve with an ADA-accessible path and 1.8-mile loop trail.

For additional locations, visit [www.leeparks.org](http://www.leeparks.org).

# Pet-friendly Hiking Trails



Although dogs are not allowed at the Slough as a wildlife protection area, there are several Lee County parks and preserves with pet-friendly trails to explore. Below are locations we recommend:

## **Buckingham Park**

9800 Buckingham Rd., Fort Myers, FL 33905

The nearest pet-friendly park to the Slough, here you will find nearly two miles of hiking trails and a pleasant loop around a small pond.

## **Caloosahatchee Creeks Preserve East**

10130 Bayshore Rd., North Fort Myers, FL 33917

This preserve has four miles of combined hiking trails, including primitive paths, a boardwalk trail and an ADA-accessible paved loop.

## **Galt Preserve**

3661 Stringfellow Rd., St. James City, FL 33956

This preserve on Pine Island has nearly four miles of primitive hiking trails through pine flatwoods habitat. Consider also a stop-in at nearby Pinewood Trails Park in Bokeelia.

For additional locations, including a list of dog parks with fenced play enclosures, visit [www.leeparks.org/dogs](http://www.leeparks.org/dogs).

# Credits

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**Photography**



Thank you to the Friends of Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve for providing funding assistance for the artwork featured in this trail guide.

## **VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE!**

Are you interested to become a volunteer at the Slough?  
Learn more by visiting [www.leeparks.org/volunteer](http://www.leeparks.org/volunteer)

**This trail guide is yours to keep.** You may also recycle this guide at the end of your visit in the receptacle near the boardwalk entrance.