The Ecosystem of the Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve

The Six Mile Cypress Slough is a crowded ecosystem where every available niche is filled by animals and plants adapted to life in a wetland.

Within its over 3,400 acres, the Slough has a diverse array of plant and animal communities. These communities occur in distinct zones related to ground elevations, types of soil, and water depths found in the Slough at different times of the year.

Pine Flatwoods

Hardwood Transition

Flag Ponds

Hardwoods

Cypress Sloughs

Pine Flatwoods Community

The pine flatwoods community is the fringe area of the Slough and has a higher elevation than the interior. This community is generally dry except during the wet season. The soil is sandy, with only small amounts of organic matter.

The pine flatwoods is very important for wildlife because it offers drier land and cover while still meeting the water needs in the adjacent wetland community. Visitors like the bobcat, wild turkey and white-tailed deer use the pine flatwoods to pass through the Slough. One of the most important functions of the Six Mile Cypress Slough is that it acts as a natural travel corridor for wildlife by connecting northern Lee County to the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve.

Just like every other community, the pine flatwoods has plants characteristic to the area. The slash pine is a common tree here and is well-adapted to this community. Its deep tap root provides access to underground water during dry times and acts as an anchor during high winds. Its thick bark and protected seeds are also resistant to the periodic natural fires that occur through pine flatwoods after lightning strikes.

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Hardwood Transitions

Although the elevation is only inches lower than that of the pine flatwoods, the soil in the hardwood transition has changed from well-aerated sands to a sandy loam with greater moisture.

The Laurel oak is common to the hardwood transition community. This tree's strong branches form a broad, dense, rounded crown. Its shade is plentiful, and so are its acorns. The Wood duck, Blue jay, Wild turkey and Gray squirrels rely on these acorns for food in the fall and winter.

Blue jay with acorn

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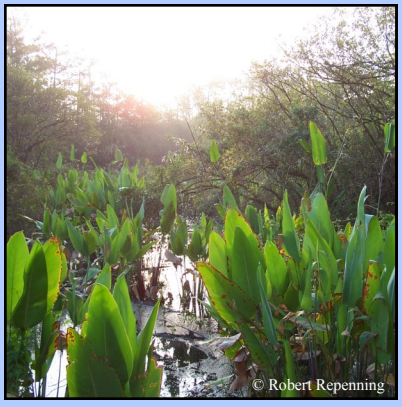
Flag Pond Community

The flag pond community is the central wet area of the Slough. This interior portion is usually under water year round and has a number of depressions, or flag ponds, within it. Travel for aquatic animals is easy through this area since the flag ponds are connected through a series of flow-ways.

This community gets its name from the tall, broad-leafed plants that dominate the area, called Fireflag or Alligator flag. The dense growth of the Fireflag provides a habitat for a variety of fish and other animal life.



As the water in the ponds recedes during the dry season, fish become concentrated in smaller and smaller areas. This concentration provides wading birds with an easily obtainable food source that is needed in large amounts to help feed themselves and their young.

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Blue mushrooms in leaf litter

Hammock Community

Marsh rabbit in a rain storm

A hammock is a small island of higher ground, and many can be found throughout the interior of the Slough. Hammocks allow plants that cannot survive being submerged under water, like the American elm and Saw palmetto, to grow in the interior of the Slough. Hammocks also provide a dry rest area for wildlife in the Slough.

Young raccoon

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Cypress needles

Cypress Slough Community

The central slough area has soil made up of sandy loam or silt material and is covered with water approximately four to six months of the year, during the wet season. The lush plant life in the cypress slough absorbs pollutants from the water while slowing the flow and allowing sediments to settle out. This process cleans the water as it flows southwest through the Slough and empties into the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve.

The dense forest canopy of the cypress slough community provides shade that helps to modify temperature extremes, thereby slowing the evaporation of the water.

Bromeliads, orchids and other epiphytes have adapted to an aerial way of life where the conditions of shade and fluctuating water levels vary, as they do in the cypress slough. The trees of the cypress slough also provide shelter and food for many Slough residents.

Bromeliads growing on a Bald cypress trunk

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