

## Gopher Key–Charley Creek Route

---

Begin: Darwins Place campsite	End: Turkey Key
Distance: 8 miles	Time: 4.5 hours
Potential Tidal Influence: 3	Potential Wind Influence: 2
Navigational Challenge: 4	
Highlights: Bird life, historic shell mound, tight mangrove creek, sneak/high-wind route to the Gulf	
Hazards: Bugs on Gopher Key, shallow water in bays from Gopher Key to Pelican Bay	
Campsites: Darwins Place, Turkey Key	
Connections: Darwins Place Route, Turkey Key Route	

---

This is a less-stroked paddle on a scenic small stream that passes an old Calusa mound, roams through an attractive creek, then across shallow bays, salt flats, and inhospitable-looking terrain before entering narrow and canopied Charley Creek leading to the Gulf. This route leaves Cannon Bay near the Darwins Place campsite and heads down Gopher Key Creek to Gopher Key. From Gopher Key, the route heads toward the Gulf to near Pelican Bay before joining primeval Charley Creek in its winding journey to the ocean. Gopher Key was named after the boat that archaeologist Clarence B. Moore used in his early 1900s explorations of Calusa cultural sites. Once at Gopher Key, you can walk around, exploring the hilly shell mound. If you like quiet creeks and less-paddled routes, “go for” this one. Bird life is rich back here. The trees on Gopher Key are larger than on most shell mounds, and the lunar-like salt flats and super-shallow bays on the way to the Gulf offer stark contrast to nearby Cannon Bay and the Gulf. *Remember, mounds like this are protected: there is no digging, and leave anything you happen to find. This is a special treasure we should leave for all to enjoy.* Be apprised that this route can be done at low tide, but once you finish Charley Creek, you may not have any water in the Gulf. Therefore, try to reach

the big water at a rising or high falling tide if you expect to get across the cove Charley Creek enters and over to Turkey Key.

Depart the Darwins Place campsite, paddling south into Cannon Bay. Look back toward Darwins Place and see the gumbo-limbo trees tower over the mangrove on the horizon. To find Gopher Creek, hug the west shoreline of Cannon Bay, passing between several islands in Cannon Bay and the shoreline. The mouth of Gopher Creek, at .5 mile, lies almost due south as you paddle. Pass a small teaser creek before coming to Gopher Key Creek. Gopher Key Creek's mouth is around 50 feet wide and not canopied. A "No Wake" sign has been posted here in the past. The stream soon tapers to around 30 feet and becomes canopied for .3 mile. The banks here are forested with red and black mangrove. The water is plenty deep.

Come to the northeastern arm of Gopher Key Bay. Continue paddling southwest through this shallow bay, reaching the main body of Gopher Key Bay at 2 miles. Birds are found here and all along the creek.

Traverse the wide heart of the bay, keeping a southwesterly course to the continuation of Gopher Key Creek. This second half of the stream is much wider, over 40 feet, than the first portion of Gopher Key Creek. It is also very shallow in spots. Keep your eye peeled to the southwest. The taller vegetation of Gopher Key will be visible in the distance, especially the red-trunked gumbo-limbo trees.

Just before coming to Gopher Key at 3.4 miles, the creek splits—this is the creek shown on nautical charts going to the unnamed bay northwest of Rookery Bay. Follow this creek, heading northwest on what looks like a small bay compared to the Gopher Key Creek channel. Stay with the right bank and look for a canoe-width clamshell landing between two mangrove trees, next to a small island. This is where you leave your craft to explore Gopher Key. Get your bug dope ready. On foot, immediately reach a small clamshell mound. Previous explorers have made small and sometimes overgrown "trails" that wind around the island—it is grown over, so keep your compass with you just in case. Check out the fig trees and other vegetation that cloaks the numerous hills here. Imagine the time it took for this mound to come to



Paddlers sometimes have to squeeze past fallen trees in Charley Creek. Photo by Constance Mier.

be, shell by shell. You can also head farther up this channel on a higher tide and then take the east channel at a split, but when the water is low, the mud is too thick to paddle and too thin to walk.

To continue toward Charley Creek, backtrack to the main Gopher Key Creek, continuing southwest beyond Gopher Key. The stream begins to break up into shallow bays mixed with small islands. Do not head toward Rookery Bay, but keep generally southwest, heading toward Pelican Bay, in very shallow water. The connector water between here and Pelican Bay is NOT SHOWN on many nautical charts but is easily seen on aerial maps. At 5.0 miles, Charley Creek splits right, away from the mix of open water and small islands. The main bulk of Pelican Bay can still be seen to the southwest. Charley Creek is uncanno-

pied at this point and is passing through open mud and salt flats with occasional trees and many snags within sight and along the water. This is the remote Everglades. Charley Creek finally becomes a full-fledged creek, leaving any connector ponds behind. By 5.5 miles, the creek is becoming canopied and narrows to 15 feet or less wide. At 6 miles, the creek splits—stay right with the larger stream. Crabs skitter from the shoreline and mangroves. Expect to work around fallen trees somewhere along the line.

The mangrove rises, the canopy opens, and the stream widens before you reach the Gulf at 6.7 miles. On a low tide, you may see nothing but a gigantic mudflat. Buzzard Key stands to the southwest, and the beaches on the south side of Turkey Key are visible in the distance. Paddle west to reach Turkey Key at 8.0 miles. The main camping area is around the west side of the island. From here, it is 8 miles south to Lostmans River and 3 miles north to Mormon Key on the Turkey Key Route.



Turkey Key campsite.

# Halfway Creek Loop

---

Begin: Tamiami Trail at Sea Grape Drive	End: Tamiami Trail at Sea Grape Drive
Distance: 8.8 miles	Time: 4.5 hours
Potential Tidal Influence: 3	Potential Wind Influence: 2
Navigational Challenge: 2	
Highlights: Loop paddle through diverse habitats, mangrove tunnels	
Hazards: Overgrown tunnels	
Campsites: None	
Connections: Halfway Creek Canoe Trail	

---

This loop paddle, located entirely within the Big Cypress National Preserve, utilizes the first portion of the Halfway Creek Canoe Trail and then spurs away from it in a series of creeks, ponds, and small lakes to make a circuit, bringing you back to where you started. Leave Sea Grape Drive, taking a canal to Halfway Creek; then follow this gorgeous waterway in tunnels and through ponds before spurring off of it and following tidal creeks to create the loop. The entire route is marked with numbered PVC pipes, which makes it a lot harder to get lost, yet you will be passing through mazelike terrain. Be apprised that no matter when you travel, the tide will be with you on one portion of the trip and against you on another. Winds are not much of a factor, and this can be a good paddle when the breezes are blowing.

This route is not on the waterproof charts, but the Big Cypress National Preserve produces a map of this loop for your use, as well as offers the GPS track on their website, [www.nps.gov/bicy](http://www.nps.gov/bicy). Or use the map in the back of this book, created from a GPS track. Follow the put-in directions for the Halfway Creek Canoe Trail, mentioned below.

Put into the canal and begin paddling southwesterly in crystal-line water bordered by sawgrass, cattails, and occasional mangrove. Other freshwater plants adorn the south bank, where the canal dredge spoil created dry ground. Soon pass the markers of an airboat trail



leaving east. Reach the first lake and the canal end at 1.1 miles. Keep southwest.

Pass marker #1 toward the end of the lake. Keep west past marker #2. Tall palms rise above the mangrove understory. Reach marker #3 at 1.7 miles. Look to your right, across the water, and you will see PVC marker L15. This is where you will come out after completing your loop. For now, continue down Halfway Creek.

The trail alternates between small lakes and narrower creeks, keeping a generally southwesterly direction. Stay with the markers. Beyond marker #6, reached at 2.4 miles, mangrove limbs hang over slender creek, until the trees eventually form a tunnel that continues for a good distance. Keep a reasonable pace, not going too fast among the twists and turns of the tunnel. Shallows are not a worry, but you may have to duck your head under vegetation.

Reach marker #7 at 2.9 miles. You're still in the midst of a thick tunnel. A smaller creek leaves to your right. A PVC pipe is marked L1. Turn right, joining a waterway more narrow than Halfway Creek.

From here on out, the PVC pipes are marked with the letter "L" and an ever-increasing number as you make the loop, from 1 to 15. Deep in this tunnel, you are hemmed in by overhanging limbs and tree roots. The bordering terrain seems to be a bit drier than at Halfway Creek, as is evidenced by numerous ferns. The drainage here heads for the Barren River. Be prepared for very sharp convolutions requiring making fancy steering.

The drainage becomes more tidally influenced. With the tide changes you will see exposed prop roots of mangroves. Open into a pond and marker L3 at 3.8 miles. Shortly open into a big lake—keep west along its south shore to soon bisect a strait and marker L5 at 4.2 miles. Turn right here and begin looping northbound into a funneling channel-turned-creek with no canopy that will likely be going in the opposite tidal direction you have been experiencing. Meet marker L7 and keep northeast. Make marker L8 at 5.0 miles. Keep left here in a slender channel that will soon open into a pond. Thus begins the pattern of pond/channel, pond/channel, keeping generally north. These channels are mostly mangrove; some are canopied, some aren't.

Stay left at marker L12 at 6.2 miles. Enjoy the tea-colored waters that allow you to see the bottom most of the time. A keen eye will spot slow-moving crabs and fish darting about. Continue alternating ponds and creeks, noting the reappearance of palms and buttonwood before reaching marker L14 and a lake at 6.7 miles. Bear southeast here, passing sawgrass bordering the lake. Reach the end of the lake and your last marker, L15, at 7.1 miles. You have now rejoined Halfway Creek and completed the loop. From here, keep left and backtrack 1.7 miles up Halfway Creek to the put-in.

### Halfway Creek Canoe Trail

---

Begin: Tamiami Trail	End: Gulf Coast Ranger Station
Distance: 7.5 miles	Time: 4 hours
Potential Tidal Influence: 3	Potential Wind Influence: 2
Navigational Challenge: 2	
Highlights: Diverse habitats, mangrove tunnels	
Hazards: Low water, strong tides under Halfway Creek Bridge	
Campsites: None	
Connections: Halfway Creek Loop, Turner River Route, West Pass Route, Indian Key Pass Route, Sandfly Island Route	

---

This route is a microcosm of South Florida in many ways. It reveals man's hand on the landscape and offers a good view of the beauty left under park protection. First, paddle down a man-made canal, definitely a part of South Florida today. Come to an attractive habitat of sawgrass, cattails, and trees islands. Then enter a strange and wonderful mangrove tunnel that turns to a brackish stream beneath a taller shady forest. Leave the park boundary, pass by houses, then go under a bridge of an artificial causeway to emerge in open and busy Chokoloskee Bay, ending your paddle at Gulf Coast Ranger Station. Consider paying for a shuttle from an outfitter in Everglades City to make this a one-way day paddle. This creek is not on the waterproof charts, but the route is marked most of the way, and the Big Cypress National