

INTRODUCTION

Looking for great places to go backpacking? The State of Florida is blessed with abundant tracts of wild lands, places where new and experienced backpackers can find attractive parcels laced with trails to trek, natural wonders to see, and sites to camp for days—or a day. These backpacking destinations present deep hardwood hammocks, open prairies, and remote pinelands—with alluring campsites to pitch your tent in the backcountry, where you can relax before a calming campfire and escape from the electronic chains that bind us to the daily grind.

A Florida backpacking adventure takes you places north and south, from the bluffs along Juniper Creek in the Panhandle to the glades of Big Cypress National Preserve, and a wealth of locales between. Florida's unforgettable backpacking jewels lead through federally designated wildernesses such as Bradwell Bay, deep in the Apalachicola National Forest, and coastal areas such as Moses Creek Conservation Area as well as along alluring waters such as the Saint Marys River at Ralph E. Simmons State Forest and beneath the big-sky prairies at Myakka River State Park.

Unbeknownst to most Americans, Florida is a backpacker's paradise, as evidenced by the Sunshine State's master path—the Florida Trail—running from the Big Cypress National Preserve to Gulf Islands National Seashore, more than 1,000 miles long and more in the making. It is the backbone of the backpacking trail network in Florida. The state's great national forests, parks, and preserves—the Apalachicola, Osceola, Ocala, Big Cypress, and Everglades—conserve millions of acres containing miles and miles of trails, presenting a multitude of overnighting opportunities that come as a true surprise to those who didn't know what fine backpacking opportunities await in Florida. Additionally, state parks, state forests, state water management districts, wildlife management areas, and other state lands offer numerous backpacking destinations within their boundaries.

So where to start backpacking in Florida? That is where this book comes into play. It delivers forty individual backpacking adventures covering more than 600 miles of trails, every mile of which I trekked and camped for this guide (whether I'd hiked them before or not, and nearly all of them I had). My résumé also includes having backpacked more than 2,500 nights in forty states throughout the United States, with hundreds of nights backpacked in Florida alone, including a complete thru-hike of the Florida Trail. That experience, combined with my having written more than eighty

outdoor-related guidebooks on backpacking, hiking, camping, paddling, and bicycling, should give you confidence in this book, a guide to help you make the most of your time backpacking in Florida.

It all started with a backpacking trip at Great Smoky Mountains National Park back in my native Tennessee, an adventure that ultimately launched me into my career as an outdoor writer. As the backpacking trips continued, I learned to apply to life in general the lessons learned while in the backcountry, such as persistence in the face of obstacles, patience when you have miles and miles to go, and acceptance of your circumstances when they are less than ideal. So can it be with you, whether you are new to backpacking or a rising veteran of the great outdoors.

To see regal woodlands, deep springs, and untamed wildlife—to backpack Florida—and be able share them with you has brought me to the realization that purchasers of *Backpacking Florida* are banking their money and their free time that Johnny Molloy knows what he is talking about. This is serious business, and I take it seriously!

One of the greatest joys of my occupation is sharing my love of the outdoors with you. And as a man who has spent many a winter season exploring Florida's natural lands and waters, my love of the state's ecological splendor raises the stakes even higher. I want y'all to see, smell, hear, and feel what lies out there, in the back of beyond, while backpacking Florida. As electronics further infiltrate every aspect of our lives, we are losing our connection with nature. Backpacking provides a means to get outside, to explore, to stimulate our mental, physical, and spiritual selves in the natural world.

You can hit the trail with friends and family, together discovering and sharing the God-given beauty of the Sunshine State. While backpacking Florida you can soak in horizon-to-horizon vistas in Kissimmee Prairie, wander among massive old-growth live oaks in Welaka State Forest, ramble alongside bucolic ponds in the Ocala National Forest, traipse through remote evergreen woodlands at Dupuis Wildlife Management Area (WMA), or visit the sinks and streams of Aucilla WMA.

This book includes different types of backpacks in varied settings with varying layers of difficulty. Most backpacking adventures detailed are two-night trips typical for the weekend backpacker, yet additional backpacks range from 3-mile, one-night family treks to multiday, 50-plus-mile, larger-than-life adventures.

The backpacks feature not only fine trails and campsites but also scenic sights—vast, open palmetto/wiregrass prairies broken by cypress domes; lush, wooded bottomlands along remote streams; boardwalks traversing otherwise inaccessible swamps; and fragrant pinelands pitted against

a bright-blue sky. Well-known “must-do” destinations such as the Juniper Prairie Wilderness, Rice Creek Sanctuary, and the Blackwater River State Forest are included, but undiscovered gems like Jennings State Forest, Ocklawaha Prairie Restoration Area, and Bonnet Pond increase your Florida backpacking possibilities.

This book also delivers “must-know” information for you, so you can more adeptly execute successful backpacking adventures: how to get to the trailhead, how far the backpack is, the hike’s difficulty, when to go, where the campsites are, what you are going to see along the way, and where you are, within reason, at any given moment of the hike. Each hike includes all of the above, along with an easy-to-scan map, trail mileage chart, and a photo to help you build a mental picture of the area. Additionally, scattered within this “where-to” guide are “how-to” backpacking tips and tricks guaranteed to make your outdoor adventures run more smoothly. These helpful tidbits will boost your quest for becoming the best backpacker you can be.

I hope this guide will inspire you to create your own adventures and make memories that will leave you and your loved ones wanting more, and to want to share the great outdoors with still others. The reason I travel and explore the outdoors is simple: the world is a beautiful place! Life is for living, and adventures are for having. Do everything now. Don’t wait. Go now. Backpacking in Florida can be so exciting—you never know what is going to happen next, what is around the bend along the trail, what is over the next hill, or what the weather will bring. But I can guarantee you that using *Backpacking Florida* will bring a wealth of adventures and memories to last a lifetime.

Backpacking in Florida

Look at a map of Florida. Several things will strike aspiring Sunshine State backpackers. First, the state extends from the western boundary with Alabama in the north across the Tallahassee Hills to the coastal estuaries of the Saint Marys River near Jacksonville, then down over the sandy hills of the central peninsula intermingled with rivers and wetlands aplenty to scattered prairies down to the sea of grass known as the Everglades. *Backpacking Florida* includes overnight trips traveling through all the far-flung points of the Sunshine State. These varied destinations harbor wide-ranging ecosystems containing diverse flora and fauna, augmenting your outdoor experience.

Furthermore, Florida is blessed with a wealth of public lands where you can enjoy backpacking—national parks, national forests, as well as state parks, forests, and water management districts. Big Cypress National Preserve offers America’s most unique backpacking—bar none. Additional

federal lands offer more backpacking possibilities—starting with Florida’s national forests. Between the Apalachicola, Ocala, and Osceola National Forests, we have almost 1.2 million acres of trail-laced wildlands in which to overnight. Florida state parks preserve another 750,000-plus acres in which to backpack. Florida’s state forests cover another million-plus acres where you can trek and pitch your tent. Finally, Florida’s five water management districts, in the course of managing the state’s aquatic reserve, also manage the trail-rich lands through which their waters flow, including still more backpacking opportunities. This adds up to a lot of Florida to explore by foot, enhancing the experience via overnight backpacking.

The diversity of terrain, habitat, and trails is reflected in the backpacking adventures that you can undertake here in Florida. Starting in the Panhandle, you can tackle a 28-mile adventure, complete with trail shelters, at Blackwater River State Forest; overnight on a coastal island at St. George Island State Park; tackle the surprisingly steep hills of Torreya State Park; or take a longer, wilder trek at vast Apalachicola National Forest, including the celebrated Bradwell Bay Wilderness.

North Florida has its own destinations, including the remote pinelands of the Osceola National Forest. The backcountry hike at Moses Creek ends on a bluff above an eye-catching tidal stream. Pitch your tent at a cool campsite on the shores of the St. Johns River at Bayard Conservation Area. Or take an extended ramble along the legendary Suwannee River.

Moving south, you come to Central Florida. Soak in distant panoramas while trekking through Bull Creek WMA. Take a pair of longer backpacks through the Ocala National Forest, home of the world’s largest sand pine scrub ecosystem. Make a shorter trek through the varied landscapes at Ross Prairie State Forest. Wander through thick forests of the Withlacoochee River on the Richloam Tract. Ramble under a cathedral of live oaks and palms at Seminole State Forest or camp overnight in the back of beyond at Tosohatchee WMA. Explore part of the famed Green Swamp, headwaters of several Florida rivers. Loop your way through the wilds of Lake Wales Ridge State Forest.

South Florida offers immense wildlands ready to explore. First and foremost is Big Cypress National Preserve, where you tackle the first 30 miles of the Florida Trail through hiking terrain unlike anywhere else in North America. Both Myakka River State Park and Myakka State Forest present sizeable tracts with multiday overnight opportunities. Camp at beautiful and remote Bowman Island on the Ocean-to-Lake Trail. Head out to Kitching Creek at Jonathan Dickinson State Park.

When you ponder the possibilities, Florida is truly blessed with a wealth of backpacking opportunities.