



FAQ'S FOR FT LONG-DISTANCE HIKERS - 2017



How long is the Trail?

The Florida Trail is approximately 1400 miles long. The mileage varies slightly every year as local maintaining chapters relocate parts of the Trail, working to take the FT off of private property and roads and into a protected corridor. Since there are multiple routes a hiker can choose from. A thru-hike is approximately 1100 miles and averages 2-3 months.

How do I get there?

The southern terminus is at the Oasis Ranger Station on US 41 about half-way between Miami and Naples. Miami and Naples both have bus service, motels, restaurants and campgrounds and Miami has a large international airport. From Naples and Miami you will have to hire a cab to get to Oasis.

The northern terminus of the Florida National Scenic Trail is at Fort Pickens in the Gulf Islands National Seashore south of Pensacola. Pensacola has an airport, bus and taxi service as well as numerous motels, restaurants and campgrounds. It's a short taxi or bus ride from the Pensacola airport to Pensacola Beach, but from there you will have to walk out to Ft Pickens or take a water taxi to the Ft Pickens Campground. Call Chulamar Charters for water taxi at 850-492-1099.

The Alabama terminus, for those hiking the ECT, is at the boundary between the Conecuh National Forest in Alabama and Blackwater River State Forest in Florida. From the kiosk it is approximately 0.7 miles on Forest Road 326B out to Beaver Creek Rd and from there approximately 35 miles to the town of Milton via Beaver Creek Rd, SR 4 and CR 191 - Munson Highway.

What about these multiple routes I can choose from?

Currently there are several options for the thru-hiker to take.

The FNST circles Lake Okeechobee from Clewiston on the south to Okee-Tantie on the north. The thru-hiker may select which side of the lake they wish to walk. They are not required to completely circle the lake. The east side offers more towns and amenities, the west side is a little more rural in nature. Note that for the 2014-15 hiking season a majority of the eastern route is closed for dike repairs. For this reason we recommend the western route this year.

Around central Florida there are also two routes. The eastern route runs from the Kissimmee River through Tosohatchee, Oviedo, Longwood, Seminole State Forest and up into the Ocala National Forest. The western route runs from the Kissimmee River through St Cloud, Green Swamp, Withlacoochee State Forest, Cross-Florida Greenway and then into the Ocala National Forest. The eastern route is shorter and closer to urban areas and supplies but many miles are on paved multi-use trails through the Orlando suburbs. The western route currently has more road-walk at the south end, but it also has more forested trail at the north end. Again, the thru-hiker may elect one or the other of these routes; they are not required to hike both.

The final decision point is out in the western panhandle. At the little community of Harold hikers can elect to hike south to Fort Pickens in Gulf Islands National Seashore or to hike north through Blackwater River State Forest to the Florida/Alabama state line.

Which is the preferred hiking season?

The hiking season in Florida runs basically from October through April. Because of unpredictable weather and hunting seasons in the fall, **we strongly recommend thru-hikers start in the south no earlier than January** and end in the north by May. While all but a few miles of trail is open 365 days a year, most Florida land managers either restrict camping to developed campgrounds or prohibit camping all together during hunting seasons. The major hunt seasons start in September in the south and run into March in the north. Starting your hike in early January in the south will avoid most hunting restrictions and place your hike during the winter "dry" season. Attempting a thru-hike during the height of general gun (deer) hunting season will either force you to hike 30-50 miles between campgrounds, stay in local motels, or camp illegally and be subject to fines and/or being escorted off the property. Hiking during the "off season" avoids hunting but subjects hikers to heavy heat and humidity (95 degrees with 98% humidity is not uncommon), daily afternoon thunderstorms, and seasonal campground closures due to low use. And when campgrounds are closed that also means the water supply is shut off.

What is the weather like during a Florida winter?

While Florida winters are moderate compared to the rest of the United States, we do get fronts coming through that can cause the temperature to drop below freezing in a matter of hours. These cold fronts also generally bring rain. Fortunately, such weather usually doesn't stay with us for more than a few days, but it does mean you should pack more than shorts and t-shirts for your hike. Be prepared for temperatures ranging from 20 degrees to 80 degrees during this winter hiking season. During El Nino years the trail is likely to be wetter and colder than normal.

Are shelters available along the Trail?

There are currently only six shelters along the Florida Trail, three of them in Blackwater River State Forest. It is therefore necessary for you to provide your own tent, tarp, bivy, or hammock for your hike. Because of our voracious insects good "no-see-um" netting on your shelter is recommended.

Do I need maps and where can I get them?

FTA sells a series of hiker maps and a Data Book. Because of frequent changes in the trail route most thru-hikers feel the maps are necessary. A full set of thru-trail maps (which includes the DataBook) may be purchased from the FTA office or the FTA online store. Notices to Hikers detailing trail changes that have occurred since the map publication are posted on the FTA website.

Do I need to be a member of the FTA to thru-hike the Trail?

Where the FT crosses private property, FTA always tries to work with the private land owner to allow for public access. However, some private land owners prefer to restrict access to only members of the Association with which they have their agreement. Membership in the Florida Trail Association is a legal requirement to cross these lands and non-members are subject to trespass laws. Individual membership is \$35 per year. These funds are used to further the goal of a protected foot trail the length of Florida! You may become a member by applying for membership at the FTA online store or by calling the FTA office.

Do I need a permit to hike the Trail?

A few private, public and military land managers require advanced notification and a permit to cross their land. The two major permits are handled through the Florida Trail Association office. For the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation you are required to sign a release and mail it in to the Reservation at least 2 weeks prior to your hike. For Eglin Air Force Base, self-registration kiosks are available at both ends of the trail. It is **required** that you register before entering Eglin AFB. The basic permits required of thru-hikers are laid out in the "Long Distance Hiker Packet" which you may download from the FTA website (<http://www.floridatrail.org/long-distance-resources>) or request via mail from the FTA.

How many miles of road-walk remain and do I have to walk them?

For 2014 there remains a little less than 300 miles of roadwalk along the various routes. In order to qualify for the FTA End-to-End certification you must walk the entire trail as it exists at the time of your hike. Most of the road-walks are blazed, although not as frequently as in the woods. The FTA trail maps and Data Book include the road walks.

What is the mileage between points X and Y on the Trail?

Our published map set and Data Book contain detailed information on campsites and campgrounds, water sources, trailhead locations, and land manager regulations. Be aware however, that the Florida Trail is evolving at a rapid pace in some areas as the trail is moved from private land and roads into a protected corridor. Maps and books only a few months old may be out of date and private landowners may change their access policies at any time. Stores open this week can be closed next week. Check the FTA website for "Notices to Hikers" under Trail conditions.

What should I know about hiking in the swamps?

Contrary to popular belief, the Florida Trail only passes through two swamps. In the central panhandle is Bradwell Bay Wilderness Area in the Apalachicola National Forest. Please note that not ALL of the trail through the Bradwell Bay WA is underwater, only about 8 miles is actually swamp. But it is a true blackwater Titi (pronounced TIE-tie) forest swamp. Expect to spend the majority of a day getting through Bradwell Bay because it's usually an obstacle course of trees and roots. For North-bounders, the Monkey Creek crossing at the east end of the swamp is generally the deepest part, so when you reach Monkey Creek you can decide whether to proceed through the swamp or take the roads around it. But relax, allow yourself plenty of daylight, take your time and have some fun.

Note: The following is a detour I've taken when Bradwell Bay is high; (Northbound)

Turn LEFT on FR 329, (waypoint 10-7 on Map 10) and follow all the way to FR 314 and turn RIGHT back to FT (waypoint 10-10 on Map 10)

More careful planning is required for passage through Big Cypress National Preserve. If wilderness is measured by how long it would take you to get out to find help, then Big Cypress is true wilderness. Between Loop Rd and I-75 the FT crosses only one traveled road – US 41 at the 8 mile mark. Water levels vary widely depending on how much rain the "hurricane season" (June through November) dumped on central and south Florida. The trail can also be very rough in January and early February since our trail volunteers are prohibited from getting in and doing trail maintenance if the National Park Service judges the water levels are too high. In a normal year water in January and February will be calf-deep to knee-deep with a few stretches of thigh-deep

to waist-deep water. Water levels start dropping in January so that by late March much of Big Cypress may be dry. Ground level rises as you hike north so from about Ivy Camp south of I-75 up to the Indian Reservation boundary you will be feet-dry – in a normal year. If the southeastern US is having a wetter or drier than normal winter, then hikers need to adjust their expectations accordingly. However, in defense of Big Cypress as a hiking destination, it is a unique environment. The Preserve is the most biologically diverse region of the terrestrial Everglades, and while dominated by a wet cypress forest is host to an array of flora and fauna, including mangroves, orchids, alligators, a variety of birds, the Florida Panther, and the Florida Black Bear. The preserve is also home to nine federally listed endangered species including the West Indian Manatee, the eastern indigo snake, and the Florida Sandhill Crane. And unlike Bradwell Bay which is a blackwater swamp, the waters of Big Cypress are crystal clear. So be prepared, but keep your eyes open for the vast array of plant and animal life you may see nowhere else on earth.

Will I see a Panther or be chomped by an Alligator?

Florida is home to the Florida Panther, the Florida Black Bear, American Alligator, several pit vipers (Copperhead, Water Moccasin/Cottonmouth, Pygmy Rattlesnake, Timber Rattlesnake and Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake) and the Coral Snake as well as numerous small wild animals. Actually, you will be lucky to catch a glimpse of the larger animals, because both the panther and our black bear are very shy of humans. Alligators are a possibility in any water. Keep your eyes open so as not to startle them and they will not challenge a human. Folks who get bitten by gators are generally swimming near dawn or dusk when the gator can't distinguish that the foot it is biting is attached to something much bigger. In 25 years of hiking the Florida Trail I have seen many alligators **from** the trail (in canals and ponds) but I have seen only one gator actually **on** the trail - in Big Cypress. We simply took a bunch of photos and detoured around him giving him about 50 feet of "breathing room". And I consider myself very fortunate to have actually seen one panther in the wild, from a distance, again in Big Cypress.

We've also been getting many questions recently about the exotic pythons in the wild in South Florida and want to emphasize that no humans have been harmed by the pythons on or near the Trail. Like any other snake, be cautious but if you should happen to see one, leave it alone and it will leave you alone.

You probably have more to fear from our mighty mosquitoes, raccoons, squirrels, fire ants and ticks than the larger mammals and reptiles. Lyme disease is in Florida, so a daily tick check is wise. Good camping practice requires you to hang your food to keep the animals away and prevent them from associating humans with food. In Big Cypress and the three National Forests bear bag hanging is a requirement, in other locations it is certainly a good precaution. It is wise to watch where you place your feet and hands to prevent encountering snakes and fire ants.

Are dogs allowed on the Trail?

Since many Florida state agencies and private landowners either prohibit dogs or place severe restrictions on them, the Florida Trail Association cannot recommend attempting a thru-hike with your dog. The two swamps mentioned above are particularly dangerous for dogs due to the possibility of alligators. If you really want to bring Fido along on a hike, then limit yourself to section hikes in the national and state forests.

How about my mountain bike/horse?

Several short portions of the Florida Trail occur on shared, multi-use trails (usually paved) but the vast majority of the trail is designated for foot traffic only. That means no horses, no bicycles, no pack stock, and no motorized vehicles.

What do the Florida Trail Association Chapters do?

Volunteers from our member chapters perform trail maintenance, build new trail, represent hiker interests at governmental and community meetings and serve on the FTA Board of Directors which formulates policy. Chapters also sponsor hikes - for members and the general public. Active members within the chapters can provide to hikers valuable information about their sections of trail. Do not be afraid to contact them for localized advice. All chapter websites/Facebook pages/Meetups can be accessed from the FTA website.

What clothing is required?

Rain protection is a must and layering is the rule for clothing. Layered synthetic clothing will allow you to regulate your body temperature on those days that start with finding your water bottle frozen solid and end with you baking in semitropical heat. You should carry a safety orange vest, poncho or pack cover to wear during hunting seasons. This is particularly important during the general gun (deer) season, which runs from mid-October to March, depending on which part of the state you are hiking.

What about boots?

Many Florida Trail hikers use sturdy "aerobic" type shoes. Others wear lightweight hiking boots. You will not find a lot of rocky terrain along the Florida Trail, but the hard sand on most of the trail requires good ankle and heel support. In the south the limestone/marl base of the trail is very hard and often slippery. Blisters can be a problem for those not accustomed to walking on sand, so include blister treatments in your first aid supplies and check frequently for "hot spots". Low gaiters can help to keep the sand out of your shoes and socks. Hiking sandals work well for some people, but sand spurs between the toes can be a problem in a few areas. In Big Cypress and Bradwell Bay you'll want toe protection from submerged logs and shoes that the marl/mud won't suck off your feet.

Is the water safe to drink?

All water in Florida should be treated unless identified as potable by signs. You must filter, boil or chemically treat all surface water.

Can I build fires for cooking?

Carry a backpacking stove to cook your meals. Don't rely on fires. Not only is it more convenient and easier in wet weather, it minimizes your impact on the land around your camp. Winter being our dry season, it is also the start of our wildfire season. Campfires are not allowed at all along some sections of the Trail and may be temporarily banned in other areas during periods of high fire danger. When you can build a fire, keep it small. Use sticks no larger than your fingers and use only pre-existing fire rings or build a leave-no-trace fire on a deep sandy base. Be particularly cautious of underground roots.

What is my daily mileage likely to be?

Florida offers its own set of challenges that can affect daily mileage. In high water years portions of the trail may have to be waded, cutting your mileage in half. In low water years, water sources may be few and far between making for high mileage days between campsites.

Big Cypress National Preserve in the south (particularly below the Oasis Ranger Station) and Bradwell Bay in the north are especially difficult sections where lower mileage (7-10 miles per day) can be counted on. The dike walks along Lake Okeechobee can be cruised pretty easily at 15-20 miles per day. Also, remember that since our prime hiking season is during the winter, daylight hours are short.

Don't underestimate the terrain in Florida simply because there are no peaks to be bagged. Instead, take the Trail as you find it. One of the fascinating things about the Florida Trail is the number of diverse ecological systems the trail traverses. A six inch change in altitude can mean a total difference in the plants and animals you are likely to encounter.

Should I be concerned about my personal safety?

Hiking the Florida Trail is much safer than living in any city, but problems can occur. Most people living along the trail or in nearby towns do not know of the Trail's existence, so relying on locals for information about the trail will generally get you lost. Also, since people in Florida are not used to seeing hikers and the homeless population in Florida explodes in the winter months, hitchhiking is more problematic compared to some other trails. Here are a few suggestions for hiking the Florida Trail:

- Don't hike alone.
- When you pass a trail register, sign in.
- Be wary of strangers. Trust your gut instincts.
- Be careful with your equipment and don't leave yourself open to theft.
- Don't camp near road crossings.
- Leave a trip plan with a friend and keep them apprised of your location on a regular basis.
- A cell phone for emergency use is a wise precaution, but note that in many places along the trail you will have no reception.
- If posting your hike on the internet, build in a delay of several days. That makes it harder for strangers with evil intent to pinpoint your location.

Anything else?

Please keep in mind that the Florida Trail is very much a work in progress at this time. It has to be treated as a grand adventure where you never really know what might be around the next corner rather than a stroll in the woods on a carefully blazed thoroughfare surrounded by other thru-hikers. If you elect to long-distance hike the Florida Trail, you are among pioneers in the hiking community, not following closely in the footsteps of thousands of others.

Be respectful of private property rights and local land management regulations. It is only through their good will that the trail crosses their property.

The trail is frequently rerouted as we work to take the trail off roads and private property and into more scenic and public surroundings. Purchase the maps and the Data Book, but be prepared to trust recent blazes if they disagree with published maps and books.

Go to the www.fthikers.org/forum to ask questions of people who are currently hiking or have hiked sections of trail recently. Check the Notices to Hikers (Trail Conditions) on the FTA website to get up-to-date information. Contact the FTA office well in advance of any long distance hikes to find out about changes in permitting and permissions. Check with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for hunting regulations.

Let us know when you complete your end-to-end hike! We're trying to keep a record of all our thru-hikers. And don't forget to fill out and return the End-to-End Application for a the patch and certificate.

Most of all, enjoy your adventure on the Florida Trail and the many and diverse ecosystems you will be hiking through.