

Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee
National Wildlife Refuge
Airboat Operator Course



Our Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Introduction

The Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge was established by an act of Congress in 1951 under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929. The refuge is managed through a License Agreement between the State of Florida and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 1986, the refuge was renamed the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge to honor former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee and noted South Florida conservationist, Arthur Raymond Marshall.

The refuge consists of 145,188 acres, or 226 square miles, of northern everglades ecosystems including a mosaic of wet prairies, sawgrass ridges, sloughs, tree islands, cattail communities, and a 400-acre cypress swamp. These lands provides habitat (food, water, shelter, and space) for more than 250 species of birds, 60 species of reptiles and amphibians, 40 species of butterflies, and 20 types of mammals.

Introduction continued



The Refuge provides habitat and protection for endangered and threatened wildlife such as the American alligator, snail kite, and wood stork. Migratory birds such as Neotropical songbirds, secretive marsh birds, shorebirds, raptors, and waterfowl winter at the Refuge, along with a great variety of year-round resident wading birds and other wildlife.

Background

In 2019, the Refuge completed a new Visitor Services Plan. With input from the public, including the airboating community, the plan calls for opening the entire Refuge to non-motorized and motorized boats in designated zones, expanded hunting and fishing opportunities, and expanded bicycling, hiking and equestrian trails, as well as permitted airboat use in designated areas and times of year.

Airboat operation in designated areas of the Refuge for hunting, fishing, frogging, camping, wildlife observation, and other traditional nature-based activities has been deemed consistent with the mission of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

With the completion of the plan, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allows airboat operation in designated areas during specific times of the year on the Refuge by PERMIT ONLY.

The ultimate goal of the Visitor Services Plan is to protect natural resources while providing for reasonable access to airboats and other recreational activities.

Airboat Operator Permit Process

In order to get an airboat permit, each owner/operator must complete this Airboat Operator Course. If there are multiple operators for one boat, each operator must complete the course.

Upon completion of the course, you will need to read the special conditions for airboat use, then submit a General Activities Special Use Permit Application (FWS Form 3-1383-G). By signing this application, you are agreeing that you have read and understand the regulations governing the use of airboats within the Refuge.



Airboat Operator Permit Process (continued)

If you are chosen in the lottery (Non-hunting Airboat Permit) you must present a valid form of identification to complete the special use permit process.

Once you have completed the Airboat Operator Course and you have been chosen in the lottery to get a airboat permit, you must bring your airboat to the Refuge for a vessel inspection.

Once you receive your Airboat Special Use Permit and decal, you are required to carry the permit with you whenever you are operating an airboat in the Refuge.

The decal is required to be placed on the left/port rudder of your airboat.

Airboat Inspections

It is the intent of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to establish vessel specifications that protect Refuge resources while providing for reasonable recreational access to airboats.

The majority of the specifications come from Title 50, Code of Federal Regulations, Section 26.22, 26.34 and 27.32, which are regulations specific to the A.R.M. Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, and adopted United States Coast Guard regulations. These regulations are used to define what is the minimum set of requirements needed for each airboat.

Airboat inspections are completed onsite at the Refuge Headquarters.

The inspection is valid for the Airboat Permit period. The airboat will need to be re-inspected each year.

Airboat Inspections (continued)

Airboats must meet the following minimum set of requirements to ensure user safety and resource protection:

- GPS Tracking device (GPS Unit or Tracker)
- Hull Length of 16 feet maximum excluding grass rake
- Width of 8 feet maximum
- Current Florida State Registration Decal
- Hull Identification Number
- Minimum of 3 inch Florida #'s displayed on each side of the bow or a minimum of 6 inch Florida #'s displayed on both sides of rudders
- PFD (Life Jackets)
- Fire Extinguisher
- Sound producing device (whistle, horn, etc.)
- Must have an automotive-style factory muffler per Florida Statute 327.391
- Port and Starboard lights (Coast Guard Requirement)
- Working White Aft Light to be seen 360'
- Orange Safety Flag 10" by 12" or larger flown at minimum 10 feet above vessel waterline.



Airboat Permits



Once you have completed this **Airboat Operator Course**, completed the **Airboat Operator Special Use Permit Application** and an **inspection of your vessel**, you will be able to obtain the permit for your airboat.



This permit is available for airboats that meet the safety and airboat specifications identified in the course. Once an inspection has been completed favorably on your airboat, this sticker will allow access during the appropriate phase and designated areas.

There is a fee of \$100 for each permit. Permits are valid for the date listed on the permit. Each sticker must be affixed to the left rudder, on the outside facing surface.

Types of Airboat Permits

An airboat permit is required to operate an airboat on the Refuge in designated areas during specific times of the year. These areas are usually the wettest areas with broad expanses of wet prairies and open water.

There are four types of airboat permits for which you can apply:

- Non-hunting Airboat Permit
- Alligator Hunt Airboat Permit
- Duck and Coot Hunt Airboat Permit
- Interior Deer Hunt Airboat Permit

Each airboat permit is limited to that airboat activity only.

The next pages will define the different airboat permits.

Non-hunting Airboat Permit



Persons with this permit will be allowed to operate an airboat in approximately 13,900 acres of the Motorized Zone within the Refuge Interior from July through November, except during duck and coot hunting seasons. Days of operation will be limited to Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Persons with this permit will not be allowed to hunt.

Alligator Hunt Airboat Permit

Only persons who have obtained an Alligator Harvest Permit from the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission for the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, will be allowed to operate an airboat in the Refuge during the alligator hunting days as specified in the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge Alligator Hunting Permit.

Persons with the Alligator Hunting Airboat Permit will ONLY be allowed to operate an airboat for alligator hunting.

Unrestricted airboat travel not associated with alligator hunting is prohibited.

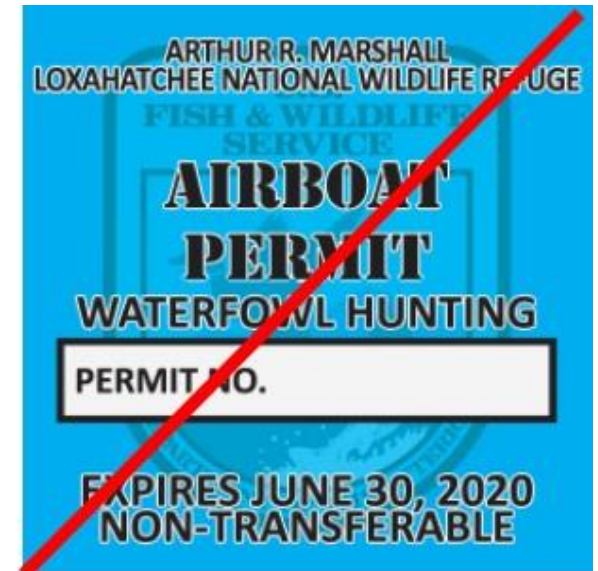


Duck and Coot Hunt Airboat Permit

Persons with this permit will be allowed to operate an airboat for Duck and Coot hunting ONLY during Phase 2 of the State of Florida Duck and Coot season. Hunting will be allowed during the days and times specified in the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge Duck and Coot Hunting Permit, and regulations under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Persons with the Duck and Coot Hunting Airboat Permit will ONLY be allowed to operate an airboat for Duck and Coot hunting.

Unrestricted airboat travel not associated with duck and coot hunting is prohibited.



Interior Deer Hunt Airboat Permit

Only persons who have obtained an Interior Deer Hunt Permit from the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge will be allowed to operate an airboat in the Refuge during the Interior Deer Hunt. Specified days will be in the quota hunt permit.

Persons with this permit will ONLY be allowed to operate an airboat during the Interior Deer Hunt.

Unrestricted airboat travel not associated with the Interior Deer Hunt is prohibited.

It's Up To You!

There are required regulations that you need to know before and during any trip into the backcountry. Please familiarize yourself with these regulations as you will be required to adhere to them while enjoying your airboat in the Refuge.

Remember, it is up to you! It is the responsibility of the user to know and follow all applicable rules and regulations. The future of airboat access depends on the continued responsible use of airboats in the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

Always remember to check kiosks, with law enforcement officers or online before each trip to ensure you are up to date with all current regulations.

Safety for you, your passengers and the Refuge

Safely exploring the Refuge, while protecting the sensitive Everglades habitats and wildlife, requires the ability to "read the water". Watch for wildlife, vegetation, other vessels, hunters and paddlers.

Know before you go:

- Be prepared. Watch for changing weather conditions.
- Be sure your vessel is seaworthy and has plenty of fuel.
- Know the draft (depth), and limits of your boat.
- Tell a relative or friend where you are going and when you should return.
- Carry a cell phone and your required Global Positioning System (GPS) device.
- Carry water, snacks, foul weather clothing, insect repellent, and emergency light.
- Have all required U.S. Coast Guard approved safety equipment.
- All airboats MUST display a 10 inches by 12 inches orange flag 10 feet above the waterline.
- Please do not leave valuables in your vehicle.
- If you should become lost or disabled, **STAY WITH YOUR BOAT**, if possible attempt to reach main canal and display light after dark.

The Refuge Emergency Number is 800-307-5789

Enjoy your day on the water

Wear your life vest!



Limit alcohol consumption.
Boating while intoxicated will ruin
your day.



Speed Limit and Safe Operation

The operation of airboats in excess of the authorized and posted speed limit of 35 MPH, or in a careless manner, or for the purpose of damaging Refuge resources, or for challenging other airboats, such as racing and competitive events, is not consistent with the mission of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

These non-traditional pursuits damage the resource and, therefore, are not authorized within the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Engaging in these activities will result in forfeiture of airboat access privileges, criminal charges and possible injury.

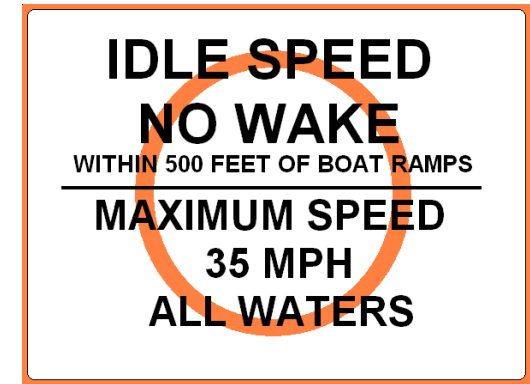
Speed Limit and Safe Operation (continued)

Speed Limits: There is a 35 mile per hour speed limit for all vessels operating in the Refuge, including airboats.

Slow Speed Zones: There are Slow Speed Zones at each boat ramp for 500 feet.

Motorized vessels are prohibited in the Non-motorized Zone, in the Refuge interior, north of a line of latitude of 26° 27.130.

All airboats must display a 10" X 12" orange flag 10 feet above the waterline.



Watch for these signs



Airboat Permit and Tracking

All airboats, while operating within the boundaries of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, must utilize a **Global Positioning System (GPS) unit or GPS Tracker**, and maintain an active track of all of the movements of the airboat.

Upon the request of a Federal or state law enforcement officer, the permit holder/captain of the vessel will produce the GPS Device for an inspection of the track and route of the airboat.

NOTE: By signing the airboat special use permit application, the permit holder agrees to the above conditions for any and all captains operating the airboat, and constitutes irrevocable consent to the search of the GPS Device by Federal and state law enforcement officers.



Firearms

Individuals are responsible for adhering to Federal and State laws related to firearms and concealed weapons.

Discharging firearms is prohibited except during a lawful hunt.

Periodic Closures

In some circumstances, areas within the designated airboat operating zones need to be closed on a temporary or seasonal basis. Whether this is for ecological concerns, wildlife, visitor safety, or maintenance; areas may be closed as needed.

Information regarding closures can be found on the Refuge website, at the Refuge Visitor Center or by calling 561-732-3684.

Limiting Disturbance

Like all human activity airboat use has an impact on the habitats within the Refuge. Designated airboat areas are those that have been used for generations.

Traveling through an area can disturb soils, vegetation and wildlife habitat, sometimes to the point that surface water flow may be affected. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is required to manage airboat use in a manner that will minimize or avoid these impacts to the Refuge, avoid sensitive habitats and soils and provide reasonable access.

Knowing the habitats of the Refuge will provide an understanding of why areas for airboat use were designated, where they were, and allow you to have a deeper understanding of this special place.

If you can't make it through you may have to turn around and go back. Stay on trails and open waters at all times.

Should I operate my airboat here?

To protect the Refuge's natural and cultural resources and your airboat, it is the responsibility of the operator to know the limitations of their vessel and their operational skills as well as where you can operate. DO NOT assume that you will be able to travel everywhere at any time of the year.

In the next slides are photographs of habitat, vegetated areas, tree islands, open waterways, trails and sawgrass sloughs. Each photo will indicate whether you should operate your airboat in or through that area.

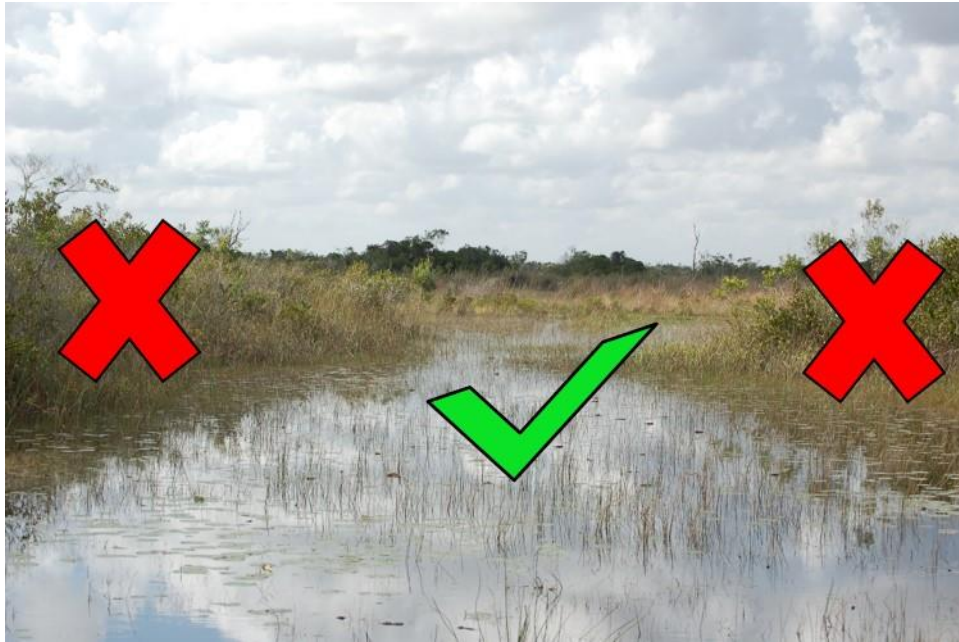


This habitat is OK to operate through.



This habitat is not OK to operate through and will damage habitat and wildlife.

Should I operate my airboat here? (Part 1)



Should I operate my airboat here? (Part 2)



Should I operate my airboat here? (Part 3)



Should I operate my airboat here? (Part 4)



Should I operate my airboat here? (Part 5)



Should I operate my airboat here? (Part 6)



Should I operate my airboat here? (Part 7)



Enforcement

The vast majority of backcountry users follow the applicable rules and regulations. However, sometimes infractions do occur. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service utilizes federal and state laws to ensure your safety as well as the protection of the Everglades habitats and wildlife in the Refuge.

It is not the intent of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to stifle a good time, but rather to provide for the continued use and protection of the Refuge by all of those who wish to enjoy it.

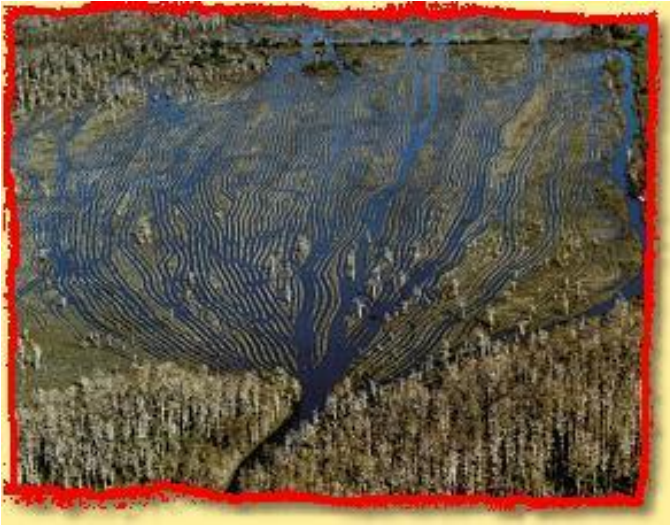
Violations of Federal and state laws within the Refuge can result in a suspension of your airboat permit as well as criminal charges and forfeiture of equipment and vessels with fines up to \$100,000 and up to year of incarceration.



**Please report violations to Federal Wildlife Officers at
1-800-307-5789**



Backcountry Ethics and Considerations



The future of airboat access into the Refuge depends upon the responsible operation that will minimize impacts to the resources, minimize conflicts between users and ensure the safety of operators and other visitors.

Backcountry Ethics and Considerations (1)

- Travel responsibly on designated roads, trails and designated areas.
- Stay in open waters. Never travel on sawgrass prairies, tree islands or through other vegetation.
- Comply with all signs and barriers.
- Respect the rights of others and all recreational users, boaters, hunters anglers, campers and others to allow them to enjoy their recreational activities undisturbed.
- Be considerate of others in the backcountry.
- Respect and follow all posted signage, don't travel on posted lands.
- Respect the rights of others and all recreational users, boaters, hunters anglers, campers and others to allow them to enjoy their recreational activities undisturbed.
- Be considerate of others in the backcountry.
- Respect and follow all posted signage, don't travel on posted lands.

Backcountry Ethics and Considerations (2)

- Educate yourself by obtaining travel maps and regulations, planning for your trip, taking recreation skills classes, and knowing how to use and operate your equipment safely.
- It is your responsibility to contact the land manager to learn of any permit requirements, closures, or restrictions.
- Obtain a map of your destination and determine which areas are open to your type of travel.
- Make a realistic plan and stick to it. Always tell someone of your travel plans.
- Check weather forecasts before you go.

Backcountry Ethics and Considerations (3)

- Avoiding sensitive areas such as open prairies. Stay on designated routes.
- Avoid "spooking" wildlife you encounter.
- Avoid causing undo resource damage by not traveling through areas your airboat may not be able to go through. If you think you might get stuck, turn around and take a different route.
- Doing your part by leaving the area better than you found it, properly disposing of waste, avoiding the spread of invasive species, restoring degraded areas, and joining local enthusiast groups.
- Pack out all trash. Carry a trash bag on your airboat and pick up litter left by others.
- Before and after your trip, wash you gear and support vehicle to reduce the spread of invasive species.

YOU ARE ALMOST DONE! A Reminder:

All airboats, while operating within the boundaries of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, must utilize a Global Positioning System (GPS) unit or GPS Tracker, and maintain an active track of all of the movements of the airboat. Upon the request of a Federal law enforcement officer, the captain of the vessel will produce the GPS Device for an inspection of the track and route of the airboat.

By signing the airboat special use permit, the permit holder agrees to the above conditions for any and all captains operating the airboat, and constitutes irrevocable consent to the search of the GPS Device by Federal law enforcement officers.

Congratulations!

You have completed the Airboat Operator Course

Now close the course and please read the Special Conditions for Airboat Use in the Refuge. Next, you will complete an application and send your application to the Refuge.

Understand that by signing the application and permit, you are agreeing that you are the individual who took this course, and that you understand your responsibilities while operating an airboat in the Refuge.

*Happy
Airboating*

