

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Lower Suwannee

*National Wildlife  
Refuge*



*Located along the southern edge of the Big Bend Region of Florida's west coast, Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge encompasses 52,935 acres of land in Dixie and Levy Counties. The historic Suwannee River; made famous by Stephen Foster; bisects the refuge.*



*This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

## **Introduction**

Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge was established on April 10, 1979, for the purpose of protecting, maintaining, and enhancing a beautiful and rare natural ecosystem. Purchase of the lands was made possible through the cooperative efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, and Florida's Suwannee River Water Management District.

Along the river and its tributary creeks, the habitat consists of majestic cypress trees and floodplain hardwood forests; scrub oak communities and pine plantations are found on the upland sites.



*R.J. Lemaire*

From the mouth of the Suwannee River, the refuge fronts 26 miles of the Gulf of Mexico where the habitat changes to scenic tidal marshes dotted with coastal islands. Each of these diverse vegetative communities

contributes to making Lower Suwannee Refuge one of the largest undeveloped river delta-estuarine systems in the United States.

The overall goal of Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge is to provide conditions desirable to wildlife through scientific management. Specific objectives developed for the area include providing habitat and protection for endangered and threatened species as well as migrating birds and native wildlife. The refuge also provides opportunities for environmental education and wildlife oriented recreation.

## Habitat and Wildlife

A constant influx of nutrients from the river system coupled with numerous offshore islands and tidal creeks create excellent wildlife habitat. Marine mammals such as bottlenose dolphin and the endangered West Indian Manatee, along with several species of marine turtles, utilize the coastal waters of the Suwannee Sound. Natural

salt marshes and tidal flats attract thousands of shorebirds and diving ducks while acting as a valuable nursery area for fish, shrimp and shellfish.

Freshwater fish including largemouth bass, Suwannee bass, bluegill, redear sunfish and channel catfish are found in the Suwannee River and its creeks.

Floodplain wetlands such as bottomland hardwood forests, wooded swamps and freshwater marsh support nesting wood ducks, black bear, otter, alligator, wading birds, raccoons and several species of bats. Mixed hardwood pine forests and

uplands offer cover to turkey and white-tailed deer.

In addition to these animals, other species (including several that are classified as endangered or threatened) utilize various habitat types present on Lower Suwannee Refuge.



Bruce Colin ©



Sean Davie ©



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Over 250 species of birds have been identified within the refuge. Osprey, swallow-tailed kite and bald eagles are among the ninety species that nest in the area.

Major habitat management

practices since 2002 have emphasized construction of habitats for several species of bats (Brazilian free-tail, Rafinesque's big-eared and southeastern Myotis) and Prothonotary warblers.

By necessity, over the years, much of the research conducted on the Refuge has been accomplished through partnerships that encourage cutting-edge techniques by university faculty and their graduate students, as well as cooperating agencies including the U.S. Geological Survey, Florida Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Most notable, swallow-tailed kite surveys show about 22 nests in the Refuge. USGS used drift fences to survey and document the amphibians and reptiles inhabiting



Bruce Colin ©

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the Refuge. A five-year archaeological study is being conducted across our 30 coastal miles. Breeding bird flight-line surveys continue each spring nesting period and Bat Conservation International audits our bat houses biannually. Thanks to the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, the refuge has been able to conduct a comprehensive survey of rare plants and document historic habitats. In addition, several cooperators are working to understand the effects on-going climate change and sea level rise will have on refuge habitats and wildlife species.

### Managing the Forest

Refuge employees strive to provide high quality habitat conditions for a variety of native wildlife. When the refuge was established, more than 6,000 acres of uplands had been commercially managed for timber production. Projects designed to restore these areas to more natural conditions are underway. Hundreds of acres of slash pines have been selectively thinned – and in some cases clear cut - to allow reforestation to more native longleaf/wiregrass and mixed hardwood communities.

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Much of the state of Florida contains ecosystems that have adapted with fire, typically burning naturally every three to ten years. Pine flatwoods and scrub are good examples of communities that need fire to sustain high quality habitat. Prescribed fire (controlled burning) is used on

refuge uplands and wetlands to mimic the natural fire regime. This improves habitat and food availability for many species of wildlife including the gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake, and marsh and wading birds.

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### Recreational Opportunities

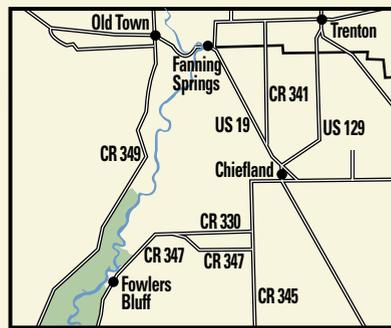
Lower Suwannee Refuge provides opportunities to enjoy the great outdoors through wildlife-oriented recreation including wildlife observation and photography, fishing, hunting, environmental education, interpretive programs, and paddling. There is no admission fee and most of the Refuge is open 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

Hiking trails, observation platforms, fishing piers, boardwalks and several launch sites for small boats provide access to many areas of the refuge that are off the beaten path.

# Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge



- Legend**
- State or county highway
  - Primary refuge road
  - Secondary refuge road
  - Canoe trail
  - Walking trails
  - Lower Suwannee Nature Drive
  - Refuge boundary and land
  - Inholdings
  - Information kiosks
  - Information box
  - Refuge headquarters
  - Observation tower
  - Canoe launch
  - Boat ramp
  - Fishing



Gulf of Mexico

Dixie County

Levy County

Shell Mound Unit



Paddling along the salt marshes or around the estuarine waters of the Shell Mound unit provides scenic wildlife observation. The Paddling Trail on the historic Suwannee River can be accessed in the town of Suwannee and offers three loops ranging from 1.5 to 4 miles in length. Spectacular tidal creeks (Shired and Sanders) along the Dixie Mainline offer award-winning photo opportunities from your kayak or canoe.



During the spring and summer months, American alligators are commonly sighted throughout all refuge wetland areas. Osprey, swallow-tailed kite, and bald eagle activity peaks during late spring. White-tailed deer are more readily observed during the fall and winter with the best time for viewing being at dusk along road right-of-ways.



### How to Enjoy Your Visit

The refuge is open year-round for wildlife observation, hiking and photography. There are 40 miles of improved roads (primary) scattered through the refuge that are open to motorized vehicles, which provide the visitor a glimpse of the various forest and wetland habitats within the refuge. Hiking and bicycling are allowed on all refuge roads. An additional 50 miles of unimproved roads (secondary) are available for hiking and bicycling only.

Several walking trails are available on the refuge. The historic Suwannee River and its hardwood swamps can be viewed along the 0.6-mile River Trail and .25 mile Bottomland Boardwalk located just north of the refuge headquarters.

A short drive to the end of County Road 326 reveals Shell Mound (0.3 mile loop) and Dennis Creek (1 mile loop) Trails. Take the wooden bridge across a salt barren, past wading birds at the pond to the observation deck. Shell Mound Trail explores a 6,000 year old archaeological site reaching 28 feet in height, where a spectacular view of the coastal estuary and Gulf awaits you. A handicapped accessible fishing and observation pier is also available at Shell Mound.



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The Salt Creek observation trail (.1 mile) and fishing access provide a breathtaking view of the salt marsh and coastal pine islands. This trail is located off of CR 349 about one mile from the town of Suwannee. Take the Dixie Mainline off Highway 349 to access this and many more picturesque sites like tidal creeks, lilly ponds and swamps.

Note: Biting insects are particularly numerous along these trails during the summer months. Use of an insect repellent is advised.

Henry Sansing



Coastal waters, tidal creeks, interior ponds and the Suwannee River are open year-round to fishing. Public boat ramps providing access to the Suwannee River are located at nearby Fowler's Bluff and the town of Suwannee in Dixie County. Access to coastal waters is

available at Cedar Key, Shell Mound, Shired Island and the town of Suwannee.

Hunting of small game (squirrel, raccoon) big game (turkey, deer and hog), and waterfowl is permitted during designated seasons. A free brochure and permit is required for hunting. Information is available at the refuge headquarters or by phone.

### The Refuge System

Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge is one of over 540 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The mission of the System is to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plant resources of the United States

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for the benefit of present and future generations. The System encompasses over 100 million acres administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency of the Department of the Interior.

In addition to the refuge system, the Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for the Endangered Species Program, National Fish Hatcheries, certain marine mammals and migratory birds, as well as other wildlife programs. The refuge office is open Monday through Friday from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm.



## Refuge Regulations

### *Vehicles*

All motorized vehicles are restricted to use on designated roads as shown on the attached map. The use of ATV's (three and four wheelers, etc.) is prohibited.

### *Camping*

Not permitted on the refuge, but is available at county campgrounds located on CR 326 near Shell Mound and Shired Island off CR 357.

### *Littering*

Prohibited. Please dispose of in a responsible manner.

### *Fires*

Not permitted on refuge.

### *Collecting*

Taking of government property, any artifact, natural feature, animal or plant is prohibited. Metal detectors are prohibited.

### *Firearms/weapons*

Persons possessing, transporting, or carrying firearms must comply with all provisions of state and local law. Persons may only discharge firearms in accordance with refuge regulations.

### *Pets*

Must be on a leash and under control of owner at all times.

### *Horses*

Not permitted on refuge.



**Lower Suwannee  
National Wildlife Refuge  
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[www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee](http://www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee)**

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
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<http://southeast.fws.gov>**

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