

How to get there.

This area is located in the Wakulla Unit of St. Marks NWR. Before you go, check the refuge website or call the refuge for hunt dates in the fall and winter. It's a safe idea to plan your hike outside of those dates.

From U.S. 98 (Coastal Highway) turn south on Wakulla Beach Road, a graded unpaved road that can be seasonally wet.

When you see the sign that marks the refuge boundary, look for the trailhead on the right. The parking area is small. Please do not block the gate.

Follow the ORANGE Florida Trail blazes along refuge road 200 for 1.7 miles. The Florida Trail leaves the main road so keep following the ORANGE blazes. Within a short distance, the palms become more dense interspersed with large slash pines. You have entered the Cathedral.

After one mile, the trail crosses another road with BLUE blazes. This is the short trail to Shepherd Spring. This small, but beautiful spring, feeds a run that empties into Goose Creek Bay. At least one alligator is usually present in the spring.

The hike from the trailhead through the Cathedral to Shepherd Spring and back is about 5.4 miles. There are no facilities. You must carry water, a snack, possibly insect repellent, and wear close-toed shoes.



Photo by Scott Davis

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge

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Collecting or taking any plants, animals, or artifacts from federal lands is prohibited.



Facts About THE CATHEDRAL OF THE PALMS

St. Marks
National Wildlife Refuge
Where Wildlife Comes First!



Photo by Scott Davis

Located in the Wakulla Unit, one of the lesser visited parts of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge,. A stroll through the Cathedral of the Palms to Shepherd Spring in the Wakulla Unit, can't be beat for a true north Florida hiking experience.

The palms of the cathedral are commonly known as the cabbage or sabal palm, and, formally as *Sabal palmetto*.

The sabal palm is the official state tree of Florida and South Carolina.

The sabal palm can appear short and stubby as well as tall and graceful at a height of up to 40 feet.

Flowers produced during the late spring months extend beyond the canopy and contain thousands of tiny, creamy-white, fragrant flowers that attract an assortment of bees. The palm produces black fruits of about ¼ inch in diameter in late summer. Although the fruits contain little flesh, they are often consumed by raccoons and other animals that disperse the seeds.



Coastal sabal palm by Scott Davis



Photo by Scott Davis

Enjoy your walk through the cathedral. Be sure to bring a camera and binoculars. Listen to the dry rattle of palm leaves blowing in the breeze. Hear the birds calling to their mates and declaiming their territory. Take your time to savor the quiet. Let these natural sounds carry you back through the years.

Although the sabal palm and the saw palmetto resemble each other and often grow in the same habitat, they are different plants. Both provide food and cover for wildlife.

Saw palmettos (*Serenoa repens*) are fan palms. The stem grows along the ground. Erect stems are rare. They can live for hundreds of years.

Saw palmettos are a host plant for the larvae of the palmetto skipper and monk butterflies. The berries are a favored food for bears in early fall when their appetite swells as they gorge on calories to tide them over during the slow winter months.

Swamp cabbage or heart of palm comes from the flesh of the sabal palm. The tree must be cut down to get to the center and will likely die.

Sabal palms will grow almost anywhere and is a popular landscape plant because it is attractive and good for wildlife!



Sabal palm and saw palmettos near the Visitor Center.