

Bear Cut Nature Trail

Trail Walking Time: Moderate one-hour-round-trip walk.

This trail gets its name from the Florida Black Bears that once roamed the island. While the bears are gone, you may see many birds, butterflies, reptiles, and small mammals on your hike today. We recommend that you bring a cold drink and protection from the sun.

1. **Hammock Canopy:** One of the most dramatic parts of this barrier island is the hammock, a forest of hardwood trees. In our coastal maritime hammock, the tree canopy serves several important purposes. It provides shade allowing under-story plants to grow. It provides a path for animals, like squirrels, to use in order to find food and it also serves as an important area for birds to nest.
2. **Under-story Plants:** Under the canopy, smaller plants thrive in the shade and provide food and shelter for hammock animals such as birds, lizards, and snakes. As you walk through the hammock, notice the Beauty Berry and its bright purple fruit. Unpalatable to humans, these berries provide an important winter wildlife food. Wild Coffee, with its shiny leaves, is also easily identifiable in the hammock. Unfortunately, it does not make a tasty cup of morning coffee!
3. **Native Plants:** The native plants along this trail are necessary to native animals for food and shelter. Animals that eat the seeds help the plants disperse from one place to another. Exotic plants, with few, if any predators in Florida, grow quickly and compete with natives for limited resources. Removal of invasive exotic plants is one of the top priorities in natural areas in South Florida. Encouraging homeowners to avoid using exotic plants in landscaping can help this problem.
4. **Fragmentation:** One of the greatest problems for native flora and fauna in many parts of the world, including South Florida, is fragmentation. Development has broken most large tracts of natural areas into small and separate pieces. This prevents animals and many plants from dispersal. The space many animals need, especially large mammals, is often unavailable and plant seeds cannot be dispersed. The use of wildlife corridors, which are strips of land that connect fragmented natural areas, is one idea posed by some scientists to link separate parcels of land.
5. **Detritus:** Much of the floor of the hammock is made up of decaying organic matter known as detritus. This decaying organic matter, as well as dead animals, are eaten by organisms known as detritivores. They play an important part in the nutrient cycle in the hammock, making the soil richer and providing a better place for plants to grow.
6. **Succession:** The hammocks of barrier islands are not static. They change over time and this change is called "succession." This hammock is an early growth hammock. Most of the trees are young and many pioneer (those that appear first after a disturbance) such as Trema, a plant with small, orange berries are prevalent. Two frequent disturbances in South Florida natural areas, hurricanes, and fires, keep hammocks like these in a fairly constant state of change.
7. **Poisonous Plants:** Never taste a plant in South Florida unless you can positively identify it because many plants have poisonous properties. Seeds, fruits, roots, or sap may be poisonous, with serious illness or death resulting from consumption. The native Tequesta Indians used the roots of one toxic plant, the Coontie, for starch, but only after repeated rinsing, which finally made it safe to eat. The Poisonwood Tree produces sap to which many people have allergic skin

reactions. It is also a major source of food for some birds. The exotic vine called Rosary Pea has highly poisonous black and red seeds that may prove fatal to humans if swallowed.

8. **Epiphytes:** Epiphytes grow attached to other plants and are often mistaken for parasites, even though they cause no harm to their host plants. Epiphytes get water and nutrients from the air around them. One of the most recognizable epiphytes, the silver and gray Spanish Moss that hangs from tree limbs, was once used in the furniture industry for padding and stuffing. Many birds use Spanish Moss to make their nests. Epiphytic native orchids were once plentiful on the Key, but they are rarely seen today, probably due to over collecting. Now these wild orchids are protected by law.
9. **Seasonal Changes:** There are four seasons in Florida! Although the climate is considered subtropical, changes can be seen in the hammock that are distinctly seasonal. Many of these changes have to do with the amount of rainfall. During our wet season summer months, the hammock is a verdant green “rainforest” with new growth everywhere. During the drier “winter” season, many deciduous trees drop their leaves.
10. **Edible Plants:** This Sea Grape Tree provides a tasty fruit used by the Tequesta and early pioneers. The fruit is green when unripe and deep purple when ripe. Coconut Palms provide the edible “meat” of the coconut and coconut water. Black Mangrove Flowers are a source of honey. Native Americans utilized the fruits of the Pigeon Plum. The Cocoplum, often used as a hedge in home landscaping, also has edible fruit. Please do not pick fruits in the park.
11. **Hammock Restoration:** It is hoped that restoration of this hammock will result in a coastal hammock resembling the one in existence prior to the arrival of Ponce de Leon in 1513. This can be accomplished, in part, through removal of invasive exotic plants. Restoring the canopy will shade out aggressively invasive exotic grasses and vines. We invite visitors to join us at the Nature Center for our monthly restoration workdays.
12. **Medicinal Plants:** Florida’s Native Americans have utilized hammock plants for centuries to treat various illnesses. If you smell a skunk-like odor in the hammock, it may be the White Stopper Tree, once used to treat diarrhea. The low-growing Saw Palmetto produces berries that are harvested for use in the fight against Prostate Cancer. Buttonwood, a popular native landscape tree, has also historically been used to treat skin conditions.
13. **Fire:** Fire plays a natural role in South Florida ecology. Lightning fires in the summer burn away overgrown foliage. Usually, they are extinguished by summer rains. Accidental fires that occur in the dry season, however, can be dangerous. This hammock has been seriously damaged by man-made fires in the past. On the other hand, controlled burns by trained forest ecologists are a useful tool in natural area maintenance.
14. **Coconut Plantation:** The many Coconut Palms scattered through the hammock are a reminder that the island was once a coconut plantation owned by the W.J. Matheson family. The family donated the land for this park to the people of Miami-Dade County. Coconut Palms may live for a century producing their larger edible and oily seeds. These seeds float and are carried from shore to shore by the ocean’s currents. The huge fronds of the Coconut Palm may be used as thatch roofing. Lethal Yellowing, a disease to which some palms are susceptible, has killed many of the Coconut Palms on the Key.
15. **Cabbage Palm:** The Florida State tree, the Cabbage Palm, is directly in front of you. It was once used as a source of “heart of palm” for a cabbage-like dish once popular in Florida. However, once the heart is harvested, the tree dies. Cabbage Palm Flowers also provide a nectar for bees and

make a delicious honey. Butterflies drink their nectar. Wildlife frequently eats its fruit and use it for shelter.

16. **Marjory Stoneman Douglas:** It was Marjory's vision nearly 30 years ago that inspired the dream for this Nature Center by the sea, which today is a reality. Her words still echoes true as when she first penned them in 1947, "The future for South Florida, as for all once-beautiful and de-spoiled areas of our country, lies in aroused and informed public opinion and citizen action. If more and more of us continually, forcefully, and untiringly demand a balanced development of land, of salt and freshwater, of people and wilderness, farms, cities, appropriate industries, wildlife and recreation such as the region can intelligently be expected to support, we can still bring back much usefulness and beauty to a changed and recreated earth."