

## The Fossil Reef Bicycle Trail (1st Page Introduction)

Trail biking time is an easy 30 minutes.

The bike trail winds through the hammock (forest) of Crandon Park. This magical area is one of the few coastal maritime hammocks that still exists in South Florida. Once, these hammocks could be found on barrier islands up and down the coast; however, many have been cleared for development. Here, in one of these few remaining natural areas, we get a vision of South Florida's past, its present and a reason why we must work together to preserve these vital wild areas for the future. The trail begins to the north of the Park Office and Park entrance at the trail head sign.

1. **Crandon Park Entrance:** The history of Key Biscayne and Crandon Park is an exciting one. The first people to discover the natural bounty and sub-tropical climate of this barrier island were the Tequesta Indians. The Tequesta fished waters teeming with ocean creatures. They hunted in the hammock that was full of game. A skirmish during the Seminole Wars was fought nearby. Early in this century, the island was a coconut plantation owned by W.J. Matheson, whose family donated this land to the people of Miami-Dade County for use as a park. The northern 163 acres, where this trail goes, is called Bear Cut Preserve. Once, Florida Black Bears and deer roamed this wild area. Though these large mammals are gone, the area remains wild and is a window to South Florida's past. Bird and butterfly watching is excellent and many rare and endangered plants may be seen. The preserve hosts researchers and educational programs of all kinds. The Biscayne Nature Center invites you to visit their exhibits and join their public nature programs. The Nature Center is located near the middle of this trail. The environmental education tours are enjoyed by children, as well as adults. Private nature tours can be arranged by calling the Nature Center.
2. **The Canopy:** Note how much cooler it is under the canopied areas of the trail. This same effect can be duplicated when people plant shade trees in their yards and there are energy-saving benefits for homeowners as well. The largest and one of the most important trees of the canopy is the Strangler Fig. It often starts growing when a bird eats one of its delicious fruit (including seeds) and deposits these seeds on a host tree. The fig may send roots entwining around this tree, effectively strangling it. Despite this menacing habit, these native figs provide an important food source to many animals. The most common tree you see is the Sea Grape with large, round plate-like leaves. This beautiful hardwood tree produces purple "grapes" that are delicious to eat. Please don't pick ours, they're "for the birds"! These Sea Grapes were enjoyed by Native Americans and pioneers and are one of many important "fuel" sources for our migrating and resident birds. Beware of the Poisonwood Tree. It has a bad reputation because touching it can produce a reaction like Poison Ivy. It can be identified by its shiny leaf with 3-7 leaflets and black spots on the leaves or trunk. Despite its poisonous properties, it provides important food for birds who are immune to its effects, including the endangered White-Crowned Pigeon which help disperse Poisonwood Seeds.
3. **Animals:** Although many animals that once lived here like deer, panthers, wild turkeys and bears are gone, Crandon Park is home to many native and exotic animals. You may see the bright Green Iguana which may grow to over 6-feet-long and sport orange coloration. The Blue Ameiva Lizard from South America and the native Five-Lined Skink are also inhabitants of this area. Birds abound. Some are year-round residents, while others are migratory, just passing through. The hammock is a grand buffet for these birds, promising fruits and insects year-round. Birds of

prey, including Hawks, Kestrels and Osprey may perch on some of the larger dead trees to the east. Smaller songbirds search for food amid the low, shrubby plants and on the hammock floor. Wetter areas may attract wading birds like egrets and herons. Small mammals like raccoons and opossum are generally considered nocturnal, but may sometimes be spotted searching for food in the daylight hours. Please don't feed them. Harmless Yellow Rat Snakes and Everglades Racers bask in the sun. Occasionally squirrels are seen using the hammock canopy as a playground. Listen for the click-click sounds they make if you enter their territory. Even gray foxes are occasionally spotted on the Key.

4. **Animal/Plant Interactions:** While many plant and animal species interact in Crandon Park, few have a story as interesting as the Florida Coontie Plant and the Atala Butterfly. The Florida Coontie is the stiff leaved plant in front of you that resembles a fern. It is a cycad, from an ancient order of plants. In the mid-late 1800s, it was harvested for its root which, after repeated washings to rinse away the poisons it contains, was used to make starch. The species became very rare due to over-harvesting. The Atala Butterfly, a beautiful insect with a red abdomen, blue-black wings, and iridescent blue spots was common in Miami in the 1800s. However, its only native food plant (in the caterpillar stage) is the Coontie. When the coontie began to disappear, so did the butterfly. By the 1930s, most people believed the Atala had vanished from South Florida. It was re-discovered here in Crandon Park in the 1970s and is now increasing in numbers thanks in part to native gardeners, who have planted Coontie (now available to plant nurseries), in their own backyards. The Atala and Coontie are a reminder that if we take positive action in our own backyards, we can make a difference.
5. **The Fossil Rock Reef:** Down the path on your right is a unique geological formation known as the Fossil Rock Reef. (Please do not leave bikes unattended!) Carbon dated back to 64 A.D., it is our Petrified Forest. Once it was a living stand of Black Mangrove Trees. These trees died and the area was covered with sand. The roots of the trees underwent a change in chemical composition and transformed from wood to "rock". This natural feature is covered by water at high tide and visible only at low tide. Animals in this environment must relocate quickly or adapt to these extremes. Brightly colored Sergeant Major fish swim around this reef, while barnacles and anemones attach themselves to its surface. This beautiful beach and its offshore seagrass beds are home to a variety of animals including octopi, Sea Horses, Snapper, Blue Crabs, Spider Crabs, Sea Squirts and the endangered Queen Conch. The seagrass beds provide food and protection, which makes them the ideal nursery habitat for juvenile marine life. The pile of seagrass and seaweed that you see all along this beach is the wrack line or also called the high tide line. We have two high tides and two low tides here each day. Beachcombing here is a pleasant way to spend the day. You will find sponges, seashells, Sea Fans and Sea Beans. Be careful, since you may also find jellyfish or other stinging creatures! Please explore and enjoy, just remember that since this is a preserve, we ask you to leave everything as you found it and please, no collecting. Everything here has a use and a purpose. Seashells provide homes for crabs, even broken shells become sand. We hope you have enjoyed your visit and will help us in our mission to preserve and protect our natural areas.