

The Tequesta Hammock Trail (1st page introduction)

Trail walking time is 25 minutes on this easy one-quarter mile loop trail.

We are very excited to guide you through the Tequesta Hammock Trail. Our naturalists and volunteers have worked hard to make it look closer to its native state. In this guide, you will learn about the fragile ecosystem of the Hammock Trail, how its elements are interconnected, what makes it unique and what threatens its survival. We hope that the community will work together to preserve and maintain this natural area and others that remain.

1. **Coastal Maritime Hammock:** This trail winds through a coastal woodland. This narrow, moist and partially canopied hammock area is a contrast to the drier coastal scrub and dune areas. Under-story plants thrive in the shade of the canopy. This canopy also provides food and shelter for the native animal species.
2. **Topography:** South Florida is a land of subtle changes in topography. In Key Biscayne, differences in land elevation even by a few inches, means major changes in plant and animal communities. As you walk this first portion of the trail, note the areas to your left, which are lower in elevation. The large Leather Fern is one example of a plant species that is characteristic of this seasonal wetland. The low swales that collect freshwater in the rainy season provide drinking water for birds, insects, reptiles and raccoons. As you continue walking, the trail winds through “higher” elevation areas, which are drier and support plant species that require less water.
3. **Strangler Figs:** These native trees with the menacing name actually produce fruit that serves as an important food for wildlife, especially birds. The Strangler Fig may actually grow around the trunk of the host tree, depriving it of sunlight and nutrients, eventually killing it. These Strangler Figs form an important part of the hammock canopy.
4. **Exotics:** Many invasive exotic species have no natural enemies in Florida, so they multiply unchecked to the detriment of native plant and animal species. In Key Biscayne, some of our most persistent invading exotic plant species include the Australian Pine, Colubrina, Brazilian Pepper and the Tropical Almond. The dead trees located in the hammock are mostly the remnants of exotic tree species killed by hurricanes or fire. Invasive exotic species planted in residential developments may be spread to this preserve via birds. What people plant in their yards does matter!
5. **Bear Cut Nature Preserve:** In 1976, the northern end of this sedimentary barrier island of Key Biscayne was named a National Environmental Study Area by the United States Department of Interior and National Park Service, with the help of Marjory Stoneman Douglas. Later, it was officially designated as Bear Cut Preserve by the Miami-Dade Park and Recreation Department. Its name comes from stories about the Black Bears that once roamed the shores and swam the waters here. Bear Cut Preserve contains many plants and animals in need of our protection. Several species are rare and endangered. This preserve provides plants and animals with 163 acres of land that is free from the threat of development and further fragmentation. Fragmentation is when large natural areas are split into smaller pieces by agriculture or development, prohibiting animals from moving throughout the system. Even seed dispersal may be impeded.
6. **Vines:** Looking around in all directions, vines cover many of the plants throughout the hammock. In the sub-tropical climate of South Florida, with rare freezes, these vines flourish.

While some are exotic vines and may actually endanger native plants, many are important native vines that produce berries that sustain wildlife. Other vines produce flowers that provide nectar sources for butterflies and other insects. The most common vine on this trail is the vibrant purple Morning Glory.

7. **Restoration:** This hammock has undergone many changes. It was once part of a coconut plantation owned by W.J. Matheson, whose family donated this park to the people of Miami-Dade County. The hammock has endured its share of hurricanes, common in South Florida. While hurricanes are a natural force, they may cause serious harm to an ecosystem already damaged by people through fragmentation. Fires accidentally set by people in the dry winter season have also been a problem. In addition, like all natural areas in South Florida, this hammock has been besieged by exotic plants, many of which “crowd out” native plants. Each month the Nature Center holds a restoration day to remove these exotic plants, and add native plants to revitalize this important South Florida ecosystem. We hope you will consider joining us in this important endeavor.
8. **Animals of Key Biscayne:** Visitors can see many different animals on the Key including raccoons, opossums, snakes, lizards, various butterflies, birds and, very rarely, a fox. Many of the animals once native to the Key such as deer, Black Bear, Gopher Tortoise, Wild Turkey, Diamondback Rattlesnakes and Florida Panthers have disappeared with the advent of development and the fragmentation of natural areas. Exotic reptiles, including Green Iguanas and Spiny-tailed Iguanas, also may be observed in the hammock. What effect these iguanas will have on the native ecosystem is not fully known.
9. **Birds of the Island:** As an important refueling stop for migratory birds on their journey south, Key Biscayne is an excellent place to birdwatch. In the hammock you may spot Cardinals, Hawks, Osprey, Bluejays, Warblers, Kestrels, Woodpeckers and Turkey Vultures, among others. Many of these birds are major seed dispersers. This means they may eat a seed in one spot and start a new plant by “depositing” the seed elsewhere. Some dead trees have been left standing in the hammock to provide “snags” or perches for birds and other animals. At the edge of the hammock, especially where there is standing water, look for Blue Herons, Great Egrets, Cattle Egrets, Tri-Colored Herons and Ibises.
10. **Ancient People of the Key:** Native Americans called the Tequesta were the first people to make Key Biscayne their home. They fished the plentiful waters of Biscayne Bay and hunted in the hammocks that teemed with game. Trees, shrubs and flowers on the Key were used for food, shelter and medicine. Several archaeological sites can be found on the Key. The Tequesta made tools from shells and bones and journeyed to the island of Cuba in their well-built canoes. They inhabited Florida up until 1763, when the few Tequesta that survived the advent of Europeans and new diseases (to which the Tequesta lacked immunity), left for Cuba. Today, the Tequesta are extinct.
11. **Butterflies and Wildfloweres:** The variety of native wildflowers that grow here provide important nectar sources for many butterflies. The most commonly sighted butterfly here is Florida’s state butterfly, the Zebra, which is black with yellow stripes. You may also see orange and black Monarchs on their southern migration, the tiny butterflies known as “Blues”, named after their color, the Gulf Fritillary, which is orange and black on top of its wings with a silver underside and Yellow Sulphur Butterflies. The largest butterfly you will see is the yellow and black Giant Swallowtail. Butterflies often have very specific larval food requirements, with

caterpillars that feed on a single plant species. Conservation of native plants is especially important to help maintain butterfly and other pollinator populations. Please remember that pesticides can kill butterflies and other beneficial insects.