

Taylor Creek South Hike at Tosohatchee WMA



4.7 miles

An exploration into the wilderness fringe along the St. Johns River near Cocoa, the Taylor Creek Loop invites you to immerse in the shade of ancient palm trees in the river floodplain. Built by the Indian River chapter of the Florida Trail Association, this well-established trail - once part of the Florida Trail - is in Tosohatchee WMA and remains high and dry as long as the river is within its banks. Expect a wonderland of botanical beauty along the north or south loops, truly one of Florida's best hikes to enjoy the splendor of palm hammocks.



The trailhead serves as a camping spot for folks hiking the Florida Trail, the sign at the trailhead says this is the Tosohatchee Wildlife Management Area, but the trail has been known as the Taylor Creek Loop since it was established by the Indian River Chapter of the Florida Trail Association at least two decades ago, when the Florida Trail used to reach this point via Tosohatchee and continue over Taylor Creek into Deseret Ranch.

The hike starts right into palm hammocks, following white (formerly orange) blazes, edging wetlands. You hear the rush of cars nearby to start but who cares! It's a nice jungle corridor with lots of palm fronds slapping you in the face as you head downhill. The resurrection fern here are much larger than you'll see elsewhere, almost the size of small sword ferns. The trick here is to watch for the white blazes, which you'll see on young pines and cabbage palms. Since the footpath is not well worn, you'll find yourself going off in various directions on animal trails, following the shape of the terrain, if you don't keep watching for the next blaze.



You can see the white blaze if you look closely to the left and just above the orange hat. At a quarter-mile, the trail jogs to the left and enters a much denser palm hammock, but it's easy to find the footpath because of the hog damage. You pass by a patch of lowbush blueberry bushes about 0.4 miles in, and you continue down the corridor of oaks, spindly pines and cabbage palms.



As we proceeded we saw some of the largest live oaks in FL. Pam noticed a couple deer jumping thru the woods I saw the white tails take-off! Deer tracks are all over. However, the wild boar left their mark throughout the whole hike.



Walk softly as you approach a broad, duckweed-covered canal, and you may see alligators. The trail turns right, heading south. You pass a cabbage palm with a 90° bend in its trunk, tacking your way away from the highway and the canal and deeper into the palm hammocks. The trail turns to circle around this wetland area while keeping in the deep shade of the oaks and palms. A little more sun filters into the canopy as you

reach 1 mile, popping out into brightness under a corridor of cabbage palms. The trail continues to twist through more palm hammocks. By 1.2 miles, the corridor is open around you, a wonderful montage of oaks, resurrection ferns, and cabbage palms with trunks crispy and singed by wildfire. Walking atop the nice soft surface of pine duff by 1.4 miles, under a stand of tall skinny young slash pines, it's a reminder that not all of this forest is old growth. In the 1930s and 1940s the region between Jim Creek and Taylor Creek was heavily logged for cypress and pine.



In the transition to the next tall stand of palms, notice the shorter, stubbier palms. I've always wondered whether these were some kind of subspecies of cabbage palm. The taller palms are coated in a star-shaped spaghnum moss, which feels like a carpet if you run your hand along their trunks. After this hammock of fuzzy palms, the trail moves on to a hammock with a very high canopy of live oaks, and you can see daylight off to the right, likely a wetland area. A line of spaghnum moss along the footpath belies seasonal flooding throughout this area. Passing a young longleaf pine you head down a corridor to another dense hammock overshadowed by large live oaks covered in resurrection fern and bromeliads.



By 1.7 miles, the trail zigzags between a maze of palm trunks. There are alternate trails leading away from the main footpath so keep an eye on the white blazes. As you walk through the next palm hammock, off to the left your at 1.9 miles you can see a break and what looks like a riverine habitat in the sun. Turning away from it to the right, the trail burrows deeper into the palm and oak hammocks. Lumpy sphagnum moss creeps up close to both sides of the trail. Cardinal wild pine grows at eye level. This is a spot where fungi and ferns and bromeliads and lichens thrive. Look for giant air plants overhead. The trail goes down a broad corridor between cabbage palms and saw palmetto under the oaks, broader and straighter than any of the footpath so far, and then makes a sharp left back into the palm maze. A barred owl swoops low out of the canopy and vanishes out to the floodplain. The palm hammock gets denser, the dwarf palms enrobed in fuzzy green carpets of moss. You've reached a quiet place, the solitude of Taylor Creek, with only the rustle of the cabbage palm fronds in the breeze and the occasional airplane overhead breaking the silence. Between the taller palms, clouds drift across patches of blue sky.



Cypress knees appear off to the left at 2.5 miles, signaling you're nearing Taylor Creek. You emerge at a picnic table marking the primitive campsite and trail junction with the return trail - the white blazes head down it to the right. Go straight ahead down the spur trail to visit Taylor Creek, which is the water source for this campsite. As you walk down this path with soft pine needles underfoot, the trail narrows and narrows and narrows. You can see the colors of the floodplain forest off to the left, and sweetgum trees begin to intrude amid the pines. Passing beneath a very large slash pine, notice there is a steady downhill slope to the trail. Coming to a T intersection at 2.8 miles, turn left at the double blaze to head down a tight corridor fringed by saw palmetto under the oak canopy. The deeper you go, the more important it is to watch for the blazes, we found the newer white painted marks to be very well done. As we headed out to the end the older orange marks and random green and red marking tape helped us find our way. One tree had several sets of blazes, which was a little confusing!



The closer you get to the creek, the rougher the terrain becomes, with cypress knees jutting out of the footpath. Blazes lead you right down into the cypress swamp to a sign "Taylor Creek Trail End," which might be underwater when you reach it, at 2.9 miles.

Look for downed trees that you can walk on to cross over the deep places.

Return back along the spur trail on this path, turning right at the first trail intersection. As you walk back through the pines, notice the many 'fallen soliders,' bromeliads that plunged from the canopy, buffeted by high winds, to land across the forest floor. After 3.3 miles, you return to the trail junction with the campsite and picnic table. Turn left.



The trail now follows a forest road, through terrain very unlike the portion of the loop you've hiked thus far. It's a broad walkway through wet pine flatwoods, the understory filled with gallberry and saw palmetto. A floodplain forest sits off to the right. A stand of silver-tinged saw palmetto sits to the side as you approach a sign at 3.6 miles, marking where the trail turns to the right along with this forest road. Through this next stretch, notice the gentle elevation gain and the colorful wildflowers, like wild bachelor's-button, amid the wet pine flatwoods. Songbirds trill from the pines. Be cautious of the fire ant nests in the forest road.

Surrounded by scrubby flatwoods with tall grasses, the trail passes an ephemeral wetland at 4.1 miles. Curving left and then curving right, you start to hear traffic from the highway. As you round the second curve, keep to the far right where the footpath hugs up against the saw palmetto. Head back out into the forest road to use the hard-packed shellrock to cross a drainage from another ephemeral wetland on the right. As the pine flatwoods yield to a mix of cabbage palms and pines, the broad forest road rounds one more wetland area - this one with a core of willow and red maple - before emerging at the cable gate and the trailhead after 4.7 miles.







Feel how soft...





Very large live oaks...



Cypress knees...





Wild boar rutting...

Directions: The Taylor Creek Loop is located along SR 520 between the Beeline and the St. Johns River on the south side of the highway. Since this stretch has high fencing along the highway, you have to be alert for a gate on the right-hand side with an "FT" symbol on it. GPS: 28.374719, -80.904380



Open the unlocked gate to enter the trailhead, which has ample parking and picnic tables.