

Everglades: Nation's only subtropical park

South Florida gem is teeming with wildlife, scenic beauty

HOMESTEAD, Fla. — If you put America's national parks in a pecking order, Florida's Everglades would seem to fall far below the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone's Old Faithful, and Yosemite.

At the tip of the Florida peninsula there is nothing other than a seemingly flat and monotonously pale-green horizon, to test the confines of the camera's window. No craggy mountain peaks or redwood trees soar toward the constant sun, no churning waterfalls tumble down cliffs. But those who work in the nation's only subtropical park say what lies within that flat, green horizon — and the chance for visitors to discover it — is what makes the Everglades so prized.

"You look down into the Canyon, and you say, 'Wow.' It jumps at you. You can't help it," says Everglades volunteer guide Regina Mueller.

"Here, you have to look." When you look, you can see the differences created by the subtle elevation changes in the "river of grass," as conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas described the Everglades. The elevation range is a mere 8 feet from Lake Okechobee, the northern boundary of the original Everglades, to Florida Bay, but that's enough to put prairie, swamp and hardwood all within view. Wings outstretched, an endangered wood stork clutches a tree branch. In what looks like murky, stagnant water, you'll glimpse a turtle diving or an alligator floating.

Making such discoveries, Mueller says, is the fun of visiting the Everglades. When it was established in 1947, it became the first national park designated not simply for its scenic value, but for its biological importance, particularly the wealth of plant and animal life it hosts.

"We have all the steps, from the lowest on the food chain to the top," said Mueller, who works out of the Royal Palm Visitor Center, a few miles down the road from the main Ernest F. Coe Visitor Center. Both are about a half-hour's drive from

annual pass to the Everglades. "We came begging to do it," agreed granddaughter Amy Brauser.

If pedaling 15 miles sounds too strenuous, you can take a two-hour tram tour, narrated by a ranger, that travels the same loop and includes a stop at the wildlife observation tower. The sights along the trail amaze even those who see them every day.

"You go around that loop 2,000 times, and every time it's something different," said tram driver Tamara Still of Miami. "You don't know if you're going to see an alligator take down a deer, or a red-tailed hawk pick up a rabbit, right in front of your tram."

The wildlife opportunities also lure photographers. Canadian photographer and friends John Reaume and Scott Fairbairn of Ontario were on their second trip to the Everglades, training their lenses on "anything that will pose," but primarily birds, Reaume said. Even though it is estimated that human encroachment in South Florida has cost more than 90 percent of the Everglades' original bird population, the park is still a sanctuary for many species. Accustomed to humans, the birds allow close approaches that birds in other places never would, Reaume said.

But birds play second fiddle to alligators, the main attraction for visitors. Shark Valley ranger Katie Bliss has been stationed at the Everglades less than a year, but she's already memorized the top visitor questions: How big do alligators get? (Between 9 and 13 feet, although the U.S. record is 19 feet, 2 inches.) How long do they live? (About 35 to 40 years, although the oldest known lived to 58 in captivity.) How often do they eat? (Every two or three days.)

Alligators are also the "key animal" for the Everglades survival, because the "gator holes" they create in the marshy swamp sustain other life, Mueller said.



Tree island shows the subtle elevation changes in Florida's Everglades, described as a "river of grass" by conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas.

5 visitor centers; 3 provide access

No matter where you are in South Florida, the Everglades is easily accessible. There are five visitor centers:

Ernest F. Coe: Main visitor center, half-hour drive southwest of Miami. Open 8:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. (305) 221-6776. Wildlife observation tower, hiking trails, bike rentals, tram rides (305) 221-6455.

Shark Valley: 45 minutes west of Miami. Open 8:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. (305) 221-6776. Wildlife observation tower, hiking trails, bike rentals, tram rides (305) 221-6455.

Royal Palm: Four miles past Coe Center. Open 8 a.m.-4:15 p.m. daily. (305) 242-7700. Multiple walking trails and ranger-led activities. Flamingos, 38 miles past Coe Center. Open 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. (941) 665-2945. Wildlife viewing platform, boat tours into mangrove swamp and Florida Bay (941) 665-3101. Canoe and kayak rentals.

That's not to say reach out and pet an alligator. Visitors are warned that they can observe, but are never to disturb or feed the animals, which do not receive food or medical care from park personnel, but rather feed for themselves, as they would in the wilderness that is the Everglades.

Some visitors are surprised, and even a bit frightened, at the presence of the alligators along park trails. "They come with the amusement park perspective — that if they're allowed to come here, it must be devoid of any threats," Bliss said. But to her, the proximity of the reptile, not to mention the birds and other wildlife, is a chief draw.

"Part of the draw to national parks in general is the potential for encounter that you don't have at zoos, or amusement parks," she said.

National Park Service

For more information, call (305) 242-7700. On the Web, www.epa.gov/ever

Federal plan aims to restore fragile ecosystem

For three-quarters of a century, Florida's Everglades slowly died.

Now, facing repercussions that range from decimated bird populations to water restrictions in the nearby megalopolis of Miami, state and federal officials will spend \$8 billion over the next 36 years to restore the giant wetlands. Part of that money will benefit the Everglades National Park, but what's at stake is nothing less than the future health of the entire south Florida ecosystem.

Prior to the arrival of 20th-century entrepreneurs, the Everglades was a huge sponge, slowly filtering seasonal rainfall that overflowed from Lake Okechobee, 65 miles to the north of the current park, across the flat southern Florida plain.

Today's Everglades National Park is but a fifth of that area, and in "dire" shape, according to park ranger Katie Bliss.

In the 1920s and 30s, entrepreneurs started digging canals to drain the Everglades north of the present park, hoping to create agricultural land on which they could grow profitable fruit and vegetable crops year-round. Simultaneously, the population of Florida boomed as people flocked to the warm, sunny climate. More canals were dug, more levees and other water control mechanisms installed, so land could be developed for human habitation.

"Everything about the water in south Florida has been tampered with over the last 100 years," Bliss

said.

That's become painfully apparent as the park and all of south Florida now suffers through its worst drought in decades, with some communities imposing water restrictions.

The slogan of the restoration project is "to get the water right," Bliss said, in terms of timing, distribution, quantity and quality. To do that, more than 240 miles of canals and levees will be removed within the park.

Timing: In the millennia before Florida became the nation's fourth-most populous state and the No. 1 visited, with 70 million tourists in 2000, plants and wildlife adapted to south Florida's 6-month-long wet and dry seasons. With the water-

flow diverted, the wet season and thus their life cycle is disrupted. So is the replenishment of the aquifer, the layers underground that store water, into which wells are tapped. Simultaneously, the ever-increasing population taxes that aquifer for drinking water.

Distribution: Canals and levees have diverted water from its natural destinations, drying up areas of the Everglades and rendering them uninhabitable for plants and animals at the bottom of the food chain. Conversely, when water management structures are opened, sudden water releases inundate the Everglades and flood out some creatures.

Quality: Diverted water has been contaminated by polluted runoff

from agriculture and development of shopping malls, houses and other human trappings. As more ground is paved over, there is less surface area for rain to penetrate the aquifer. In coastal areas, depleted freshwater supplies increase the possibility of saltwater intrusions into inland aquifers.

Quantity: Water diversion has rerouted freshwater from the interior of Florida to the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico — to the tune of 1.7 billion gallons a year, Bliss said, much to the angst of the 900 new residents Florida gets every day. These are people who desperately need the water ironically diverted to accommodate them in the first place.

— By Cari Noga