Ecotourism Hot Spots along the Emerald Coast
THE HEART OF FLORIDA’S
EMERALD COAST
DESTIN | FT. WALTON BEACH
OKALOOSA ISLAND
EMERALDCOASTING.COM
The Emerald Coast offers many ecotourism opportunities in coastal gems, interior forests, and cultural centers, all exploring the rich ecological and social history of the region. These sixteen ecotourism hotspots will expose visitors to a vast array of ecosystems, while providing educational resources to encourage learning about Florida’s natural landscapes. With opportunities to hike, fish, kayak, paddleboard, bird, and more, an avid ecotourist has near limitless opportunities here on the Emerald Coast.

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Ross Marler Park

**Address:** 1275 Santa Rosa Blvd, Fort Walton Beach, FL

**Activities:** Fishing, walking, picnicking, swimming, boating, paddle boarding

**Facilities:** Restrooms, boat ramp, grills, picnic pavilion

**Hours:** Sunset to sundown

**More information:** [http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/pw/parks/ross-marler](http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/pw/parks/ross-marler)

**Directions:**
Going west on Miracle Strip Parkway on Okaloosa Island, take a right onto Santa Rosa Boulevard, driving straight through the roundabout and into the park. Going east on the parkway Santa Rosa Boulevard will be on your left.

**Description:**
Ross Marler Park offers both facilities and access to Choctawhatchee Bay, with grassy lawns, a beautiful little beach, a new arboretum, and an interpretive fishing pier. A boat launch, large parking area, bathrooms, and extensive covered picnic facilities makes this little park a perfect place to stop for lunch or cool off in the water. All pathways as well as the fishing pier are handicap accessible. Though not natural, the park also has a Mini-Explorer Tot Lot playground, also handicap accessible.

Because of the smaller waves, the park is ideal for lounging in the water and for young swimmers. Paddleboards and kayaks can be easily launched from the beach or from the boat launch itself. If your boat is larger, there are 20 parking spaces for boat trailers.

Want to see some common plant varieties for yourself? You can! Many native plant species are growing in a fledgling arboretum to the side of the park. Though the trees are small now, they will one day provide abundant and comfortable shade, illustrating mature examples of Florida’s most iconic trees and plants. Signs along the paved pathway introduce you to Redbay, Saw Palmetto, Sea Purslane, and Sabel Palmetto.

The wetland areas of the park provide perfect places for spring and summer wildflowers to blossom. Dune Sunflowers and Beaked Butterfly Pea can be found near the pond and pier, while Railroad Vine grows near the parking area along the dunes. Though not a wildflower, the cattail wetland near the parking lot is very lush, and particularly lovely when the breeze flows through their fronds.

However, the most impressive plants on the property are the towering pines. They are tall and beautiful, with rich reddish bark and branches that provide abundant shade beneath.
Veterans Park at Baywalk

**Address:** 1250 Miracle Strip Parkway, Fort Walton Beach, FL

**Activities:** Walking, wildlife viewing, picnicking

**Facilities:** None

**Hours:** Sunrise to sunset


**Directions:**
From Destin, travel west on Miracle Strip Parkway/ US 98. The Emerald Coast Visitor’s Center will be on your right. Travel to the back right corner of the parking lot, and you will see the beginning of the boardwalk.

**Description.**
Veterans Park, once a three-hole golf course, was purchased by Okaloosa County and is located next to the Emerald Coast Convention Center. The site currently has access to the Choctawhatchee Bay, in addition to three existing freshwater ponds. A boardwalk winds around the property, preventing erosion of the sandy soil.

The park hosts large pine trees as well as wildflowers, tall grasses, and other vegetation, providing unique habitat on Okaloosa Island. The park is a birding hotspot, with nearly 200 species found here throughout the year. In the summer Ospreys and Great Blue Heron nest, allowing you the opportunity to see the new chicks grow and fledge. Other herons, such as the Green, Tricolored, and Yellow-crowned Night Heron, fish in the ponds, while Red-winged Blackbirds, warblers, doves, and many other species find food and shelter in the bushes and trees.

Veteran’s Park is currently open to the public at the boardwalk entrance at the back of the convention center. Soon however, the park will be restored. Walkways will be increased and the boardwalk raised to accommodate turtles traveling underneath, invasive species removed and additional native species planted, and a kayak/paddleboard launch constructed.

In addition, Veteran’s Park will become part of a living shorelines project to reduce erosion and enhance natural coast ecosystems. Oyster beds will be created as a living breakwater, and marsh, sea, and dune grasses and plants restored. Upon completion this park will offer both exceptional habitats for wildlife as well as ecotourism activities for locals and visitors alike.
Okaloosa Island Fishing Pier

Address: 1030 Miracle Strip Parkway SE, Fort Walton Beach, FL 32548

Activities: Walking, wildlife viewing, fishing

Facilities: Restrooms, vending machines

Fee: $2 for walking, $7.50 for fishing

Hours: Mid-march through Mid-October: 24 hours; Mid-October through Mid-March: 5 a.m.-9 p.m.

Directions: Driving west on Miracle Strip Parkway, the pier entrance is located on the left, across from the Emerald Coast Convention Center and adjacent to the Gulfarium.

Description: The Okaloosa Island fishing pier is open 24 hours a day, extending 1261 feet into the Gulf. With beautiful sugar sand beaches on either side, the pier is in a beautiful spot, is productive for anglers, and offers walking visitors the opportunity to regularly see marine wildlife, including dolphins and sea turtles.

Walking visitors pay only $2 to enter the pier, while there is a $7.50 fee to fish ($4.50 for those under 12). Rods are available to rent for $7. A selection of restaurants is available on land where the pier begins, while restrooms and vending machines are located at the very end of the structure.

Fishermen and women can hope to catch Hard Tail, Ladyfish, Red Fish, Bluegills, Tarpon, Jack Crevelle, Spanish Mackerel, and more. From the pier it is easy to see swirling balls of bait fish that attract the larger fish, and in the shallows the long, thin bodies of Needlefish can be spotted.

Dolphins are not the only wildlife attracted to the bait fish. Brown Pelicans are often present, and visitors can watch impressive displays of aerial acrobatics as they plunge-dive for their fishy prey. Gulls and multiple tern species are also common, while Great Blue Heron patrol the shallows (or the pier) for their share of bait fish. Note: avoid feeding the herons or any other wildlife.

As an added bonus, the pier is a wonderful place to observe the gorgeous Emerald Coast sunsets. During the summer months, the pier also provides a great location to look out over the water and see Destin HarborWalk Fireworks.
John Beasley Park

**Address:** 1550 Miracle Strip Parkway, Fort Walton Beach, FL

**Activities:** Swimming, paddle-boarding, bird watching, walking, fishing

**Facilities:** Restrooms, showerheads, picnic pavilion

**Hours:** Sunset to sundown

**More information:** [http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/pw/parks/john-beasley](http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/pw/parks/john-beasley)

**Directions:**
From Fort Walton Beach, take Miracle Strip Parkway onto Okaloosa Island. Traveling east, John Beasley Park will be on your right.

**Description:**
Beasley Park, located on Miracle Parkway adjacent to the visitor center, is the perfect place to get to know the beaches, Gulf waters, dunes, wildflowers, and wildlife of Okaloosa Island.

To reach the sugar white sand so iconic on the Emerald Coast, park in the extensive parking area and head through Beasley Park’s visitor building. Overhangs provide shaded picnic spots, while restrooms and freshwater showerheads are available for rinsing off. Short boardwalks, including a handicap ramp, take you to the beach itself, while Indian Blanket and Dune Sunflowers bloom near the parking area.

Looking west visitors can see the Okaloosa Fishing Pier, while looking east they will see a long expanse of beach that eventually stretches all the way to the West Destin Jetty. Much of this area is owned by the Eglin Air Force Base. The waters here are the iconic emerald green, and can be absolutely calm or provide fun waves, depending on the weather. A lifeguard is on duty during the summer months, right in front of the boardwalk.

A variety of marine life can be found within the waves and just above the surf line. When the tide is right you can actually see the little clams unearthed by the force of a wave, only to rapidly dig themselves under again. The water is so clear in its shallow depths that small fishes are easily viewable. Where the sand is dry, look for Ghost Crabs; they dig themselves holes to hide from predators, but emerge when they feel they are safe.

The beach is bordered by the dunes, partially covered and stabilized by the vegetation. The sand that creates the dunes is actually called “quartz sand,” and originated from mountains far from the coastline. Sea Oats and other vegetation grow right on the dunes themselves, and while it is permissible to walk next to the dunes do not walk around or over them, as this causes erosion. During storms dunes are particularly important in preventing surges from entering inland areas.
Gulf Island National Seashore: Okaloosa Area

Address: Miracle Strip Parkway, Fort Walton Beach, FL

Activities: Swimming, walking, paddle boarding, picnicking, boating, fishing, birding

Facilities: Restrooms, showerheads, boat ramp, picnic tables

Hours: 8 a.m. to sundown

More information: http://www.nps.gov/guis/planyourvisit/okaloosa-day-use-area.htm

Directions:
From Fort Walton Beach, take Miracle Strip Parkway onto Okaloosa Island. Traveling east, the park will be on your left.

Description:
Gulf Coast Park is located along Choctawhatchee Bay on Okaloosa Island. The park offers a boat ramp, public beach access, restrooms, and freshwater showerheads for rinsing off.

The beach itself is usually calmer than on the Gulf side. There are fewer visitors, and the shallow water is perfect for young swimmers or those who simply want to lounge on the sandy bottom. Picnic tables with a view of the water provide a beautiful place to have lunch.

The land behind the beach is all protected, and maintains its natural dune structure as well as a covering of native vegetation. In the summer, Indian Blanket and Large-flowered Pink Marsh flowers bloom and add color to the sand. In fact, Large-flowered Pink Marsh can only be found in Florida and Alabama, and with their pink petals and yellow, star-like center they are gorgeous wildflowers. Pine cones from large pine trees along the coast wash up here, mixing with seashells.

You can walk as long as you want along the beach. Look for dolphins fishing in the shallows, Osprey soaring overhead, Great Blue Heron standing still along the water, and multiple shorebird species feeding in the surf. Do you see any shells with legs? Those are native Hermit Crabs! They inhabit cast-off shells of other species, living inside the hard casing for protection. As they grow, they look for larger and larger shells of all shapes and sizes. Feel free to pick them up and look inside, but be gentle and always put them back where you found them.

The park offers opportunities for other recreation as well. The calm waters are perfect for paddle boarding, while wind surfers can catch a breeze farther from shore. The park is also known for fishing, especially near the pilings by the boat ramp.
West Destin Jetty

Address: Miracle Strip Parkway, Destin, FL

Activities: Swimming, walking, boating, fishing, wildlife viewing

Facilities: None

Hours: Sunrise to sunset

Directions:
Travelling West on Miracle Strip Parkway/ US 98, the parking area for the jetty will be on your left directly after you cross the Brooks Bridge. If travelling east, it will be on your right just before the bridge. Park and walk out to the beach, curving right along the shore until you see the jetty itself.

Description:
The small parking area near the Brooks Bridge is a great place to hop out of the car and explore the beach, the jetty, and also the protected dune/wetlands ecosystems managed by the Eglin Air Force Base. Due to its proximity to the parking area, the beach provides an easy place to launch a kayak or paddleboard.

The grassy wetland is perhaps best viewed near the parking area. Bring binoculars to scan the grasses for egrets and herons, as well as colorful wildflowers. In the summer, look for the delicate pink Saltmarsh Mallow, which can grow to six feet and sport dozens of blossoms. Iconic Sea Oats wave in the breeze from their preferred dune habitat.

Due to the calmer waters, Hermit Crabs abound here, and children delight in collecting them, then releasing them once more when they leave the beach (always be gentle when handling wildlife, and return the crabs to where you found them).

The crowds thin as you walk along the beach towards the jetty. Look for little shorebirds running against the waves, as well as Least Terns fishing in the shallow waters. Great Blue Herons can be seen within the wetland plucking long grasses for their nests on Okaloosa Island. Once you reach the jetty itself, your view expands all the way down the beaches of the island.

In addition to terrestrial wildlife, the jetty is known for its fishing opportunities. Anglers cast in the water both to the side of the jetty, as well as from the rocks themselves, hoping to catch Bluefish, Ladyfish, Red Fish, and more. Be careful, the wet rocks can be slippery!

The jetty and beach around it provides an amazing place to view the evening sunset. Birds and other wildlife are particularly active during this cooler period of the day, and you may just have the beach all to yourself.
East Destin Jetty

Address: O’Steen Beach Access, Gulf Shores Drive, Destin FL
Activities: Swimming, snorkeling, fishing
Facilities: None
Hours: Sunrise to sunset

Directions:
When crossing into Destin and heading east on US-98, continue through Destin. Gulf Shores Drive will be on your right. Follow Gulf Shores Drive until you see the O’Steen Beach Public Access sign on your left, with public parallel parking on your right.

Description:
East Jetty is the second rock structure that extends into the Gulf, forming the other arm of East Pass. The jetty itself is a little walk from the parking area, past a private beach but with plenty of public beach and swimming area available for visitors.

The jetty itself is a great place to fish, though anglers should be very careful of wet and slippery rocks. This area is also a favorite for Great Blue Herons, and it is possible to see half a dozen of the large birds at any one time. Shorebirds are also common at the shoreline, as are multiple tern species soaring in the winds overhead.

The waters around the finger jetty can be excellent for snorkeling and diving. Two sculptures can be seen beneath the waves, and the rocks of the jetty and finger jetty attract both reef fish and larger recreational fish, such as Jack Crevelle and Flounder. However, it is highly recommended that all divers and snorkelers go with trained guides, as the currents in this area can be very strong and sometimes dangerous. Snorkel and snuba trips are available, and if you have never tried scuba diving but always wanted to, feel free to check out on of the many discovery dive options with local dive shops and guides.

In the summertime, make sure to arrive to the public access parking early in the morning. Because of the spot’s popularity, the spaces are often filled quickly.
Mattie Kelly Park and Nature Walk

Address: 825 Beach Drive, Destin, FL 32541

Activities: Fishing, walking, wildlife viewing, picnicking, swimming

Facilities: Restrooms (at adjacent boat launch), fishing pier, nature trail boardwalk

Hours: Sunrise to sunset


Directions:
Traveling east on Miracle Strip Parkway, cross the bridge into Destin. Turn left onto Calhoun Avenue, and continue 12 miles until Calhoun Avenue becomes Sibert Avenue. After another .2 miles, Sibert Avenue becomes 1st street; after .2 miles, turn left onto Beach Drive. The parking area is on your left.

Description:
Bordering Joe’s Bayou on Choctawhatchee Bay, Mattie Kelly Park offers visitors both a look at Florida wetlands, as well as access to the Bayou and a large fishing pier. A brackish pond near the water provides additional opportunities for wildlife viewing, and over 100 bird species have been recorded in the park.

The nature trail comprises a raised boardwalk and interpretive signs, giving visitors a vaulted view of the marsh grasses, royal fern, muscadine, and cattails below. Across the wetlands area are beautiful Longleaf Pine, with needles that can grow up to 15 inches long. The boardwalk also shows visitors examples of invasive species in the form of the Chinese Tallow Tree, which can outcompete native plant species if not removed.

When the nature trail ends, visitors can cross the road to the entrance to the fishing pier, which runs parallel to the shore before turning out into the bayou. Seagrass grows here, and the clear water affords great views of oyster bed restoration in progress. The bottom is sandy, and wading is permitted as long as seagrass and oysters are avoided.

Fishing at the pier is relaxing, and anglers can hope for hard tail, groupers, and more. Fishing is better at high tide.
Destin History and Fishing Museum

**Address:** 108 Stahlman Ave, Destin, FL 32541

**Activities:** Museum exploration

**Facilities:** Restrooms, gift shop

**Hours:** Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**Fee:** Adult tickets are $5; Seniors and military are $4, while children and students are $3. Children under 6 and members are free.


**Directions.**
Traveling east on Miracle Strip Parkway, cross the bridge into Destin. Turn left on Stahlman Avenue, and the museum will be on your right.

**Description.**
The Destin History and Fishing Museum receives thousands of visitors each year, and its artifacts, photographs, and displays provide context for the fishing hub Destin has become. Visitors to the museum walk along a long rectangle in the museum's interior, with a large display of fish one can hope to catch here as well as accurate depth illustrations of the Gulf off of our Emerald Coast shores. Fishing in Destin is so spectacular because a deep ocean drop-off is relatively close to the coastline, allowing anglers to reach true deep-sea fishing with shorter journeys.

Opposite the diorama is a collection of items showcasing both the history of fishing in Destin, as well as early life in the town. A display of antique fishing rods is highlighted by one owned by Ernest Hemingway himself, while an exhibit showcasing seine boats explores the evolution from seine boats to head and party boats so popular in Destin today.

The exhibits also showcase the early families that originally settled the area, including the Destin family, for whom the town is named, and the Mahler family, who founded the town’s first post office. Still other displays show visitors the items that would have filled the homes of these first families, including a piano, a sewing machine, and other antique furniture and items.

Before you leave, don’t forget to check out the outdoor exhibits as well. The last seine fishing boat constructed in Destin, the Primrose, sits right outside the museum entrance. In addition, the very first post office in Destin has also been erected on site, with a restored interior and additional information about early Destin history.

For all fishing aficionados and history buffs, this is a stop that cannot be missed. To fully understand the ecological and historical roots of Destin’s amazing fishing activities, spend an hour at this delightful museum!
Indian Temple Mound Museum and Historic Buildings

Address: 139 Miracle Strip Parkway, Fort Walton Beach, FL 32548

Activities: Walking, museum exploration

Facilities: Restrooms, gift shop

Fees: Adults $5.30; Seniors & Military $4.77; Children $3.18; 3 and under free.

Hours: June 1 – September 5: Indian Temple Mound Museum and Gift Shop open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Historic buildings open from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.
September – May: Indian Temple Mound Museum and Gift Shop open Monday through Friday, 12 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Historic buildings open from 1 to 3 p.m.

More information: http://fwb.org/museums/location-and-hours/

Directions: Traveling west on Miracle Strip Parkway, the museum and historic buildings will be .1 miles past Florida Pl SE, on the right.

Description:
The museum campus consists of four distinct parts: the Indian Temple Mound and Museum, the Camp Walton Schoolhouse, the Garnier Post Office, and the Civil War exhibit. The Temple Mound is the focal point for the property, with a set of wooden stairs leading visitors up to the top of the structure. Ancient trees grow here, providing beautiful greenery as well as comfortable shade. Signs point out Live Oaks, Long Leaf Pines, and the Sabal Palmetto. The mound itself was built between AD 700 and AD 1500 by Native Americans during the Mississippian Period, and was used primarily as a ceremonial and political focal point for the nearby communities.

The museum at the base of the mound contains artifacts and information about the Native Americans who have lived in this region for thousands of years. The most famous artifact is the Buck-long Effigy Urn, which stands about 15 inches tall and resembles a human with four legs. Reconstructed from 100 fragments, the urn could have once held the ashes of an important community member.

The other three elements of the museum campus are the schoolhouse, post office, and civil war display. The schoolhouse building, originally located on Miracle Strip Parkway, was used by students from 1912 to 1936.

The post office was used in a similar time period, from 1918 to 1953. It was located on stilts on Garnier’s Bayou, where the mail came by boat. The stove heated the whole office, where families not only picked up packages but also voted.

Finally, the newest addition is the Civil War Exhibit, located adjacent to the post office. Confederate troops once camped here, guarding the strategically significant Narrows. The exhibit showcases a civil war tent encampment, complete with information about who served here and the location’s importance.
Henderson Beach State Park

Address: 17000 Emerald Coast Parkway, Destin, FL
Activities: Swimming, picnicking, biking, fishing, wildlife viewing, geo-caching, camping
Facilities: Restroom, picnic pavilion, showerheads, playground, camping, handicap accessible
Hours: 8 a.m. to sunset
Fees: $6 per vehicle; $4 for single passenger. $2 for pedestrians, bicyclists, and extra passengers in cars over 8 people.
More information: https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Henderson-Beach

Directions: Travelling east on US-98, Henderson State Park will be on your right.

Description:
Henderson Park, purchased by the Florida State Park system in 1983 and opened in 1991, encompasses 208 acres, includes 6000 feet of beach front, and offers visitors a beautiful nature trail, restrooms, covered pavilions, and a children’s playground.

The beach is made up of the iconic sugar sand beaches of Okaloosa County, home to nesting birds as well as visitors. The dunes are roped off and set up with wooden decoys of Black Skimmers and Least Terns, enticing these Florida listed species to raise their chicks here. The dunes themselves are vegetated with lovely Sea Oats and wildflowers, while the water is warm and emerald green, perfect for swimming, wading, or fishing (though note the restricted areas). Anglers can hope to catch Red Fish, Flounder, Catfish, Cobia, Whiting, and Pompano.

The nature trail truly sets Henderson Park apart from many other areas in the county. Coastal dune ecosystems are both ancient and rare, and a ¾ of a mile trail weaves through Sand Pine, Sand Live Oak, Saw Palmettos, cacti, and wildflowers. Birds flock to this natural setting during migration, and almost 100 species have been recorded. Interpretive signs throughout the nature trail provide information on native species and wildlife.

Biking is also an option at the park. The camp road is almost a mile long, and can be great fun for those just learning to pedal. A long boardwalk provides another way to enjoy the scenery, high above the dunes. For those who wish to spend more than just the day at Henderson, camping is available in 60 spaces. Reserve them early, for they fill up fast in the summertime!
Sound Park

Address: Miracle Strip Parkway/Highway 98, East Ft. Walton Beach, FL
Activities: Fishing, walking
Facilities: Picnic area, fishing pier
Hours: Sunrise to sunset


Directions:
After driving through downtown Fort Walton, continue west down Miracle Strip Parkway/Highway 98. Sound Park will be on your left.

Description:
Sound Park, located along highway 98 and the intracoastal waterway, features picnic areas, benches, a fishing pier, and unique sculptures.

The shore bordering the park is the site of the “Sound Park Conservation Project,” and was planted with native vegetation in order to stabilize it – as well as provide habitat for local wildlife. An oyster reef was built in the waterway itself.

Visitors can stroll along the short boardwalk that leads to the fishing pier, or crisscross the other dirt pathways that wind through the park. Five beautiful sculptures dot the grassy areas, provided by the Fort Walton Beach Main Street Organization.
Oak Tree Nature Park

**Address:** 210 W Hollywood Blvd, Mary Esther, FL 32569

**Activities:** Hiking, wildlife viewing, picnicking

**Facilities:** Picnic pavilion

**Hours:** Sunrise to sunset

**More information:** [http://webapps.dep.state.fl.us/DslParks/details/598](http://webapps.dep.state.fl.us/DslParks/details/598)

**Directions:**
Travelling on US-98, take Doolittle Rd. From Doolittle Turn left on West Hollywood Blvd; the park will be on your left.

**Description.**
Though only 25 acres, Oak Tree Nature Park has it all: benches, trails, a picnic pavilion, and wildlife observation areas. The land was purchased through a partnership with the Florida Communities Trust, first opened to the public in the early 2000’s. The park has even been a study site for Native American archeology, and researchers found a shell midden as well as other artifacts.

The trail is approximately a mile long, looping around the park. The forest overhead provides comfortable shade even on the hottest afternoons. Pine trees, oak trees, magnolia, and other trees make up the canopy of the park, while palmettos, wax myrtle, fetterbush, sparkleberry, and Florida anise form the understory. The trail crosses lovely Silver Sands Creek in two spots, one of which includes a viewing platform. Dragonflies, minnows, and frogs can be seen on the banks of the small stream from above.

The undeveloped park has preserved native plant communities and provides habitat to numerous mammals, birds, and amphibians. Otter and beaver can be seen here, as well as turtles, alligators, and over 100 bird species. Interpretive signs show visitors what wildlife sounds to look and listen for, including species present and how they use the park as habitat. One sign even explains the concept of invasive species and the harm they can bring to native ecosystem, using Chinese tallow and air potato vine in front of the trail as an example.

The park may be 25 acres, but it hosts multiple opportunities to learn about Florida’s native ecosystems. The shorter trail is perfect for children, and we recommend making at least two loops to see all the park has to offer.
Turkey Creek Park

**Address:** 340 John Sims Parkway West, Niceville, FL 32578

**Activities:** Swimming, walking, bird watching, kayaking

**Facilities:** Restrooms, picnic pavilion, grills

**Hours:** 6:30 a.m. to sunset


**Directions.**
From Florida 85/ Eglin Parkway, turn left onto John Sims Parkway West. Make a U-turn on Evans Street onto the parkway traveling in the other direction, and Turkey Creek will be on your right. If you hit Highway 85 N you have gone too far.

**Description.**
Turkey Creek Park, owned and maintained by the City of Niceville, is unique in its walking and swimming opportunities. The primary trail is a ¾ mile boardwalk that follows the creek as it meanders through lowland forest. The boardwalk is shaded by Cypress, Water Hickory, Sable Palmetto, and Sweet Bay trees, some of which grow through the boardwalk itself. Native plants, including Panhandle Lilies, can also be seen to the left and right of the boardwalk, and trail markers identify what vegetation visitors can hope to spot.

Turkey Creek has a sandy bottom and is not often deep, and thus has become a favorite for floating and swimming. There are multiple docks and access points to the river along the boardwalk, providing areas for swimming. If visitors walk to the end of the boardwalk they can swim and float all the way down the creek to the entryway – a popular pastime for adults and children alike. Kayaks and canoes are also permitted, as the creek eventually flows into Boggy Bayou, but no gasoline engines are allowed.

Though there are fewer birds in the summer, the park is a birding hotspot in the fall, winter, and spring. Still, warblers, herons, and Swallow-tail Kites are possible even in the warmest months, so never forget your binoculars!

At the entrance to the walk is a covered pavilion complete with picnic tables, grills, and even a stone hearth. Public restrooms are located near the pavilion. The boardwalk also has a special extension that leads to a quiet place along the creek, dedicated to parents who have lost a son or daughter.
Fred Cannon Rocky Bayou State Park

**Address:** 4281 State Road 20 East, Niceville, FL 32578

**Activities:** Hiking, fishing, boating, geo-caching, camping, picnicking, birding, wildlife viewing, bicycling, swimming

**Facilities:** Campsites, restrooms, picnic areas, playground, boat launch

**Fee:** $5 per vehicle; $4 single occupant. $2 for pedestrians, bicyclists, or extra passengers in cars over 8 people.

**Hours:** 8 a.m. until sunset

**More information:** [https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Rocky-Bayou](https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Rocky-Bayou)

**Directions:**
From the west: Take I-10 east to Highway 85, travel south until you reach Highway 20. Park will be approximately give miles on the left. From the east: Take I-10 west to Highway west on Highway 20 approximately 25 miles until you see signs for park on the right.

**Description:**
Named for U.S. Air Force Colonel Fred Gannon, this park provides a range of nature-based activities within its 350 acres. The park can be enjoyed on land or in the water; canoes and kayaks for rent are available, as well as a boat launch for your private watercraft.

The park is divided into camping areas as well as general recreation areas. The campsites are shaded by beautiful, native tree species, with nature and fitness trails winding through the woods. The general recreation areas include picnic pavilions, boat launches, staircases to the shore of the Bayou, as well as additional nature and fitness trails.

Their most famous nature trail is the Red Cedar Trail, approximately a half mile long and showcasing the beautiful native Red Cedar species. Other species include Saw Palmetto, Hickory, and others. However, this landscape is visually dominated by what is commonly known as “Deer Moss,” a blue-green lichen species that completely covers the forest floor in patches. Though the lichen grows slowly, in this area there is so much carpeting the ground that it almost looks like strange, colored snow.

The park’s two other nature trails are also beautiful: the Sand Pine Nature Trail follows Puddin Head Stream, and the Rocky Bayou Trail traces the shoreline. In addition to terrestrial explorations, there are boating opportunities for gasoline engines as well as kayaks and canoes. Look for beautiful aquatic flowers in the shallows, as well as nesting Osprey that hunt in the Bayou for fish. The waters here have been designated as an Aquatic Preserve, though fishing is permitted.
Blackwater River State Forest: Karick Lake

**Address:** Karick Lake Lower Road, Baker, FL

**Activities:** Hiking, wildlife viewing

**Facilities:** Restrooms, camping, picnic areas

**Fee:** $2 per person

**Hours:** Sunrise to sunset

**More information:** [https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Blackwater-River](https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Blackwater-River)

**Directions:**
From the town of Milton, take Munson Hwy, also known as CR 191, to SR 4 in Munon. Turn right, and follow SR 4 to the intersection of SR 189. Here, turn left and look for the south access point on Karick Lake Lower Road, in 8 miles on the right. In .8 miles farther is the north access point on North Karick Road.

**Description:**
The Blackwater River State Forest is the largest in Florida, covering over 200,000 acres and a wide variety of ecosystems. Though the forest stretches over multiple counties, Karick Lake in Okaloosa County is one of the state forest's gems. Made in 1965 through the construction of a dam, the lake is 65 acres and is a designated Fish Management Area. Though the lake is an average of seven feet deep, it does reach 18 feet in its deepest areas.

A 3.8 mile hiking trail around the lake is the perfect way to see its waters as well as look for wildlife. The trail begins in the parking area, and loops over a wide, grassy dam before continuing around. Look for Bald Eagles, as at least one pair nests nearby. This section of the forest has been recognized for its birding opportunities, and has earned a place on the Great Florida Birding Trail.

The path is also a great place to see local wildflowers and pollinators. The wide space beneath the towering pine trees provides ample light for spring and fall blossom bursts, and seeing the wide range of butterflies is magical.

Finally, the park has fishing piers and allows electric motors, making it great for fishing. The lake is stocked, and Catfish, Sunfish, Bass, and Bluegill are regularly hooked here. Restrooms are open at each of the campgrounds.