



Office of Greenways & Trails

Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail Segment 25 Jacksonville

Emergency contact info:

911

St. Johns County Sheriff's Office: 800-346-7596

Duval County Sheriff's Office: 904-630-0500

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922

FPTA Region: L

Begin: St Augustine

End: Talbot Spoil Island

Distance: 46 miles

Duration: 3 days

Special Considerations: Boat traffic can be heavy along the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW), especially on weekends and holidays. Paddling along the high-energy East Coast shoreline is not recommended due to safety considerations. Plus, there are no inlets in this segment connecting the ICW to the Atlantic with the exception of the St. Johns River. Jetties that extend almost two miles into the Atlantic along the mouth of the St. Johns make this option prohibitive. Tides will begin to have a stronger influence as you head north. Paddlers in the ICW must often contend with a strong easterly shore breeze.

Introduction

The city of Jacksonville, chartered in 1832, was named after Florida's first territorial governor, Andrew Jackson. An important seaport, the city figured prominently in the Civil War, being occupied by Union forces on four separate occasions. In 1901, a

devastating fire left almost 9,000 homeless, but the city was quickly rebuilt and today Jacksonville is a thriving urban center and port. Paddlers may spot numerous fast-moving helicopters along the ICW as Jacksonville is home to the United States Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron, commissioned to interdict high-speed drug-running vessels and help to ensure homeland security.

While this segment covers one of the largest urban areas in the state, paddlers will be pleasantly surprised. Numerous unspoiled areas provide optimal paddling opportunities. Vast stretches of marsh, islands, and coastal forest have been protected largely through the efforts of the City of Jacksonville, the Timucuan National Preserve, and private landowners. The Preservation Project Jacksonville was begun in 1999 by then-mayor John Delaney after voters approved a bond issue. Since then, more than 50,000 acres have been protected. The goal of the project is to help to guide growth, protect environmentally sensitive lands, improve water quality, and provide more outdoor recreation opportunities.

Four main preserves are accessible along the trail: Cradle Creek, Castaway Island, Dutton Island, and Tideviews. The scenic network of these preserves has helped to create the Jacksonville Intracoastal Salt Marsh Paddling Guide. Access to all of these preserves except for Dutton Island is limited at low tide.

This segment also traverses the southern part of the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve. Managed by the National Park Service, it is named for a large Native American tribe that once inhabited the area. The 46,000-acre preserve encompasses wetlands, upland forests, and historic sites. Paddling trails for day trips are available in the preserve. A unique partnership of city/county, state, federal, and non-profit land managers is responsible for the waterways, lands, and facilities that are included in this segment of the paddling trail. Known as the Timucuan Trail State and National Parks, the partnership includes the National Park Service, the State of Florida, the City of Jacksonville, and the Nature Conservancy. This coalition has come together to develop the Florida Sea Island Paddling Trail, a network of 10 saltwater trails and 2 freshwater-brackish creek trails through public lands.

History and natural beauty combine in an exceptional segment just north of Jacksonville. In this region of the paddling trail, five rivers either merge or flow into the Atlantic Ocean: the St. Johns, Nassau, Amelia, St. Mary's, and Fort George. The St. Johns River Blueway is a 300-mile designated paddling trail and an American Heritage River, one of only 14 in the country. Winding creeks through unspoiled marshlands help to evoke a feeling of original Florida. Kayakers also have easy access to historic sites such as Kingsley Plantation, and the Ribault Club. Paddlers have a choice of taking interior

creeks and the Intercoastal Waterway (ICW), or the Atlantic shore. Those familiar with the area agree that only expert paddlers should attempt the Atlantic shore due to strong currents and wave action, and the fact that jetties along the mouth of the St. Johns River extend almost two miles into the Atlantic. The interior route suggested here is considered safer, with more opportunities for camping and visiting points of interest.

1. St. Augustine to Nocatee Spoil Island, 15.6 miles

As you head north, you'll be passing alongside several large tracts of public land, mostly along the eastern shore.

To access the GTM Reserve's Guana River site, you can land at Shell Bluff, the site of a coquina well remaining from a Minorcan farm in the early 1800s. There are 10 miles of hiking/biking trails and it is about a 1.5-mile walk from Shell Bluff to the GTM Environmental Education Center (a small fee for entry) where there are exhibits, aquariums, an orientation video, and a nature shop. The Guana River and lake east of the Tolomato River is a popular destination for day paddlers.

The next large chunk of public lands is the Guana River Wildlife Management Area (WMA). While there is no camping allowed on WMA land on the east side of the ICW, you can paddle through several adjacent coves and side channels that will allow you to separate yourself from the sometimes busy ICW and enjoy unspoiled marshy vistas and rich bird life.

Several spoil areas along the ICW are often used for primitive camping by boaters, but permission has not been granted to include them in this guide. Leave No Trace principles should be utilized for any primitive camping outlined in this guide. The Nocatee Spoil Island is on the west side, about 2.75 miles south of the Palm Valley Bridge.

2. Nocatee Spoil Island to Dutton Island, 18.2 miles

The ICW widens after the Highway 202 Bridge and becomes more natural-looking, with numerous tree islands, tidal creeks, and unbroken expanses of marsh. Cradle Creek, along the eastern shore, is the first of three Jacksonville preservation lands that are ideal for kayaking. The next city preserve, Castaway Island, is along the western shore just past the Beach Boulevard Bridge.

To access nearby restaurants, a drug store, and a supermarket within easy walking distance (about a half-mile), you can land at the Palm Cove Marina (see map). Check in at the marina service station first. There is also a restaurant at the marina. Directly across the ICW on the eastern shore is Beach Marine where you can also access restaurants.

Proceeding north in the ICW, past the Atlantic Boulevard Bridge, the Tideviews and Dutton Island Preserves will be along the eastern shore. This unspoiled area of islands and tidal creeks features a kayak launch dock and a mile-long marked paddling trail through a pristine tidal zone. Currently, paddlers can utilize the park's group camp area (a fee is required) by walking a quarter-mile north of the kayak launch dock. For camping reservations, call the City of Atlantic Beach Recreation Department at (904) 247-5828. Also, a primitive campsite for paddlers is being established on a small peninsula east of the kayak launch.

3. Dutton Island to Talbot Spoil Island, 12.2 miles

Be wary of currents and large boats as you enter the St. Johns River. You must cross the river in a diagonal direction to reach Sister's Creek. On the northside of St. Johns, stay away from the shipyard, especially if there are naval craft present. No vessel is allowed within 100 yards of a U.S. naval vessel. If you want to visit the Fort Caroline National Memorial in the Timucuan Preserve, paddle 2 miles up the St. Johns along the south shore to the low floating docks just before the reconstructed French fort. Jean Ribault landed near here in 1562, exchanged gifts with area Timucuan Indians, erected a stone monument, and claimed the area for France. "It is a thing unspeakable," wrote Ribault in his journal, "to consider the things that be seen there, and shall be found more and more in this incomparable land."

The French established a colony at the site in 1564, building Fort Caroline, but only a year later, Ribault and several hundred French soldiers sailed south to raid Spanish St. Augustine. He was shipwrecked by a powerful tropical storm. Spanish Admiral Pedro Menendez saw an opportunity and raided Fort Caroline, brutally killing most of the adult males. He then hunted down Ribault and other shipwrecked sailors and killed them at a place called Matanzas ("slaughter"), part of segment 24. The fighting marked the first of many battles over European control of the "New World." Regarding the Timucuan Indians, their numbers dwindled from tens of thousands to only a few hundred by 1700, primarily due to disease. The tribe is considered extinct today.

The Sister's Creek Marina is located on the west side of Sister's Creek just off Heckscher Drive (State Road 105), a short distance from the St. Johns River. Please note that the marina is closed to the public during the Greater Jacksonville Kingfish Tournament in July and one week before. Restrooms, water, and a picnic area are available.

From the marina, paddle north up Sister's Creek, which is also the Intracoastal Waterway, so be wary of motorized craft. An incoming tide will be helpful. After about four miles, you have a choice of what route to take to Talbot Spoil Island. The ICW Route takes you 3 miles up the ICW directly to Talbot Spoil Island. The primitive Talbot

spoil island campsite is across the ICW from Big Talbot State Park, along the west shoreline.

An alternate route takes an eastward turn at the Ft. George River. This route will add 7 miles to your trip, but if the weather and tides are good, it offers camping alternatives to Talbot spoil island, several points of interest, and the scenery along the way is worth the effort.

On the alternate route, less than a mile on your right you will spot the white wooden buildings of the Kingsley Plantation, open seven days a week from 9 AM to 5 PM. You can land at a small beach about a hundred yards past the dock and visit this historic site free of charge. The plantation is located on Fort George Island and much of this 1,000-acre island was used to grow crops, especially cotton, during the plantation period (1763-1865). During your visit, you can view the planter's residence, kitchen and barn, and the half-moon arc of slave quarters.

The Kingsley family was unique in that Zephaniah Kingsley took an African wife and they had several children together. Mrs. Kingsley owned her own plantation and slaves. In the 1830s when harsh restrictions were enacted regarding free and enslaved people in Florida, most of the Kingsley family and fifty newly-freed slaves moved to Haiti, a free black colony.

The next historic stopover is less than a mile on your right down the Fort George River. Paddlers can land at a convenient boat ramp at the Fort George Island Cultural State Park and tour the Ribault club, a 1920's style structure with grand rooms and unique architecture. The park itself is open daily, and the Club is open Wednesday through Sunday from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. This multi-agency visitor center is cooperatively managed by the Florida State Park Service and the National Park Service.

To camp at Little Talbot Island State Park, paddle northeast from the Ribault House across the Fort George River and travel north up Simpson Creek a little over a mile. Then paddle up Myrtle Creek about a mile to the Little Talbot Island State Park campground. Sites 34, 35, 36, and 37 are near the boat ramp on your right. Time your approach to the campground with high tide. Advance reservations for these coveted spots may be made up to 11 months in advance at State Parks Reservations or call (800) 326-3521 (8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.) or TDD (888) 433-0287. When you arrive, please check in at the Talbot Islands State Parks ranger station on the West side of A1A before setting up camp. The ranger station may be reached at (904) 251-2320.

Another camping option is to proceed down the Fort George River a little more than two miles to the Huguenot Memorial Park, inside the Ft. George Inlet. Operated by the City

of Jacksonville, tent camping is inexpensive and you can paddle up to the campground. Across the St. Johns River mouth to the south, you can view the large naval ships of the Mayport Naval Station. It is important to walk the half-mile or so to the office and check in before setting up tents. You can make reservations by calling (904) 251-3335 or (904) 255-4255.

From Little Talbot Island State Park, backtrack a half mile south on Myrtle Creek to Simpson Creek and proceed north on Simpson Creek. This creek is passable at high or low tides. If you camped at Huguenot Park campground, proceed north on the Fort George River to Simpson Creek.

On Simpson Creek, just before the AIA Bridge on the right is an outfitter, Kayak Amelia, where restrooms, snacks, and rental equipment are available. Be sure to ask them about the best timing/tidal conditions to go under the AIA Bridge and for up-to-date information about paddling conditions in the area.

About a mile north of the AIA Bridge, paddlers will be greeted with an unmarred view of Half Moon Bluff, where the creek is creating a sheer cliff. Look for wading birds, wood storks, and a variety of other avian creatures along this scenic creek. The cliff, combined with expansive views of unspoiled salt marsh, creates an unforgettable scene.

At the mouth of the creek, proceed along the shore of Nassau Sound. To your right is Bird Island, a bird rookery off-limits to humans. Please observe birds with binoculars from a distance of at least 300 feet. If you spot birds standing up and paying attention to you, they are not performing essential functions such as resting, grooming, incubating and sheltering eggs, or feeding young.

Along the shore of Big Talbot Island, you'll soon spot scenic bluffs where ocean waters are cutting into the uplands. On the map, you'll see a GPS point that marks the beach end of a short trail beneath a scenic live oak canopy atop the bluff. At the end of the quarter-mile trail, you'll find a picnic area and port-o-let.