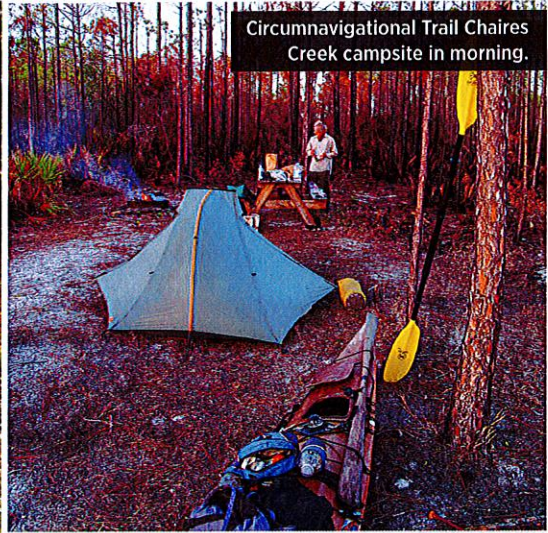




PHOTO BY JOHN MORAN

Baseline to Marshall Swamp Trail, Cross Florida Greenway.



Circumnavigational Trail Chaires Creek campsite in morning.

PHOTO BY DOUG ALDERSON



Titusville Mayor Walt Johnson (holding logo), city staff, and Greenways and Trails staff and council members at Florida Trail Town event.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF TITUSVILLE

NATURE TOURISM

# Florida's Growing Trails System

Trails link cities for hikers, cyclists, equestrians and paddlers

by Doug Alderson  
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For traveling across Florida, interstates may be the fastest route, but Florida's long-distance trails provide a scenic and healthier alternative. Trails attract visitors from other states and countries, providing an economic boost to communities across the Sunshine State.

Hiking, bicycling, equestrian, paddling and multi-use trails are part of the interconnected **Florida Greenways and Trails System**. This system encompasses more than 10,000 miles of existing and proposed land trails and 4,000 miles of designated paddling trails.

The trail system includes the 1,300-mile Florida National Scenic Trail, which runs from Big Cypress Swamp to Fort Pickens near Pensacola. The trail is primarily used by hikers. The trail system also includes the 1,515-mile Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail traversing the entire coast of Florida from Pensacola to Key West to Fernandina Beach. Both of these long-distance trails can take three to four months to complete in

one trip, but many people tackle them in segments over several years. Many describe a journey on these trails as life changing.

"The trail is amazing," said **Jodi Eller**, the first woman to complete the Circumnavigational Trail. "It goes through so many different ecosystems. How the beaches change along the trail is just incredible," Eller said. "The trail made me a stronger paddler, and it also redefined who I am in a way, bringing me back to the essence of being human. It's a powerful experience to go through."

Thousands of outdoor enthusiasts use the Circumnavigational Trail and Florida Trail for day trips and weekend outings each year. For example, surveys show that about 365,000 people a year hike sections of the Florida National Scenic Trail. This is good for the health of Florida citizens and visitors because the American Heart Association estimates that for every dollar spent on walking paths and programs, about three dollars in medical expenses can be saved.

To boost trail use as a healthy alternative, the Florida Park Service has launched the Park Fit program as an alternative to traditional gyms. The Greenways and Trails System is coordinated by Florida's **Office of Greenways and Trails** – an important component of the state **Department of Environmental Protection's** Florida State Parks system – with other agencies, local governments and nonprofit groups.

Long-distance paved multi-use trails for cyclists are being planned and built throughout Florida. Projects include the 250-mile Florida Coast-to-Coast Trail from St. Petersburg to Titusville; the 260-mile St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop; the Florida portion of the East Coast Greenway that runs from Maine to Key West; the Gulf Coast Trail in Southwest Florida; the Capital City to Sea Trails in the Big Bend; and the Great Northwest Coastal Trail along the Panhandle coast. Florida is quickly becoming a national and international cycling destination.

Paved trails that are separate from roadways are attractive due to their scenic appeal and higher safety levels. The 90-mile Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail attracts more than a million visitors per year, making it the third most visited state park unit in Florida. The most visited state park in Florida is the 110-mile Cross Florida Greenway, which provides trails and recreational opportunities for hikers, cyclists, equestrians and paddlers. More than 2.6 million people visited the Cross Florida Greenway last year.


Funding for building paved multi-use trails is manifold. The Florida Department of Transportation funnels federal alternative transportation money for trail construction. In addition, the

state-funded Shared-Use Nonmotorized Trail Program allocates \$25 million annually for constructing paved multi-use trails identified as priority corridors.

Local governments are also instrumental in creating new trails and trail amenities. **Clermont** is building a paved loop trail through its downtown that will connect to the South Lake Trail and Florida Coast-to-Coast Trail. It is known as the Clermont Legacy Loop. The city is also building the Meet Us in the Middle Trailhead and Gateway with tech-based kiosks, seating and more at the halfway point of the Florida Coast-to-Coast Trail.

**Inverness** has embraced bicycle tourism as an economic driver. It raised \$14 million to build a highly visual gateway from the 46-mile Withlacoochee State Trail to its downtown. Projects include redesigning trailside parks, turning an abandoned warehouse along the trail into a farmer's market and events center, and transforming an abandoned railroad depot into a trail facility with amenities. Construction and renovations are underway with a major phase to be completed by October.

The efforts of Clermont and Inverness are just two examples of how communities throughout Florida are contributing to the state's growing trail system, improving the quality of life for residents and visitors.

Doug Alderson is the assistant bureau chief of the Office of Greenways and Trails. He is also the author of several award-winning Florida outdoor and travel books. For more information about the trails program, contact him at [Doug.Alderson@FloridaDEP.gov](mailto:Doug.Alderson@FloridaDEP.gov). 

## CITIES NEAR TRAILS REAP BENEFITS

Trails are a distinctive resource for nearby municipalities, which can be vibrant places where hikers, bicyclists, equestrians or paddlers enjoy a meal, stock up on supplies, spend the night, find information, or simply enjoy the heritage and charm of the community. When cities enhance the traveling experience for trail users, trail users can, in turn, support a city's economy.

To recognize these communities, the Office of Greenways and Trails developed the **Florida Trail Town** program in 2018, inspired by the successful trail town programs of states such as Pennsylvania and Kentucky. Interested communities conduct a self-assessment to gauge their strengths and weaknesses in relation to nearby trails and trail users and then submit an application. Trail Town candidates are considered for approval by the legislatively established Florida Greenways and Trails Council.

The first designated Florida Trail Town was **Dunedin**. Located along Florida's west coast, Dunedin has long been a mecca for non-motorized paved trail users. Bicyclists, joggers, in-line skaters and those enjoying a leisurely stroll can access the city by way of the Pinellas Trail, which runs through the downtown area on an abandoned railroad corridor. The trail is credited with increasing business occupancy rates from 30 percent to 100 percent.

Since Dunedin was designated, **Titusville, Clermont, Vilano Beach, Malabar, Palatka, Deltona, Inverness** and **Everglades City** have received Florida Trail Town designations. Most of these Trail Towns are on major long-distance multi-use trails, and Titusville is likely the only city in Florida that features a bike shop inside its downtown visitor's center. Everglades City is a hub for paddling trails, including the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail.

A goal of the Florida Trail Town program is to acknowledge successes with the hope that other communities will be inspired to follow suit. Research has shown that communities can benefit when they expand services to trail users. "In Florida, participating in outdoor recreation is a way of life," said **state parks director Eric Draper**. "Trail Towns not only provide trail users with necessary goods and services, but also promote healthy lifestyles. It's very exciting to see the Division of Recreation and Parks' Trail Town program gaining such momentum."

Successful Trail Towns have a common denominator: a champion, or champions, to support the Trail Town designation. This person could be a resident, local government official, a leader of a nonprofit organization or someone who fits a combination of these categories. The support of elected officials and the business community is essential.



**GO TO:** Visit [floridadep.gov/parks/ogt](http://floridadep.gov/parks/ogt) to find Trail Town highlights and program information.