

SANDFLY CREEK

Freshwater paddle along the Suwannee River and picturesque creek in the floodplain.

Length: 3.5 miles from Fletcher's Landing on the Suwannee River to Sandfly Creek, paddle the loop and return to Fletcher's Landing (black dash route). This trail can be extended an additional mile, more or less paddling up Sandfly Creek (yellow dash route) or another mile by crossing the Suwannee River and paddling into Flag Creek (orange dash route).

Time: 2 hours to paddle the Sandfly Creek Loop trail and return to Fletcher's Landing launch site.

Skill Level: Safe (see cautionary note below) for beginner paddlers with basic navigational skills. However, paddler must remember that final mile requires paddling up current on the Suwannee River back to Fletcher's Landing. Waters are protected in creeks but are subject to wind and tides along the Suwannee River. Strong winds in excess of 10 mph can create 1-2 foot waves on the Suwannee. These conditions are not safe for beginner paddlers.

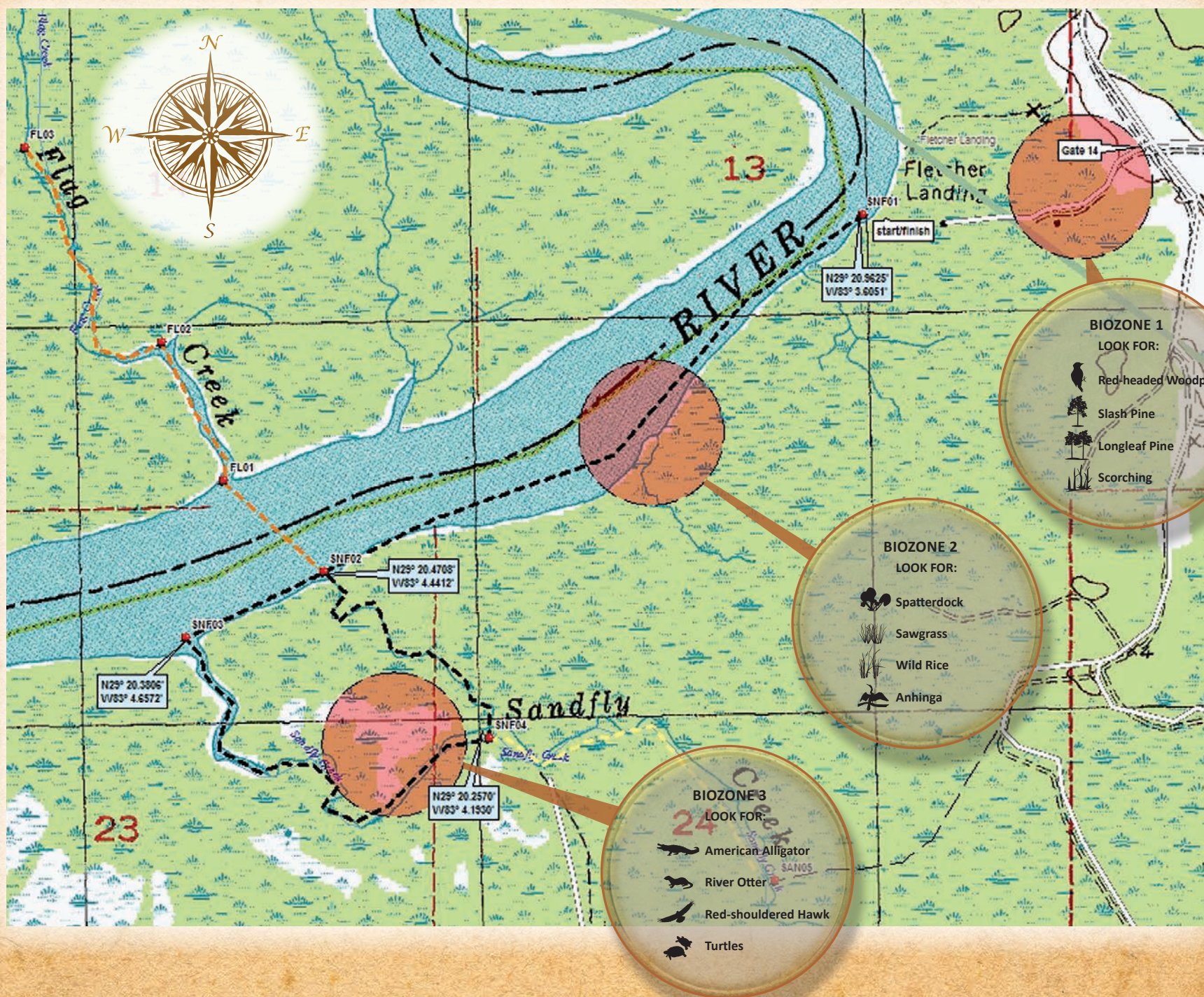
CAUTIONS: Paddler should be aware of airboats and motorized boat traffic. Creeks are usually passable at very low tides, but may require caution due to fallen trees and mud flats. Winds stronger than 10 mph can create waves of 1-2 feet along the Suwannee River, not safe for beginner paddlers. Paddler must be physically conditioned to paddle 1 mile upstream against a 1-3 mph current back to launch site.

DIRECTIONS TO LAUNCH SITE:

From the entrance to the Refuge headquarters (on CR 347), travel south on CR 347 approximately ½ mile to the Lower Suwannee Nature Drive, North Entrance.

Turn right and go approximately 1.9 miles on the Nature Drive to Gate 14 on the right.

NOTE: Gate 14 is locked. Key must be obtained from Refuge headquarters. Follow road to Fletcher's Landing launch site.



For more information, updates and comments, please visit: www.paddleLSCRefuges.org

INFO ABOUT KAYAK RENTALS, GUIDE & OUTFITTER SERVICES, LODGING AND RESTAURANTS GO TO: www.purewaterwilderness.com and click on appropriate links for Dixie and Levy Counties.

TIDE CAUTION: Certain paddles may not be passable at low tides. All paddles are safer and easier to navigate at mid to high tides. For tides schedules go to www.saltwatertides.com/dynamic.dir/floridagulfsites.html, click Crystal River to Apalachee Bay, choose either Cedar Key or Suwannee River entrance, and select month and day(s).

NOTE TO USERS: Great care has been taken to ensure this guide's accuracy, but tides, weather, depth and other conditions can change rapidly and create potentially hazardous conditions. Users should have proper safety equipment and check conditions prior to departure.

Sandfly Creek

On the way to the launch site, this route traverses uplands and swamps before arriving on the Suwannee. Traveling downriver paddlers pass banks with cypresses, hardwoods, and shallow areas with spatterdock and sawgrass. Tiny unnamed creeks beckon for brief exploration. Entering Sandfly Creek a bit over a mile downstream, they continue under lush second-growth forest to a tributary leading back to the Suwannee. An optional paddle leads further up Sandfly, as it gradually narrows.

Biozone 1. Upland Habitat Restoration

On the way to the launch site are upland areas with widely spaced pines and dense, low underbrush. The tall trees are slash pines, and the woody vegetation beneath them is kept in check by periodic controlled burning. Absent these fires, deciduous trees would spring up and eventually keep the pines from reproducing, resulting in an unnatural hardwood forest. The purpose of burning is to attempt to re-create pre-human conditions, in which frequent fires swept the uplands, helping to maintain the pine forests and the wildlife and other plants adapted to prosper in them.

Restoration has not been a complete success, however, because slash pine probably did not dominate these forests before the arrival of fire suppression (see Spyglass, below).



An early autumn paddle on Sandfly Creek.

Biozone 2. The Banks of the Suwannee

Paddling from the launch site downriver along the Levy County shore, one encounters two kinds of habitats. Where the current is strong, the riverbank is relatively steep, and open water directly adjoins the cypresses, hardwoods and clumps of yellow asters (probably bur marigold). In other, shallower sites, emergent spatterdock, sawgrass and wild rice create habitats that support a variety of fish and wildlife species.

Birds commonly seen are American coots, which winter in dozens or hundreds in the beds of spatterdock, and anhingas, often seen, drying their wings on nearby perches or preparing to dive for small fishes.

A raft of American coots floats on the Suwannee, behind them is a zone of spatterdock, and behind that is a band of sawgrass and wild rice. Still further back is the swamp, with cypresses and deciduous trees. Together these provide a complex of habitats.

Biozone 3. Sandfly Creek

One of the most pleasing spots on the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, the isolated Sandfly Creek is a serene, supremely beautiful, and easily navigated waterway. While impressive, its forest cover is probably a pale reflection of the original vegetation (see Spyglass below). Flowering plants visited by butterflies line the banks. Alligators, turtles, river otters, and red-shouldered hawks may be seen.



Clumps of lavender flowers line the creek. These are probably Elliott's Asters.

Spyglass: Regenerating Forests

What may at first strike paddlers as a wild and unspoiled swamp forest has been cut over at least twice—first to harvest ancient cypresses, and later hardwoods. Upland forests have likely been logged even more frequently. Cutover swamps will regenerate naturally, but it may take decades before they again appear forest-like, and much longer to regenerate the giant cypresses that once dominated. On the adjacent uplands, natural regeneration requires periodic fires. Longleaf pine, a fire-adapted species now all but absent from the refuge was cut over early. Wildfires were suppressed, and the uplands regenerated to hardwoods. The present regime of controlled burning favors another species, slash pine, but refuge managers are attempting to restore stands of the original longleaf pine in selected areas.



Sandfly creek is well forested, but the forests are certainly less than 100 years old, lacking the giant cypresses and hardwoods that originally comprised the swamp forest. Dominant trees now include cypresses, swamp bay, one or more species of ash, black gum, tupelo, and others.