



Port Leon Loop Paddling Trail

Overview:

Begin at the St. Marks Riverfront Park and Boat Ramp. Paddle downstream following the left (east) bank of the river to access Port Leon Creek. Explore this beautiful winding course to the old town of Port Leon. The trail ends where the train trestle spanned the creek, evidenced now by a few remaining trestle ties. Return back to the St. Marks City Boat Ramp to complete the loop trail.

Considerations:

It would be best to begin the trip on an outgoing tide and return on an incoming tide.

Focus:

Wildlife viewing. Paddlers will encounter Alligators perched on mashed-down reed beds along the winding creek.

Distance:

3.6 miles, 2 hours. It is 1.5 miles from the launch to Port Leon Creek. One can paddle about .3 mile upstream before the trail ends at the old train trestle.

Put In/Take Out:

St. Marks Riverfront Park and Launch. From US Highway 98, turn south at the intersection with Port Leon Dr. (SR 363) toward the City of St. Marks. Follow signs to San Marcos de Apalache Historical State Park, which is adjacent to the park with restrooms, pavilions, trash cans, and parking. Put in at the grassy area next to the boat ramp.

Expertise:

Beginner and up.



Hurricanes

Since the 1800s, over one hundred hurricanes have passed over or near Apalachee Bay. Some of the most damaging that have been recorded were: October 1842; September 1843; August 1851; September 18, 1873; Hurricane Opal in October



1995; Hurricane George in September 1998; and Hurricane Dennis in July 2005. Ann Dudley, the first woman keeper at St. Marks Lighthouse, lost most of her worldly possessions in

the hurricane of 1851. Her losses totaled around \$1,100, but her petition to Congress for compensation went unheeded.

Port Leon

Port Leon was a veritable “boom town” with a hotel, taverns, and train depot awaiting travelers arriving by sea after 1838. The town was built near “Spanish Hole” to accommodate large ships after Magnolia upriver succumbed to yellow fever. Port Leon was Wakulla County’s seat in 1843. The storm surge from the 1843 hurricane destroyed the town and the railroad bridge across the St. Marks River. Residents quickly built a New Port Leon upriver; today it is called Newport.

Port Life & Trade

Apalachee Bay’s Paddling Trail follows vital Spanish supply routes established in the 17th and 18th centuries. As early as 1539, De Soto’s cartographer began mapping the confluence of the rivers and the bay westward. William

Augustus Bowles, several hundred Indians, and other whites attacked the Spanish fort in 1800. Bowles, the self-declared Director of the Muskogee Nation, enjoyed his victory for 5 weeks. Spanish warships from Mobile and Pensacola came after Bowles, who escaped to Miccosukee. Steamboats arrived after 1829 and, as long as river travel was expedient, steamboats plied the waters until the mid-1930s. They transported mail, cotton, timber, naval stores, and people between Apalachicola, St. Marks, and Tampa.

Tallahassee-St. Marks Railroad

The Tallahassee-St. Marks Railroad was chartered in 1834 and in operation by 1836, placing it among the first railroads in Florida. It was operated by mule and later converted for use by steam engines. The railroad remained in operation for 147 years. Territorial Governor Richard Call extended the Tallahassee-St. Marks rail line to Port Leon in 1839 as the Tallahassee to Port Leon railroad’s president. Through the early 1900s, the Tallahassee-St. Marks Railroad transported cotton from the plantation belt to the St. Marks Port for shipment to textile mills in England and New England. In 1984, its railbed became the Tallahassee-St. Marks Historic Railroad State Trail, Florida’s first designated state “rail to trail.”

Alligators

Alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) abound in the area as living fossils, having survived for over 200 million years. Although alligators have a heavy body and a slow metabolism, they are capable of short bursts of speed, especially in very short lunges. In Florida, it is illegal to feed wild alligators at any time. If fed, the alligators will eventually lose their fear of humans, thereby becoming a greater danger as they associate people with food. When startled, they will slide from the bank into the water for safety. The best rule to follow is always give them plenty of room. Do not approach them, as they may have a nest or young nearby. An attack on a kayaker or boater is extremely rare. However, having a small dog on board is not recommended, as it represents a food source and thus creates interest on the part of the gator. Alligators are harvested through a lottery system, with meat being available at local seafood stores. Considered a delicacy, Alligator meat is also on the menu at most local restaurants.

