



## St. Marks River to Lighthouse Paddling Trail

### Overview:

Begin at the St. Marks Boat Ramp. Paddle downstream following the left (east) bank, passing limestone rock islands and continuous stands of marsh grass bordering the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Stop for lunch or a break at Apalachee Point/Rock Island. Upon entering Apalachee Bay, follow the shoreline to the St. Marks Lighthouse. Take out at the St. Marks Lighthouse parking lot.

### Considerations:

Take this trip on an outgoing tide. The water in the Bay is shallow, but can be choppy in windy conditions.

### Focus:

Fishing and photography.

### Distance:

6 miles, 3 hours. It is 4.1 miles to the entrance of Apalachee Bay

### Put In:

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 launch, with restrooms, pavilions, trash cans, and parking. Put in at the grassy area next to the boat ramp.

### Take Out:

St. Marks Lighthouse parking lot. Continue east on US Highway 98, passing the community of Newport, and crossing the St. Marks River. Turn south (right) onto CR 59 (Lighthouse Drive) and continue through the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge to the lighthouse at the end of the road. At high tide, take out here or at low tide at the boat ramp accessed by the waterway west of the lighthouse.

### Expertise:

Intermediate and up.



### Limestone quarries

Within the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, almost opposite Port Leon's location, are the remnants of Spanish limestone quarries. The quarries were guarded by one of the New World's earliest aid to navigation: a two-story fort with a tower atop which fires showed seafarers the way into the "Apalachy River." These quarries provided the stone to build the Spanish Fuerte San Marcos de Apalache.

### Spoil Islands

Dredging material is deposited in and around the mouth of the St. Marks River. The river is passable to very large barges bringing oil from New Orleans into St. Marks. These islands offer shelter, and during World War II were lookouts for armed artillery keeping an eye on German gunboats and submarines roaming the Gulf of Mexico. The U.S.



Army Corps of Engineers dredged the St. Marks River on numerous occasions, widening the river to accommodate large oil barges. Most of the oil tank farms in St. Marks have disappeared. Rocks on the side of the river are from these dredging operations.

### St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge

Covering more than 68,000 acres of land and 31,000 acres of bay, the Refuge is internationally recognized for its more



than 300 species of birds. Renowned for its excellent birding – especially migratory waterfowl in fall and winter months – viewing is best at Refuge ponds along the road. The Refuge

has outstanding nature trails and viewing platforms, as well as colorful displays of wildflowers with Monarch and other butterfly migrations in spring and fall.

### St. Marks Lighthouse

The St. Marks Lighthouse, dating to 1829, was rebuilt several times due to poor construction, beach erosion, and hurricane damage. Standing 85 feet high on a 12-foot base of limestone rocks from nearby quarries, the light was automated in 1960 and still guides mariners.



**Architect:** Winslow Lewis.

**Builder:** Benjamin Beal and Jairus Thayer (first tower); Calvin Knowlton (second and third towers). Conical brick tower constructed of brick and iron; 88 feet high, 80 steps. Lighted in 1831 and 1842. Current electric light can be seen for up to 15 miles.

**Original lens:** fifteen Lewis Argand lamps with fourteen-inch reflectors; Winslow Lewis (1831). Present lens: Fourth-order fixed Fresnel lens; Henry-LePaute (1867).

**Focal plane:** 82 feet.

**Other buildings:** attached 1871 keeper's dwelling. Lighthouses suffered damage from both Union and Confederate troops during the Civil War. If attack appeared imminent, valuable items such as lenses were hidden for fear that Union troops would damage or destroy them. Dwellings and towers were often pressed into service as a barracks, fortress, or lookout tower. The St. Marks Lighthouse was bombarded by Union ships and the tower stairs burned to prevent Confederates from using it as a lookout post. It was reported that, at the end of the war, retreating Confederates tried unsuccessfully to destroy the tower by setting off charges in its foundation.