

Triple N Ranch Hike



Wet at times - 7.2 miles

The trail starts just beyond the hunt camp campground on the right at a kiosk. Sign in before you head out into the backcountry of this preserve. As you follow the trail east, look down at your feet. You'll see yellow-eyed grass, sundews, and wild bachelor's buttons, a few of the many wildflowers you'll find amid the vastness of the Great Osceola Pine Savanna, which this loop immediately enters, an immense landscape of prairie grasses dotted with longleaf pine. Straight ahead, it's broken up by a handful of cypress domes. A cool breeze ruffles across the wiregrass as you reach a tiny pitcher plant bog on the left. The pine savanna's open expanse is sometimes broken up by the flash of a car on US 192, but the trail quickly draws you away from the road and into the solitude of open space. A pine tree on the left wraps around in an odd curlicue back on itself before you reach the white-blazed cross-trail, which departs to the left at a quarter mile. Gallberry and St. John's wort grow in clusters. Patches of innocence, a low-growing white flower, appear in open sandy spots.

By 0.4 mile, you're immersed in the palmetto prairie, the open pine savanna habitat which William Bartram described once covered much of the uplands of Florida. Sundews carpet the footpath in this habitat that revels in rain, the pine flatwoods one of the most prolific places for wildflowers to grow. In winter, the wiregrass forms an orange haze on the forest floor. Reaching a rough treeline, the trail enters a gathering of pines that's a little more dense than the open savanna. Many more sundew and wild bachelor's button are at your feet, as well as coreopsis, Florida's state flower. After a slight rise of elevation, butterworts are in evidence, checking off three of the four major species of carnivorous plants found in Florida within the first mile of hiking. This open savanna is a key site for spring, summer, and fall wildflowers for Central Florida.

A thicket of saw palmetto grows waist to shoulder high, and the trail weaves through it beneath the tall scattered longleaf pines. Listen for the sounds of red-cockaded woodpeckers, an endangered species that thrives around these ancient pines, which they use for nesting. Deer trails criss-cross open patches of prairie grasses. A subtle shift in the habitat occurs at 1.3 miles, as clusters of gallberry speak to a slightly different acidity of the soil. The bright line of a cypress strand is evident on the right, beyond the pines. As you draw close to another cypress dome at 1.5 miles, the trail reaches a T intersection with a forest road. Turn left. At the next set of double blazes at the fork, keep right. Yellow bladderwort appears underfoot, finishing your checklist of carnivorous species for the preserve. The trail follows a narrow forest road through the savanna. Crossing another forest road at 1.6 miles, you see beehives off to the right. The trail narrows to head towards the outline of a creek defined by cabbage palms and cypresses. The shallow waterway may be dry as you step across its small impression in the landscape and climb out of the creek basin into a grassy prairie with flat-topped goldenrod.

You leave the prairie to enter a stand of pine flatwoods with a lot of intermingled cabbage palms. Crossing an old forest road at 1.9 miles, follow the quartet blazes as they curve the trail left into a hardwood hammock past a gathering of bladderworts. This is the first serious patch of shade along the trail. The trail passes by a large stump on its way through the hammock and curves right to follow the ecotone between

flatwoods and hammock, edged by sprays of coreopsis. Popping out into the sun along the line of trees, the trail passes painted-out blazes that lead into the pine flatwoods. Crossing a forest road at 2.2 miles, the trail dives into a dense thicket of saw palmetto to enter the floodplain of a tributary of Crabgrass Creek. Wild coffee grows throughout the understory, and shoelace fern dangles from mossy cabbage palm trunks. The corridor is not broad; you can see pine savanna in the distance in both directions.

By 2.5 miles, the trail starts getting damp underfoot as you see the first signs of the creek flowing beneath the deeply shaded canopy. Anything not covered by water is covered by moss. The trail leaves the east side of the hammock and heads west, following the streambed, which is about 5 feet across and 2 feet deep. The vines on the trees make you do double takes as they look a bit like corn snakes. Bromeliads drape from the trees. This is a wild, wet place, and this is only the start of several hours of hiking in this rugged habitat. When water flows through the channel, it does so with some speed, as noted by the divots in the sand. The trail drops down through the creek and over to the far side, winding through more saw palmetto. Jogging left, the trail climbs out of the floodplain basin and onto the edge of the pine savanna. You reach a T junction with a former incoming trail, the blazes marked out to the left. Turn right and you soon find the sign for "Cathi's Trail," dedicated to Cathi Riley, a long-time Florida Trail Association member who we lost to cancer some years ago. The Indian River Chapter of FTA built this trail with her inspiration, and as noted before, it's a toughie.

The trail climbs back out of the basin to the edge of the pine savanna, but only for a moment before it heads back into the shade of the floodplain of Little Crabgrass Creek. It's not easy going, between the roots and rough terrain underfoot and the spiderwebs overhead. At 3 miles, the trail rises out of the floodplain to slightly higher ground. There are pits of water off to the right before the trail makes a left turn into a drainage filled with ferns above the pit, where minnows swim. Mounds of ferns surround the footpath, marsh ferns and cinnamon ferns amid the rooty terrain. You encounter some thick mud at a creek crossing with flowing water. Palmetto logs provide a scramble. The trail continues its dance with the creek. The trail swings away from the creek through the gatorbacks into a patch of sunshine on the east side of the floodplain. Climbing up and over, you emerge on the edge of the savanna and reach a T intersection with a forest road at 3.4 miles. Turn right and follow the sandy road into the hammock. You can see the creek up ahead, and the trail wanders along the bluff through tall saw palmetto.

The next intersection is tricky. It appears the trail goes up into the pines, which it does not: it virtually doubles back on itself around a horseshoe in the waterway. Footing is difficult around these gaping holes before the trail transitions into a palm hammock inside the creek basin, with tall cabbage palms overhead. At a double blaze, the floodplain basin broadens where the waters of Little Crabgrass Creek and Crabgrass Creek merge and the forest gets denser off to the right. The trail turns left to parallel the edge of the pine forest. Dancing along the creek, the trail emerges briefly into the savanna at 3.8 miles and drops back to the creek basin, passing a stand of blue flag iris. Just the slightest bit of water in this part of the floodplain results in boot-sucking mud, making for slow going. Guided away from the waterway by double blazes, the trail slips between saw palmetto and wild coffee. There are more logs to jump over and more gatorbacks to climb.

By 4 miles, the trail climbs out of the wet zone again and is firmly in a deeply shaded palm hammock. Traversing churned-up sand, the trail makes a left and heads into the Crabgrass Creek floodplain beneath trees of enormous stature, including live oaks, hickories, and red maple. The trail faces a young stand of cypress and curves to the right, away from it. You may notice some scraped-off blazes where the trail has been rerouted to higher ground. Keep looking for the next orange blaze. There is a grove of wild citrus off to the left and yes, those tempting globes are grapefruits, just out of reach. The trail works its way out of the floodplain and into the ecotone. Now carpeted with pine needles, the footpath passes by tall saw palmettos before caroming back to the roots and stumps along the creek. At 4.5 miles, a sign and blue blaze off to the left guide you to high ground for a break at a picnic table. Take this side trail. As it climbs out of the floodplain and up into the pine flatwoods, it's surrounded by pitcher plants in clumps on both sides of the trail before you reach the shady oak hammock where an old picnic table sits atop the foundation of an old building. Enjoy this rest stop before returning to the loop trail.

Continuing counterclockwise along the loop, the trail makes another sharp horseshoe turn facing a forest of cypress knees and stumps along an arm of the creek. Walking beneath the palms along the creek, the footpath is crispy in fallen leaves. On the high ground between two floodplains, keep watching for the next blaze as you pass under a massive red maple. Young southern magnolia and tall hickory grow on the slopes of the creek. Just as you think you might be headed into the pines, the trail turns sharply at 5.2 miles to head deeper into the floodplain. Crossing a small tributary just wide enough to leap across, the trail winds its way deeper into the forest. Look up into the canopy to see the sheer size of the cypresses and oaks shading you. The palm-lined creek becomes much wider as you enter a maze of cypress knees at 5.6 miles. Scrambling up the far bank of this swale, the trail hugs the creek closer. Poison ivy pours like smoke out of an enormous stump of a cypress, a stump big enough to stand inside. Crossing yet another squishy cypress-lined corridor, the trail reaches the corner of a barbed-wire fence. To skirt the next waterway, the trail rises up into the pine savanna, reaching the other end of Cathi's Trail, marked here with a sign at 5.9 miles. This doesn't mean the tough stuff is over yet!

In a few moments, you're at an intersection with the yellow trail, a forest road with yellow blazes in both directions. Turn right to continue along the orange blazes, crossing Crabgrass Creek over a culvert to emerge in the pine uplands on the far side of the creek. Both blazes lead left. The trail meanders down a forest road through the longleaf pine forest, your first dry habitat in a while. At a T intersection with a post wrapped in barbed wire, turn left to drop back down into the floodplain. It's a little tricky here as the trail backtracks along the edge of the pines before heading right out into the swamp. Keep those blazes - either yellow or orange - in sight as you find the best way across the rivulets of water amid the swamp forest. A cabbage palm rises between the buttresses of a tall hickory. A sharp right turn at a double blaze and it's a relief to see a bridge to cross Crabgrass Creek at 6.6 miles.

Passing eight blazes (yes, eight) on a single cabbage palm trunk, the trail makes a sharp left turn to finally rise out of the floodplain forest for the last time on this trek and into the pine savanna. A bonanza of pitcher plants lines the trail in this drainage area as you

climb up to the scrubby flatwoods and into open, shadeless scrub with bright white sand underfoot. Turn left at a forest road at 6.9 miles to continue along the orange blazes. The trail makes a sharp right almost immediately as it meets the white and yellow blazed trails, following a line of blaze posts to even higher ground. Prickly pear grows between clumps of saw palmetto. The blaze posts are now decorated in white, yellow, and orange.

By 7 miles, you can see a collection of buildings in the distance to the right, and flashes of traffic straight ahead along US 192. The trail reaches a T intersection and turns left, working its way through the scrub. Emerging at the main road through the preserve by 7.3 miles, turn right. Follow it back to the trailhead, completing this satisfying but strenuous 7.5 mile loop. Don't forget to sign out before you leave.

Directions: Follow US 192 west out of Melbourne. 3.6 miles before US 441 the preserve entrance is on the left.