

KITCHING CREEK NATURE TRAIL

JONATHAN DICKINSON STATE PARK

We invite you to walk this 1.25 mile trail loop and enjoy the variety of plant and animal life found along the way. The trail winds westward from here through low pine flatwoods and along a tributary of the Loxahatchee River.

The points of interest along the trail are numbered and are described by the numbered paragraphs in this booklet. Please be considerate of the people who are to follow, and do not remove or leave anything.

1. CHANGE - Sometimes we view nature as being permanent and unchanging, although we know that changes are taking place. The mountains, seas and forests show very little alteration other than from season to season. However, mountains erode to become hills, and lakes may gradually fill in and become dry land. What changes are taking place in these woodlands?

2. FIRE - This old, charred stump shows us a form of change which has been a way of life here for thousands of years. The story of fire is almost as important as the story of water in south Florida. Both plants and animals have found different ways to live with the changes caused by fire and water.

3. SAW PALMETTO - The most abundant plant in this area is the saw palmetto. In some places it grows so thick that it is nearly impossible to walk through. This plant's name comes from the saw-like teeth along the leaf stalks. The upper part of the plant will burn in a forest fire, but it is very fire resistant and is seldom killed.

4. JONATHAN DICKINSON - The fruits of the saw palmetto are edible and were an important food for Native Americans. In 1696, Jonathan Dickinson was shipwrecked on Jupiter Island, less than five miles from here. He reported that the Jaegas, a local Indian tribe, ate the berries of the palmetto. After tasting these fruits, he commented "they tasted like rotten cheese steeped in tobacco juice." Hungry anyone?

5. PINE FLATWOODS - This plant community occurs where the ground is so flat that there is little drainage of water off the land or into the soil after it rains. The most common tree in this community is the slash pine. Under the pines, you will notice a lower growth of plants that includes saw palmetto, gallberry and wax myrtle.

6. CYPRESS - The buttressed, furrowed trunk of the bald cypress rises out of the water and muck of this small creek. The flaring base spreads out like a skirt giving the tree a lower center of gravity. This helps to balance its great height which commonly reaches 50-75 feet and sometimes as high as 100 feet. The tree has cones but is not an evergreen. It drops its needles each year during the dry season. This makes it look dead. However, when the rains return in the spring, the new feathery needles color the cypress forest a bluish-green.

7. FLOWERS - Numerous flowering plants grow in the pinelands. The wildflowers of this area change almost from week-to-week and provide the park with one of nature's best color shows. Look for something special, such as one of the pink ground orchids, the yellow St. John's wort or the white tarflower.



8. CHANGE IN THE ORDER - At the boundary of land and water, everything seems to have its place - St. John's wort in the wetter areas, a ring of saw palmettos around the wet prairie and slash pine on higher ground. However, drainage of the land around the park has lowered the water table that sustained what used to be wet areas. This is but one more example of how natural systems do not recognize the "artificial" boundaries created by man.

9. SLASH PINE - Notice the pleasant smell of pine needles and resin, the quiet whisper of the wind through the branches and the cool shade created by the tall pines. The south Florida slash pine is found nowhere else in the world except the southern part of Florida. In the days before this was a park, the early settlers sought out the hard, termite-resistant wood of these pines for their homes. As you walk the trails, give yourself time to imagine their view of a continuous forest of century-old virgin pines over two feet in diameter and over 90 feet tall.

10. HARD LIVING - Imagine yourself as an early pioneer in this environment. Early settlers had to be both physically and mentally hardy. Many cleared the land by hand to grow crops. They labored long hours under harsh conditions without benefit of heavy equipment.

11. WIRE GRASS - The most abundant grass in the flatwoods area before you is wire grass. This grass was named for its blades which look and feel like fine wire. When flowering, the seed head of the plant has a wheat-like appearance. The plant is fire-dependent, flowering best if burned during the wet season (April-September). It is a common food of the gopher tortoise.

12. DEAD TREE - Along the trail, you probably noticed several dead and decaying pine trees. These "snags" are not cleared from the park because they are very useful to wildlife. Snags may serve as homes for squirrels, insects and raccoons or provide food for woodpeckers and other birds that eat wood-boring insects. When dead trees fall to the ground and decay, they return nutrients to the soil. This process of change is essential to the life of the forest.

13. KITCHING CREEK - About 1886, the Kitching family bought land around this creek from the State of Florida for \$1.25 an acre. Born in England, Walter Kitching was the first of the family to visit the area in 1882. He later set up a trade boat business between Titusville and Jupiter. At the time, travel in south Florida was generally restricted to the water. Kitching would travel by boat to the riverfront homes of settlers with his merchandise of clothing, shoes, groceries, medicine and kerosene. Ironically, it was probably his sister living in England who bought the land without ever having seen Florida.

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14. STRAND - Kitching Creek is called a cypress "strand." A strand is a long narrow band of trees that follows a natural shallow water drainage system. Unfortunately, some of the cypress trees were cut for lumber from 1940 to 1941. However, the area is still a valuable remnant of a unique environment that lies largely within the boundaries of the park.

15. LANDSCAPING BY FIRE - Views, such as the one before you, would eventually change if fire was excluded from this pineland. Many more oaks and hardwoods would appear and the pines would gradually disappear.

16. CABBAGE PALM - There is no mistake that the trees by the river are "The State Tree of Florida." However, when young they are often confused with the similar saw palmetto - like the ones in front of you. The palm's name is derived from the cabbage-like heart which was used to make a tasty "swamp cabbage." While a delicacy for humans, this practice is fatal to the tree. Even after a raging forest fire, palms will usually survive because their buds are protected by the base of the fronds.

17. LISTEN - By the time you reach this point, you may have heard many insect sounds, birds singing or the drumming of a woodpecker. A rustling noise in the bushes or dry leaves could have been caused by a lizard or a bobwhite. At night, opossum, raccoons, deer and bobcat may also be seen in this area.

18. FIRE AND PINES - Because wildfires are very destructive and can kill the tall pines, Park Rangers prescribe burn the ground fuels of dead leaves and grasses every three to five years. These prescribed fires are not harmful to the pines. They reduce the danger of a wildfire which could threaten park visitors and wildlife.

19. GALLBERRY - The shrub having a few teeth on each side of its leaves is called gallberry, a member of the holly family. Instead of having red berries, it has black berries. Like most holly plants, its fruits are not edible. The shrub is abundant in the pine woods since its underground roots are not damaged by fire and the plant quickly recovers. Settlers used the gallberry bushes to make yard brooms. It was also used in a "sweeping motion" when applied to the rear end of disobedient children!

20. DEAD CYPRESS - In the distance, the dead cypress trees tell of changes man has brought to this area. The Loxahatchee River's historical water flow has been changed by roads, damming and channeling occurring in the headwater areas. This leaves little fresh water to hold back the salt water from flowing upstream and killing the cypress trees close to the river.

21. FETTERBUSH - This area abound with fetterbush, scrub oak, saw palmetto, tarflower and rusty lyonia. Can you imagine trying to walk through such a tangle of vegetation? Maybe that was why early settlers called many of these plants "fetter bushes." (Fetter means to restrain.) Over the years, however, this name has come to denote just one type of plant.

22. FERNS AT WILSON CREEK - Although Florida has been called the "Land of Flowers", it could just as easily have been called the "Land of Ferns." More kinds of ferns are found in Florida than in any other state. Here in the water and growing close to the edge of the creek, we see several types of ferns. The tallest is the leather fern with royal fern growing to your left. Behind you is a native swamp fern and an "exotic" (non-native) climbing fern called *Lygodium*.

23. TURKEY OAK - Usually growing to a height of 20 to 30 feet, the turkey oak is one of the most common oaks found with pines in dry, sandy soils. It is interesting that even growing at the warm southern end of its range, it still undergoes its characteristic dropping of leaves in the fall. Many of the tropical trees of south Florida also drop their leaves. However, it is usually done more gradually and usually in response to a prolonged dry season.

24. RECENT HISTORY - During World War II, the government created Camp Murphy, home of the Southern Signal Corps School, serving as a U.S. Army base for instruction in radar operations. In 1944, Camp Murphy was deactivated, and in 1947, it was acquired for a state park.

25. TRAIL'S END - As you leave the Kitching Creek Nature Trail, stop and think about the many changes that have occurred in this pineland. Seed by seed and plant by plant, you can come to understand that your next walk along this trail will never be the same; but it can provide a feeling of returning discovery.

You may keep this brochure or return it to the box for use by another visitor.

If you have any questions, please contact the Ranger Station at (772) 546-2771.

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Division of Recreation and Parks

