

## Cockroach Bay Preserve State Park and Little Manatee River State Park Real Florida Guide

Note: Colored numbers correspond with numbers on the map. **Red** = Introduction, **Green** = Day 1, **Blue** = Day 2, and **Yellow** = Day 3.

[Cockroach Bay Preserve State Park](#) (1) is a series of barrier islands, collectively more than 617 acres in southeast Tampa Bay in Hillsborough County. The islands are located in the mouth of the Little Manatee River and extend southward along the shore of Tampa Bay. The state park serves to protect water quality, preserve wildlife habitat and provide nature-based recreation. The islands are surrounded by the 4,800-acre [Cockroach Bay Aquatic Preserve](#). The bay is considered the least disturbed part of Tampa Bay which makes it popular for canoeing, kayaking, fishing and a premier spot for nature observation.



Why is it called Cockroach Bay? Horseshoe crabs were once so abundant here that early Spanish explorers called them cockroaches, believing them to be seagoing cousins of the insects.

The state parks' landscape is mostly submerged at high tide and dominated by mangrove swamps. The islands are only accessible by water using personal watercraft; bring your own boat. The bay waters, many barrier islands, and mangrove swamps create





a picturesque landscape best viewed from a canoe or kayak. The nearest public boat ramp is located west of U.S. Highway 41 at the end of Cockroach Bay Road, four miles north of the Manatee County line. Launch and paddle south on the Horseshoe Crab Paddling Trail, a 2.5 - 3 hour trip. To the north is the 1 - 1.5 hour Snook Paddling Trail.

Nearby [Little Manatee River State Park](#) (2) offers tent and RV camping facilities from which to base your regional explorations. Reservations may be made up to 11 months in advance through [Reserve America](#). Book Online or call (800) 326-3521 (8:00am to 8:00pm).

### Day 1, Cockroach Bay Preserve

The best place to start your explorations is the [Cockroach Bay Preserve](#) (3), owned by Hillsborough County. This is also the location of the parking area for the boat launch for the Cockroach Bay Preserve State Park and Cockroach Bay Aquatic Preserve. Cockroach Bay Preserve also offers the [Trefoil Trail](#) (4), a 1 mile hike to a scenic overlook of a 500-acre natural habitat restoration project which benefits the water quality of Tampa Bay. According to the [Great Florida Birding Trail](#), Cockroach Bay Preserve and surroundings are home to 260 species of birds.



### Day 2, Little Manatee River State Park

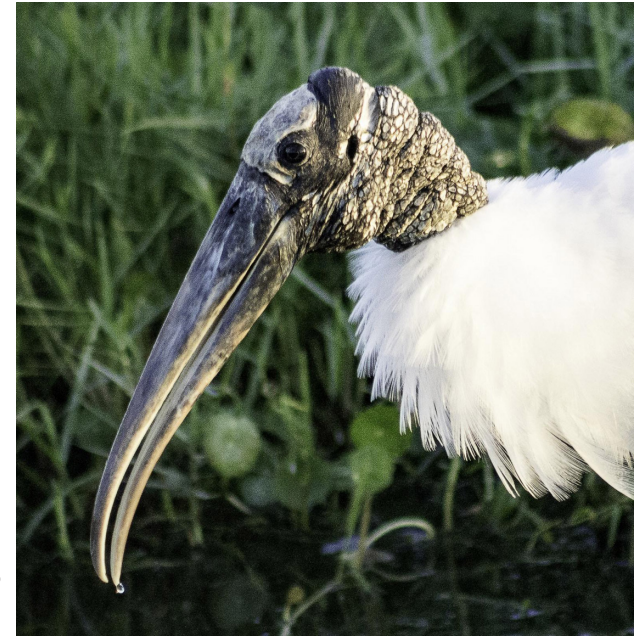
The Little Manatee River begins in a swampy area near the ghost town of Fort Lonesome and flows almost 40 miles before emptying into Tampa Bay. The river has been designated an Outstanding Florida Water and is part of the Cockroach Bay





Aquatic Preserve. The river flows for 4.5 miles through 11 unique natural communities within Little Manatee River State Park. Visitors can enjoy the [Little Manatee River Paddling Trail \(5\)](#), a 10-mile state designated paddling trail suitable for beginners. The four access points allow paddlers to create a trip of different lengths.

[Little Manatee River State Park](#) is a 2,400-acre park and one of the best kept secrets of Hillsborough County. The park has a little something for everyone including a tent and RV campground. Nature enthusiasts will appreciate the rare ecosystems found within the park, including sand pine and oak scrub and oxbow wetlands, which can be explored by hiking, canoeing, horseback riding, or camping. According to the [Great Florida Birding Trail](#), the park is home to 88 species of birds.



The state park boasts some of the premier hiking trails of southwest Florida. The [Little Manatee Hiking Trail \(6\)](#) has two loops – 3 miles and 6 miles. The trails are accessible from U.S. Highway 301 N from the trailhead entrance on the north side of the Little Manatee River, a separate gate from the main park entrance located on the south side of the river. This rustic trail takes hikers through many of the unique natural communities in the park, including riverine hammock and floodplains, scrubby flatwoods, mature sand pine forests, and remnant sandhills. The trail crosses Cypress Creek, a major tributary of the Little Manatee River and the scenic point where the creek feeds into the river. A primitive campsite is located 2.5 miles from the trailhead for hikers looking for an easy overnight camping experience. The primitive backpacking site can be reserved by calling the state park ranger station at 813-671-5005.



More than 15 miles of multi-use hiking and equestrian trails offer more hiking opportunities at the park. A huge network of narrow loop trails and wide firebreaks crisscross the southern half of the park. Firebreaks connect many trails to each other and can provide alternate routes for hiking and exploration. Ask for a map of the equestrian trails at the ranger station. Also, you can explore the park and other conservation lands from the water by paddling the 10-mile [Little Manatee River Paddling Trail](#). This trip is suitable for beginners and rentals are available from area outfitters.

### Day 3, Camp Bayou Outdoor Learning Center

The [Camp Bayou Outdoor Learning Center](#) (7) is a 160-acre nature preserve. The learning center is open to the public Thursday thru Saturday, 9am-2pm and features three trails, butterfly habitat, native plant nursery, native people's camp, nature center, fossil museum and observation deck. Check their calendar for events such as guided canoe trips. The center is located on the Little Manatee River at the south end of 24th St SE, three miles south of State Road 674, off Interstate 75 exit 240B in the City of Ruskin.

### Other Activities

The immediate area has many regionally significant conservation lands and historic sites with many outdoor recreational opportunities. Explore these nearby options in Hillsborough County:

[E.G. Simmons Regional Park](#) - The park features 18 picnic shelters, fishing piers, two playgrounds, two boat launches, canoe/kayak rentals, two campgrounds (primitive and RV) and 700 feet of beach. According to the [Great Florida Birding Trail](#) the park is home to 122 bird species.







## In nearby Manatee County explore:

[Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve](#) – 22,000 acres of submerged lands in Tampa Bay. The shoreline is dominated by mangrove islands, tidal creeks, sinkholes and other geologic features best explored by paddling. Paddling trails are part of the [Manatee County Blueways Network](#).

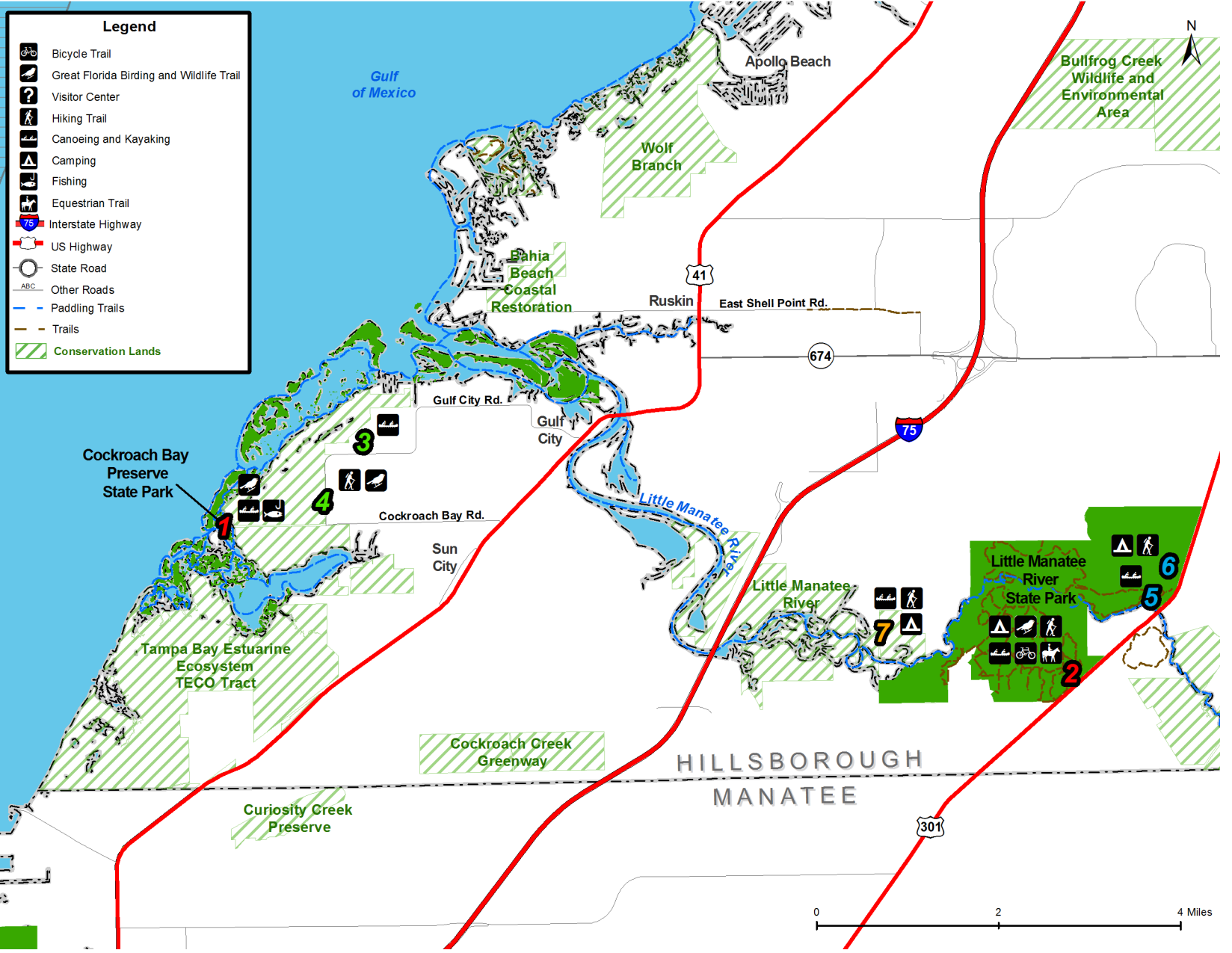
[Terra Ceia Preserve State Park](#) – 2,000 acres of mangrove forest, freshwater and saltwater wetlands and uplands. Kayaking and hiking are the primary activities.

[Madira Bickel Mound State Archaeological Site](#) – Is a 10-acre site featuring a flat-topped ceremonial mound-composed of sand, shell, and Native American village debris that measures 100 by 170 feet at the base and is 20 feet in height. Picnic tables and a walkway winds to and on top of the mound.

[Emerson Point Preserve](#) – 365-acre preserve located at the tip of Sned Island in western Palmetto. The Portavant Temple Mound is southwest Florida's largest Native American ceremonial mound. The Ranger Station is open Friday and Saturday. Amenities include a paved trail, multi-use trails and boardwalks, two small picnic shelters, a large picnic shelter for rent, and a canoe/kayak launch for access to Terra Ceia Bay.

[De Soto National Memorial](#) – A National Park dedicated to Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto's army making landfall in Tampa Bay in 1539. Enjoy a festival each April and weekend Ranger-led kayak tours, living history programs and a kids summer camp. Call 941-792-0458.





Cockroach Bay Preserve State Park

Tampa Bay Estuarine Ecosystem TECO Tract

Cockroach Creek Greenway

HILLSBOROUGH  
MANATEE

Little Manatee River State Park

Bullfrog Creek Wildlife and Environmental Area

Bahia Beach Coastal Restoration

Little Manatee River

Curiosity Creek Preserve

Gulf City Rd.

Gulf City

Sun City

Cockroach Bay Rd.

East Shell Point Rd.

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