

The Silver Palm Trail forms a loop through a hammock, mangrove area, dune and along the beach. As you walk along the trail, keep in mind that this dynamic system has been shaped by climate changes such as fluctuations in sea level and tropical storm events. Numbers on the posts correspond with the numbers in this brochure.

For your safety and for the benefit of the plants and animals, please remain on the trail. Remember – All plant and animal life in the park is protected.

**1 Birth of a Hammock** – Thousands of years ago when plants first became established on this ancient coral reef island, the area ahead of you was a beach. Over the years, sand brought in by wind and waves elevated the land and new plant communities became established. What you see now is the beginning of a tropical hardwood forest or hammock. If the hammock forest is undisturbed by fire or tropical storm events, a mature hammock will develop. The Silver Palm trees will eventually be shaded out and dense canopy of branches will be formed by Gumbo Limbo, Poisonwood, Jamaica Dogwood and other hardwoods.

**Note:** The Silver Palms along the trail represent one of the largest concentrations in the State. They are becoming increasingly rare as people illegally remove them from their natural habitat to be planted in residential areas.

**2 Sand and Leaves** – The sandy substrate in which these trees grow consists primarily

of tiny particles of algae, coral and shell fragments. It provides little nutrients for the plants, so they rely on recycled dead leaves and branches that fall on the forest floor as fertilizer. Under the sandy substrate is solid coral rock which forces the trees to have very shallow root systems.

**3 Freshwater** – The absence of adequate soil and the low nutrient level causes these trees to be very slow growing. They must rely on rainfall for their source of freshwater. The shade from the larger trees helps reduce the amount of water that evaporates from the forest floor

**4 Land Crabs** – In the cool shade of the trees, land crabs burrow into the loose sand, coming out at night to feed. These large blue-gray crabs are mostly vegetarians, but will forage on bugs if given the opportunity.

**5 Spider Webs** – As you walk along the trail, look for spider webs among the branches of the trees. The webs snare many kinds of insects that live in the hammock. The most commonly seen spider is the golden orb weaver, a large black and yellow spider that builds very large webs.

**6 Elevation** – As you continue down the trail, you should notice a change in the elevation. This difference, although slight, is enough to completely change the plant community. Now, instead of hammock trees, which are not salt tolerant, you will see plants that are more tolerant of saltwater.

**7 Mangroves** – The trees with the arching prop roots that you see growing in the calm, saltwater lagoon are red mangroves. They are

very important to marine animals because they are the basis of the food chain. Small animals feed on the leaves decaying in the water and are, in turn, eaten by larger animals such as fish, crabs, lobster, and wading birds.

The roots of the mangrove offer protection to marine life and the branches provide roosting and nesting sites for many different species of birds. Mangroves are also valuable because they filter pollution from the water and provide a measure of erosion control.

If you visit the lagoon early in the morning, you may see a variety of wading birds, including the Great White Heron, Great Egret and Snowy Egret.

**8 Ecotone** – The area where two plant communities meet is called an ecotone. As you walk along, you will notice the difference in vegetation on each side of the trail. Here there is a greater diversity of life because plants and animals from both communities overlap.

**9 Lichens** – The odd-colored patches on the tree trunks are lichens, which consist of a fungus and an algae living together in a symbiotic relationship. Lichens do not harm the tree but provide an important food source for tree snails.

**10 Dunes** – The elevation is now increasing and soon you'll be at the top of the dune, overlooking the ocean. This dune is one of the highest natural points on the island. You may be standing where a Calusa Indian watched Spanish galleons arrive hundreds of years ago.

**11 Salt Pruning** – Look at the trees around you. Most are growing fairly low to the ground. The salty wind blowing off the ocean has kept these trees pruned back.

**12 Sea Oats** – The plant community here is younger and more salt tolerant than some of the others you have visited. The dominant plant along the beach is the sea oat. Sea oats have very fibrous roots that anchor the sand, stabilizing the dune and protecting the plant communities further inland. For this reason, they are protected by State and Federal laws.



**13 The wrackline** – The tides and waves bring in flotsam consisting of dead algae and seagrass. The decaying seagrass on the beach is very important to a healthy ecosystem. It is home to tiny creatures, called amphipods, which are related to lobster and shrimp. Amphipods are a major food source for shorebirds. The decaying material serves as fertilizer for beach plants, and it also helps to hold the sand in place on the beach.

If you are lucky you may find tropical drift seeds or sea beans that have been carried in by the Gulf Stream from the Caribbean and South America. They can often be found on the beach after strong southeast winds. Many of the island's native plants have grown from drift seeds that floated in hundreds of years ago.

Types of tropical drift seeds that can sometimes be found include the hamburger bean, sea heart and sea coconut.

We hope you have enjoyed your walk along the Silver Palm Trail. With your help and interest, areas like Bahia Honda State Park and the Silver Palm Trail will remain for future generations to enjoy.

Ranger guided nature walks on the Silver Palm Trail are offered in the winter months, check with the ranger station for dates and times.

Please continue to the boardwalk which will lead to the parking lot.



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## Silver Palm Nature Trail at Bahia Honda State Park



A Self-Guided Walking Tour