



Watching Florida's Wildlife¹

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Almost everyone enjoys viewing or watching Florida's wildlife. One of the most appealing aspects of this activity is that unlike most other outdoor-related recreation, wildlife watching can be done anywhere: It is not restricted to one specific habitat or a specially designed facility such as golf course or a baseball diamond. Watching our native wildlife also does not require expensive clothing or equipment.

Where to go

Some of our wildlife watching is casual and we enjoy seeing wildlife as part of our total recreational experience, such as watching Pelicans soaring over the waves during a day at the beach or watching Cardinals in our yard as we look out our dining room window. At other times, some of us may more actively pursue a certain species or subspecies only found in a very restricted area in the state, like the Key Deer.

Look in the phone book under county, state, and federal listings for parks with public access. Because every species needs a certain combination of food, cover, water, and space, visiting a variety of habitats (beach, swamp, marsh, scrub, etc.) will increase your chances of viewing a greater diversity of wildlife.

Florida's Watchable Wildlife Program

Florida Wildlife Viewing Guide

In response to growing public interest, a project was initiated in 1992 by a grant from the Nongame Bureau of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission to facilitate wildlife watching in the state. Many individuals, 15 governmental agencies, and private organizations in Florida collaborated to promote wildlife viewing, conservation, and education. This effort also is affiliated with the National Watchable Wildlife Program, coordinated by the Defenders of Wildlife, that began in 1988 in Oregon.

A product of this effort was a publication, "Florida Wildlife Viewing Guide", published in 1993. This book describes wildlife viewing opportunities at 96 locations throughout the state. Florida's watchable wildlife sites are part of a national network linked by projects in individual states.

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Follow-up Projects

After the viewing sites were selected, several follow-up projects or activities were identified to enhance use and viewing experiences at these sites.

Identify viewing sites: The Florida Department of Transportation is responsible for marking travel routes to viewing sites with a standardized brown sign with white binoculars.

Site enhancement: Many of the 96 sites need different improvements such as interpretive signs, trails, viewing blinds or platforms, etc. This is being accomplished by site owners/managers, consultants, and volunteers.

Educational activities: Federal, state, and private conservation organizations are conducting educational programs to increase viewers' awareness and knowledge of the wildlife at each site.

Conservation Actions for You

Wildlife recreation and conservation programs are closely linked. Conservation efforts maintain and restore wildlife populations for people to enjoy through activities such as hunting and viewing. People who participate in recreational activities develop a greater appreciation and concern for wildlife which lead to deeds that help to conserve this important resource. Some of these actions include:

- Supporting public agencies and private organizations working to safeguard Florida's wildlife and wildlands legacy.
- Visiting Florida's wildlife viewing sites.
- Exposing others to Florida's wildlife viewing opportunities.
- Learning as much as you can about Florida's wildlife and natural areas.
- Purchasing a "Florida Wildlife Viewing Guide" for yourself and as gifts for friends and relatives; available at many bookstores or from Falcon Press, P.O. Box 1718, Helena, MT 59624.

Wildlife Viewing Ethics

It is much more enjoyable and interesting to watch wildlife doing something like feeding, building a nest or taking care of their young rather than flying, crawling or running away from humans. Overzealous and loud viewers can also disturb wildlife to the point of causing them to abandon an otherwise suitable habitat area for nesting or feeding. Here are a few other rules responsible wildlife viewers always follow:

- Always obtain permission from private landowners before entering their property.
- Do not approach so close that the creature will want to leave.
- Do not feed wildlife.
- Do not let your cats and dogs run loose in wildlife viewing areas.
- Pick up litter.
- Do not pick up animals that appear to be orphaned or sick. Often the parents are waiting unnoticed for you to leave so they can continue to care for their young.
- Do not spoil the viewing experiences of others by being too loud or active or both.

Some Equipment Considerations

All kinds of stores carry equipment that can be used while wildlife watching. And like many other activities, some people go first class and others take a less elaborate approach. There are no rules except using common sense and sticking with what you can afford.

- binoculars
- bug repellent
- food
- paper or notebook and pen to write notes about neat sightings

- sun block
- hat
- spotting scopes (for really far-away viewing)
- maps
- field guides (to help identify animals you see)

Suggested Field Guides

The Golden Nature Guide Series: Spiders and their Kin, Butterflies and Moths, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, Mammals, etc.

The Peterson Field Guide Series: Birds, Butterflies, Mammals, Animal Tracks, Reptiles and Amphibians, Bird Nests, etc.

Audubon Field Guides Florida's Birds by H.W. Kale II and D.S. Maehr, 1990, Pineapple Press, Sarasota.

Handbooks of Reptiles and Amphibians of Florida by R.E. and P.S. Ashton, 1981, Windward Publishing Co., Miami, FL.