

## **NINE NEARBY NATURAL WORLDS**

Marco Island is surrounded by a richness of unique natural worlds to explore and enjoy with family and friends. All are a relatively short drive off the Island and can be experienced in any degree – from a day trip to an overnight to many days of camping. By foot or watercraft, get to know the “real” Florida in Marco Island’s own backyard. Here is a list of nine “must-experience” southwest Florida sites. For more information, the phone number and website address has been provided for each.

### **Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve**

(239) 417-6310 and [www.rookerybay.org](http://www.rookerybay.org).

A prime example of a nearly pristine subtropical mangrove forested estuarine ecosystem, Marco Island’s environment benefits from being surrounded by this 110,000 acre Reserve. Hiking, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, and camping are all activities to enjoy in Rookery Bay. There are designated sites for boat ramps and primitive camping. Guided kayak tours are available. Visit the Learning Center, a 16,500 square foot center with auditorium for hands-on activities, scientific laboratory views, live wildlife displays, trails, observation bridge and daily programs. Many annual events – Dive Into Oceans, Southwest Florida Wildlife Festival and Estuaries Day should not be missed!

### **Collier-Seminole State Park**

(239) 394-3397 and [www.floridastateparks.org/collierseminole/](http://www.floridastateparks.org/collierseminole/). This 7,271 acre park has one the three rare stands of native Royal Palms in the state of Florida and is part of one of the largest mangrove swamps in the world. Its claim to fame though, is that it is the site of a National Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark, the last existing Bay City Walking Dredge. The dredge was built in 1924 and it was used to build the Tamiami Trail Highway (U.S. 41) through the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp, linking Tampa and Miami and opening southwest Florida to travelers. It is amazing to look at the Dredge and think what it must have been like for the men who build the Trail! It’s a great spot to spend the day hiking, picnicking, kayaking, canoeing, riding the tour boat or stay longer by camping. The annual “Jammin’ in the Hammock” Blue Grass Festival each spring is very popular.

### **Picayune Strand State Forest**

(239)348-5775 and [www.fl-dof.com/state\\_forests/picayune\\_strand.html](http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/picayune_strand.html).

(Restrooms and parking are located at 2121 52nd Avenue SE Naples 34117.) This is a 78,625 acre area in Collier County for birdwatchers, horseback riders, hikers and campers. As the heart of the Big Cypress Water Basin, this mostly hydric forest of slash pine, cypress and palmetto, is underwater most of the time. Land managers have created approximately 22 miles of horse trails for equestrians, which include ten paddocks, non-potable water and equestrian camp sites. If you are a hiker, there is a 3.2 mile hike on which you will encounter Bald Cypress that were not logged in the 1940s, and now are around 100 years old. Birders can check off many species on their list on this hike – Wood storks,

Night Herons, Egrets, Owls, Woodpeckers and Hawks, are only a short list of what can be seen.

### **Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve**

(239) 695-4593 and [www.floridastateparks.org/fakahatcheestrland/](http://www.floridastateparks.org/fakahatcheestrland/). Known as the “Amazon of North America”, this linear strand is the only place in the world where Bald Cypress and Royal Palms share the same forest canopy naturally. Orchids, bromeliads and rare and endangered, very diverse, plant life thrives. Panthers, black bears and alligators all find the Fakahatchee Strand habitat suitable for their needs. Take a walk on the wild side and walk the 2,000 foot boardwalk through this capsule of amazing biodiversity. In January 2012, Art in the Preserve – En Plein Air, is an experience not to miss.

### **10,000 Islands National Wildlife Preserve**

(239) 353-8442 and [www.fws.gov/floridapanther/TenThousandIslands/](http://www.fws.gov/floridapanther/TenThousandIslands/). This 35,000 acre Preserve, known as the “10K”, consists of mangrove habitat, near shore waters of the Gulf of Mexico. It is the largest expanses of mangroves in North America. 200 known species of fish and 189 species of birds inhabit this watery world depending on the mangrove and sea grass habitats in the 10K, many are listed threatened endangered such as the Sawfish, Kemps Ridley and Loggerhead sea turtles, Bottled Nose Dolphins, Woodstorks, Manatee, Peregrine Falcon, and Bald Eagles. Boating is the way to see it. Using your own boat, a charter or the tours offered by the Preserve, this is an area not to miss when in Southwest Florida.

### **Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge**

(239) 353-8442 and [www.fws.gov/floridapanther/](http://www.fws.gov/floridapanther/). This refuge is habitat for the Florida Panther but many other species that depend on the same ecosystem of wet prairies, hardwood hammocks and tropical plants depend on the area, too. It is 26,400 acre refuge with two public pedestrian trails located at the northeast corner of the I-75 and State Road 29 intersection. It is not uncommon to see panther tracts near the trail. Each March, the Refuge hosts “Save the Panther Week” when swamp buggy rides, birding and plant walks and other activities for the public are available.

### **Big Cypress National Preserve**

(239) 695-1201 and [www.nps.gov/bicy/](http://www.nps.gov/bicy/). Historically, the Big Cypress is home and refuge for the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, the Seminole Tribe of Florida and early Floridian settlers. Now, getting around Big Cypress is by vehicle, foot, canoe/kayak or bike. While enjoying the scenic car ride along State Road 41, visitors can stop at several boardwalks and lookouts to view endless landscapes and sight wildlife. Panther, Deer, Black Bear, birds of all kinds, all make their home in this Preserve. At the Oasis Visitor Center, American Alligators sun and swim along a boardwalk that puts a visitor only a few feet from these large reptiles. (And don’t miss, just down the road is photographer, Clyde Butcher’s studio, which has displayed his encompassing photos of the Everglades and beyond that will take your breath away!) Non-motorized boat launching is available for paddlers to explore the

waters and wildlife under the cypress, Royal Palms and hammocks of this swamp.

### **Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary**

(239) 348-9151 and [www.fl.audubon.org/who\\_centers\\_Corkscrew.html](http://www.fl.audubon.org/who_centers_Corkscrew.html).

Known as the “heart of the Everglades”, this 14,000 acre swamp in the western Everglades is owned and managed by National Audubon. A 2.25 mile boardwalk winds through the largest remaining stand of old growth Bald Cypress forest in North America. Four types of habitats, as well as, alligator, deer, raccoon, many of the over 200 species of birds can be seen when exploring the Corkscrew Swamp boardwalk. Annually, endangered woodstorks roost and nest along part of the boardwalk. The elusive Ghost Orchid has bloomed along this boardwalk, also. For a quick stop, the Blair Audubon Center located at the boardwalk trailhead is a treasure itself! This is a must see destination for residents and visitors alike.

### **Shark Valley Trail - Everglades National Park**

(305) 241-7700 and [www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/shark-valley-trails.htm](http://www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/shark-valley-trails.htm).

A 15-mile trail that loops through the “river of grass” gives you up-close views and encounters with alligators and birds such as Roseate Spoonbills, Great Blue Herons, Gallinules and many more. In spring, newly hatched alligators sun in the canal just a few feet from the trail. Ride an open air tram with commentary from a naturalist or get some exercise and ride a bike around the paved looped trail. Bring your bike or rent a comfortable cruiser at the Park. Half way through the 15 mile loop, a two story observation tower is open for visitors to see a panoramic view of the 100 miles of Everglades National Park. The Shark Valley Trail is an adventure for all ages.

When planning your trip, remember to layer clothing, bring plenty of water, pack a lunch or snacks, binoculars, and camera. Be prepared with sun protection (glasses, hats and sunscreen) and bug spray. Get out and explore southwest Florida!

- *Nancy J. Richie*  
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