Florida’s Hidden Wild

A nature photographer’s guide to the best of the Sunshine State
Florida’s Hidden Wild

Top spots to capture scenic landscapes and wildlife in this photographer’s paradise

Text & Photography By Carlton Ward Jr.
Moonrise Over Caladesi II, 2010. The full moon rises over Caladesi Island in the evening twilight just after sunset over Clearwater Beach and the Gulf of Mexico. Fringing Florida's most densely populated county, this state park and its sisters, Honeymoon Island and Anclote Key, provide rare experiences with the region's original nature.
Florida is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Our 21 million residents are joined by 116 million visitors who flock to the Sunshine State each year. Now Florida is best known for Disney World and beaches, yet its first draw was its natural attractions. Much of Florida’s original nature is still here but often hidden in plain sight of the amusement parks and coastal cities.

As a conservation photographer, I’ve dedicated my career to raising awareness of Florida’s lesser-known natural treasures with the purpose of inspiring their protection. I got my start as a professional photographer working with Smithsonian scientists in the rainforests of Central Africa. But after four years of expeditions on the other side of the globe witnessing relatively pristine nature, I grew increasingly concerned about the rapid loss of wildlife habitat at home and moved back to make Florida my full-time focus.

I’m an eighth-generation Floridian and fortunate to have connections to our lesser-known heartland. That’s where I began my photographic quest. Through photographing Florida black bears that were relying on Everglades cattle ranches, I learned from biologists how much connected habitat bears need to survive and at the same time realized how rapidly new housing developments and roads were cutting wildlife habitat into smaller and smaller pieces. I also saw that the lands of cowboys and black bears were virtually absent from Florida’s identity and were not getting the attention they deserved.

That led me to found the Florida Wildlife Corridor project, a conservation campaign working to inspire protection of a statewide network of contiguous land, 16 million acres in total, that keeps wild Florida connected. Through two major expeditions in 2012 and 2015, I’ve hiked, paddled and biked more than 2,000 miles through the length and width of Florida. In addition to producing books, films and numerous media stories along the way, I also added to a lifetime shot list of amazing places I want to revisit, several of which I’m going to share with you now.

Reef at Loggerhead Key, 2014. At the far reaches of the Florida Keys, where the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean meet, a coral reef rises close to the surface along the west side of Loggerhead Key. Here, in Dry Tortugas National Park, the reefs host about 30 species of coral. While coral reefs are in bad shape worldwide, especially in the upper Florida Keys, where runoff from development and pollution have been leading causes of decline, the reefs in the Dry Tortugas survive in relatively good health thanks to being 65 miles from the closest human population and safeguarded within a marine-protected area.
JACKSON COUNTY, FLORIDA

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Ten Thousand Islands, 2015. Everglades National Park is the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States and protects the largest wilderness and largest contiguous mangrove forest in the western hemisphere. The park has been declared an international Biosphere Reserve, a World Heritage Site and one of the Wetlands of International Importance, one of only three locations in the world to appear on all three lists. The boundaries of the park protect about 20 percent of the original land area of the Everglades.
WITH SO MANY SPECIES, YOU MAY NEED MORE THAN ONE MEMORY CARD.

Discover the thrill of bird watching on the Audubon Birding Trail at Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park—a more adventurous place to see raptors, wading birds and migratory songbirds through your camera lens.

VisitPasco.net
Wild Florida: Favorite Places
We’ll start our journey along the Gulf of Mexico at Caladesi State Park, a barrier island near the city of Clearwater, where I grew up. Caladesi is one of the last wild places in the most densely populated county in the Southeast and has always been an oasis for me. I developed strong connections to nature here as a boy, and it’s the first place I revisited as a photographer when I came home from college. You can reach Caladesi by a ferry boat from Dunedin or by walking two miles north along the sand from Clearwater Beach (thanks to Hurricane Elena in 1985, which filled in a land bridge between the two islands).

One of my favorite views of Caladesi is standing on the edge of Clearwater Beach looking east through the sand dunes across a shallow lagoon with layers of mash grasses, mangrove, palm and pines stacking toward the horizon. At dusk before the full moon, you can catch it rising just above the trees within moments of when the sun has melted into the Gulf behind you.

Caladesi Island is one of Florida’s 175 award-winning state parks. If you visit Caladesi, I recommend making the short trip to Honeymoon Island State Park and Anclote Key Preserve State Park on neighboring barrier islands. The afternoon light coming in low over the Gulf of Mexico on Florida’s west coast is the most powerful and brilliant I’ve seen anywhere in the world. In the summertime, be on the lookout for cold, dark thunderheads marching seaward over the peninsula to provide intense contrast with the warm sunset rays. The juxtaposition will awaken your senses.

The next stop, Dry Tortugas National Park, is also on the Gulf of Mexico. Seventy miles west of Key West, this maritime outpost is as far south and west as you can go and still be in Florida. The only way to get there is by boat or seaplane, and there are regular ferries and flights from Key West. There are fantastic subjects throughout the Florida Keys, but the remoteness of the Dry Tortugas makes it one of my favorite places in the world. You can camp on Garden Key.

Everglades Blue Heron, 2006. A great blue heron forages at dusk in the Shark River Slough, the main aquatic artery of Everglades National Park. Wading bird populations have declined by 90 percent since the 1930s, primarily from loss or alteration of habitat. While some species continue to decline, Everglades restoration and continued habitat protection offer hope for partial recovery.
THE PERFECT SETTINGS.

Explore the unspoiled part of Florida in Central Florida’s Polk County. From Circle B Bar Reserve to two state parks, 25,000 acres of wetland preserves, old Florida Scrub Land and wildlife habitats galore. Go to VisitCentralFlorida.org to start planning your escape today.
by the old fortress at Fort Jefferson and travel by boat 3 miles to the next island, Loggerhead Key, where a 150-foot lighthouse stands over the shoals and reefs where the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean meet. If you have a water housing, you won’t want to miss the chance to explore some of America’s most vibrant coral reefs. If you have a dome port, you can try split-level shots that show the reef and either Fort Jefferson or the Loggerhead Key lighthouse in the background.

From the Dry Tortugas, we’ll travel back north across the Gulf to Everglades City. This frontier community is nestled between Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge and Everglades National Park. Together they contribute to the largest protected mangrove coastline in the western hemisphere. From Everglades City, you can take airboat tours into the backwater creeks and sawgrass, or powerboat tours through the labyrinth of mangrove islands between the estuary and the Gulf. Some on the mangrove islands can make iconic silhouettes at sunrise and sunset with a backdrop of watery wilderness wide open to the Florida Keys and beyond. I love to see the Ten Thousand Islands from above, where you can find intricate patterns of islands and water that put the whole region in context.

For wildlife and landscape photography in the Everglades, you can’t go wrong with the Shark Valley and Anhinga Trails. Driving east from Everglades City on U.S. Route 41—one of my favorite roads with Big Cypress National Preserve on your left and Everglades National Park on your right—the Shark Valley Visitor Center is halfway to Miami, near the Miccosukee Indian outpost and airboat tours. At Shark Valley, you can hike, bike or ride a tram down a trail straight into Shark River Slough. On a sunny day, there will be dozens of alligators to see up close along the way. At the end of the trail, there’s a tall observation tower to climb for panoramic vistas of the “River of Grass.”

For excellent bird photography, you don’t have to walk or ride quite as far. A series of ponds and boardwalks close to the visitor center is a perfect place
North Port | Palms wind along the Myakka River, guiding the way.
Forgotten islands dot shallow bays. This is Florida the way it was.
This is family time the way it should always be.
to see iconic water birds like anhingas, cormorants, wood storks and a variety of egrets and herons. These birds are used to seeing people, so getting close enough for a full-frame photo isn’t difficult. My photograph of a great blue heron in this article was taken there during an Everglades assignment for Smithsonian magazine.

Closer to Miami, you can enter Everglades National Park from the east near Homestead. From there, the first stop for bird photography should be the Anhinga Trail. Bird sightings will be best in the dry season, typically from January through May, when less water elsewhere in the Everglades helps concentrate birds and the fish they eat around deeper ponds near the visitor centers.

The Everglades is the largest subtropical wetland in America and Florida’s best-known wilderness. With conservation areas such as Big Cypress National Preserve, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park and Picayune Strand State Forest, there are 4 million acres of contiguous public land combined with Everglades National Park. But the Everglades watershed is much larger still. The headwaters of the Everglades are near Orlando within the boundaries of Disney World. The watershed encompasses nearly half of the Florida peninsula and provides water for 9 million people.

Public lands alone aren’t enough to protect the Everglades from suburban development that’s pushing out from urban cores to accommodate 1,000 new residents moving to Florida every day. Corridors for water and wildlife are needed to keep Everglades National Park connected to its headwaters, and one important piece of the conservation puzzle is the Florida cattle ranch. America’s first cattle and horses arrived in Florida with Ponce de Leon in 1521, and ranches encompass nearly 6 million acres of Florida today. Because Florida ranches retain a lot of forest and often historic prairies, their habitat for wildlife can be as good as public parks.

Forever Florida near Kissimmee is one place to see and learn about historic ranches. Some of Florida’s best

Longleaf Pines, 2012. In a longleaf pine habitat seen here in Ocala National Forest, an open understory of sweeping wiregrass is maintained by frequent fire. The natural diversity of a healthy longleaf pine forest can be comparable to that of tropical rain forests, with more than 40 species per square meter. Protecting and restoring longleaf pine forests is important for connecting the Florida Wildlife Corridor.
HAPPY PLACE, FOUND.

What can be discovered beyond 825 miles of beaches? How about 320 freshwater springs, infinite mangrove tunnels, or hidden caverns. Let your adventure begin.

FOLLOW YOUR SUNSHINE
State parks and forests were formerly cattle ranches. The St. Johns River flows north from south of Orlando to the Atlantic Ocean near Jacksonville. Florida’s longest river and second-largest watershed next to the Everglades, the upper St. Johns is largely protected by a patchwork of public lands and private ranches. One of my favorite places is Little Big Econ State Forest, where picturesque palms rise above the floodplain and line the waterways at the confluence where the Econlockhatchee River meets the St. Johns. I recommend paddling and camping along this waterway that flows east from Orlando. You might see cowboys on horseback gathering herds along the banks.

Freshwater springs might be Florida’s greatest hidden treasure. North Florida is said to have the highest concentration of freshwater springs in the world. A great place to see them is along the Florida National Scenic Trail in Ocala National Forest, where they supply pure water to the St. Johns. Or, further west, the Suwannee River and its tributaries are lined with springsheds, where crystal clear water flows up from underground aquifers. The water is 72 degrees year round, refreshing in the summer and relatively warm in the winter. Many springs provide important warm-water refuges to migrating manatees.

Ocala National Forest is also a fantastic place to photograph longleaf pines. This forest type once covered 90 million acres of the southeastern U.S. but was reduced by logging to just 3 million acres today. Groups like The Nature Conservancy and The Longleaf Alliance are working to restore longleaf to more of its historic range, which is critical for regional wildlife corridors. Longleaf forests and savannas are biodiversity hotspots, with species diversity approaching that of tropical rainforests. When photographing pine forests, I enjoy...
An Ogeechee Tupelo spreads its branches over a shallow sandbar colored orange by tannin-stained water flowing from the Okefenokee Swamp. The Suwannee River runs 240 miles from the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in southern Georgia through the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge to the Gulf of Mexico near Cedar Key.

Southwest of Jacksonville along the St. Johns River, Clay County’s small towns, each with its own distinct personality, invite you to awaken your big passions for experiences that make you feel like a kid again, seek outdoor adventure, discover stories of courage from long ago, or simply enjoy a place to unplug from the hectic pace of life.

EXPLORE CLAY COUNTY, FL.

Visit www.exploreclay.com to start planning your photography adventure.
using a moderate telephoto lens to compress the scene and focus on the patterns the layers of trees and grasses present. In spring when the wiregrass is seeding, the ground cover dances with texture and depth. Other great places to photograph longleaf pines are Apalachicola National Forest, Blackwater River State Forest, Eglin Air Force Base and Tall Timbers Research Center.

The Suwannee River originates in Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in southern Georgia and winds through historic longleaf country. I strongly recommend exploring its upper reaches, from Big Shoals State Park, where you can photograph flowing rapids, upstream toward the Georgia Florida line. On Day 96 of the 2012 Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition, that’s where I photographed an Ogeechee tupelo tree in fresh spring foliage reflecting over the dark tannic waters oozing out of the Okefenokee.

In the dry season, when water is low, shallow white sand bars will color the brown water orange. Carry a polarizing filter to reduce the reflection and increase saturation of vegetation and to help see through the water.

As the Suwannee flows southwest, blue spring water mixes with the dark tannic waters along the way. Awesome underwater photos can be made where the two waters converge, in places like Ginnie Springs or Manatee Springs State Park. After 240 miles, the Suwannee spreads out through Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge into the Gulf of Mexico north of Cedar Key, which is a great jumping off point for freshwater and saltwater adventures. People working oyster beds in the shallows can make great subjects, as will flocks of white pelicans gathering in winter months.

This region around the Suwannee is known as Florida’s Nature Coast. Nearly 1 million acres and 160 miles of coastline are protected from north of Tampa to the
Aucilla River Delta, 2015. The St. Marks River meets the Gulf of Mexico at the edge of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, which protects nearly 70,000 acres, including wintering grounds for endangered whooping cranes that migrate 1,117 miles from Wisconsin.
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Big Bend south of Tallahassee. Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, Homosassa Springs State Park, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, Rainbow Springs State Park, Aucilla River Wildlife Management Area and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge are just a few of the amazing places to explore.

During the cooler months, magical fog often lingers over warmer springs and creeks, making for magical light. On Day 10 of the 2015 Florida Wildlife Corridor Glades to Gulf Expedition, I set my camera on a tripod and used its intervalometer to capture a photo of myself paddling off into the misty sunrise at Chassahowitzka.

Further west, the Nature Coast transitions to the Forgotten Coast near the town of Apalachicola. This is a charming base camp complete with seafood restaurants and cafes where the Apalachicola River flows through a million acres of protected land to meet the Gulf. Shrimp boats line the docks in a town where 80 percent of households still rely on Gulf fisheries for their livelihoods. From the pristine beaches of Dr. Julian G. Bruce St. George Island State Park and St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge to oyster boats tonging in the shallows of Apalachicola Bay to massive cypress trees lining the vast floodplain of the Apalachicola River, the challenge will be picking which subjects you want to explore first.

Plan Your Florida Photo Adventure

Recommendations for lodging, entertainment and recreation to compliment your photo tour of Florida’s scenic hotspots

CENTRAL FLORIDA

When it comes to making unique photographs, the best outings are often the most strenuous. It’s no different when you’re stalking the perfect photo in central Florida. Perhaps you’ve hiked miles into the woods just to find the perfect dew-dripping leaf. Or maybe you’ve kayaked further down river than you expected, chasing the most photogenic egret you’ve ever seen. The heat, the humidity and the terrain—surprise, there are hills in Florida—all take their toll.

Luckily, there is no shortage of places to recharge your batteries, refresh your creative juices and enjoy some Southern hospitality.

If you are looking for an urban downtown to explore not far from the wilds of Circle B Bar Reserve, go no further than downtown Lakeland. While there are plenty of quality hotels in Lakeland, a stay at the Terrace Hotel gives you the option to dine in at its full-service restaurant or stroll to other options nearby. Just a short walk away is a taste of traditional New Orleans cooking at Harry’s Seafood Bar & Grille. Serving food from early morning until late in the evening—when the specialty drinks come out—is Frescos casual bistro, where the triple cheese lobster mac—its twist on the ol’ favorite of mac-and-cheese—is on the dinner menu.

Not to be forgotten are Taco Bus, a healthy yet authentic take on Mexican cuisine, and local favorite Palace Pizza, which serves sandwiches, calzones and pasta dishes besides its namesake. And don’t forget the handmade cannoli.

Other shops around downtown Lakeland include boutique home goods store Scout & Tag, menswear shop Nathan’s Men’s Store and various other boutique clothing, candy and holistic shops. Set around Munn Park, the downtown makes a perfect place to stroll with a cup of coffee before or after a meal.

For more information: VisitCentralFlorida.org.
CLAY COUNTY
Discover your passions and get ready for adventures in Clay County, nestled along the St. Johns River in northeast Florida. Explore the outdoors or splash in our natural spring and waterways.

Have a splashing good time along our 39 square miles of waterways. From Black Creek to Swimming Pen Creek and the mighty St. Johns River, choose from kayaking, wakeboarding, fishing and more. Interested in renting a boat? We can help with that.

Explore our 93,000 acres of parks with 35 miles of trails for wildlife sightings and a look at authentic Florida. Take a walk along Jennings State Forest and Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park, both part of the Great Florida Birding & Wildlife Trail.

Imagine sleeping in a treehouse, just steps away from Black Creek, and hiking nearby trails surrounded by wildlife. Camp Chowenwaw Park, a former Girl Scout Camp, features 150 acres of freedom, allowing you to unplug and have the ultimate adventure outdoors.

Camp Chowenwaw’s Treehouse Point was named one of the best treehouses in the country by Parade magazine, so gather your family and make plans to explore the outdoors.

For more information: ExploreClay.com, (904) 278-3734.

CRYSTAL RIVER
Crystal River is Florida without the fuss: A small town with an easy pace and some surprisingly big city comforts. Lodging goes from boutique to comfortable luxury. With roomy suites, Kings Bay Lodge is a retro waterfront motel lovingly reimagined. The Crystal Blue Lagoon Bed & Breakfast features a spring as its swimming pool. Wake up to manatees just outside the door.

For a luxurious feel, Plantation on Crystal River provides instant access to Kings Bay and the fishing grounds of the Gulf of Mexico, plus all the comforts you need once the sun goes down, including the ever-impressive fare at West 82 Bar & Grill. Out on the town, seafood is king on Kings Bay, and many restaurants in Crystal River double as fish markets, including The Crab Plant, Charlie’s Fish House and Seafood Seller & Cafe.

For an equally authentic Florida feel, try Old Homosassa, one of Florida’s oldest fishing communities, located just 6 miles south of Crystal River on the spring-fed Homosassa River. Wake up to riverfront views at the Homosassa Riverside Resort, Seagrass Waterfront and MacRae’s of Homosassa.

The Freezer at the Cedar Key Fish Company is considered one of Florida’s 10 best hole-in-the-wall seafood joints. Across the river, Crump’s Landing keeps the music playing into the night under its elegant waterfront tiki and cabanas, located right next to the historic Atlanta Fishing Club.

For more information: DiscoverCrystalRiverFL.com, (800) 587-6667.
JACKSON COUNTY
Home to dozens of natural springs, gorgeous antebellum homes, rich Southern history and remarkable outdoor landscapes, Jackson County, Florida, is a destination like no other in Florida. What makes it most unique, perhaps, is the distinct Southern Charm you’ll find in each of its small communities.

“Mom and pop” stores and restaurants line the downtown districts, with hidden gems such as award-winning chef Nick Rickman’s restaurant, The Salt Block. Located in the heart of downtown Marianna, Chef Rickman serves up a healthy dose of unique and mouthwatering dishes that are sure to appease any appetite.

Around the corner, you’ll find locals spending Friday evenings at Bistro Palms, listening to live music with a fully stocked bar and made-from-scratch wood-fire grilled pizza. Seafood lovers rejoice, the small town of Graceville is home to Circle Grill, Gary’s Southern Grill and Grady’s Seafood, each with their own take on the South’s favorite crustacean.

Don’t forget to check out any of the awesome boutiques and antique shops in the area. A Wild Hair Salon and Boutique is a one-stop shop for all of your pampering needs. At McCoy’s Outdoors, visitors will be surprised to find a boutique, gun shop and archery range in this local favorite service station. The Market in Graceville is a great resource for finding antiques and Living Life RePurposed gives all of its vintage finds a new life. Sweet treats can be found at farm-to-table favorites like Southern Craft Creamery and Ocheesee Creamery.

Jackson County, Florida, has a little of everything for everyone—you could say that It’s In Our Nature.

For more information: VisitJacksonCountyFla.com, (850) 482-8061.

PASCO
Conveniently located on Florida’s beautiful Gulf coast just 45 minutes north of Tampa International Airport, Pasco is a more adventurous kind of getaway for nature photography enthusiasts.

At one of the best birding sites in Florida, you might encounter more than 150 species of raptors, wading and migratory song birds along the Audubon Birding Trail at Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park. Or spot unique flora, wildlife and more than eight distinctive springs by trail or kayak along the mangrove-lined banks of Werner Boyce Salt Springs State Park.

Pasco’s vibrant culture will beckon you to step out from behind the camera and become part of its lively scene. Head to Dade City for an up-close safari encounter at the Giraffe Ranch, or challenge yourself to an aerial obstacle adventure at TreeHoppers. Reach new heights at Skydive City in Zephyrhills or take some well-deserved R&R on the pristine white-sand island of Anclote Key.

Shopping devotees, history lovers and beer aficionados will appreciate charming downtown Dade City. Browse locally owned boutiques for that perfect-picture frame or delightful gifts to take home. Sugarcreek Too and Tampa Bay Salvage are full of hidden gems.

As the day draws to a close, enjoy a drink and dinner in downtown New Port Richey. One local favorite is Sip, a wine bar with live music that serves savory charcuterie and cheese plates. Then settle in at one of several new or newly remodeled chain hotels for a comfortable retreat.

For additional information: VisitPasco.net, (800) 842-1873.
SARASOTA COUNTY

Luxuriate on the white sand shores of Sarasota. This southwest Florida coastal gem is known for some of the top-ranked beaches in the world, including Siesta Key Beach, with quartz white sand, and Lido Beach, just steps from the shopping and dining district of St. Armands Circle.

Head a little farther south and search for shark teeth in Venice at Caspersen Beach, or watch the sunset to live music at Sharky’s on the Pier.

Savor wines, expertly crafted beers and fresh local seafood in downtown Sarasota, Venice Main Street or any number of boutique restaurants serving the best of Sarasota flavors.

Be sure to save time to enjoy a performance or show by one of our internationally recognized arts and cultural companies, such as the Sarasota Ballet or the Asolo Repertory Theatre.

Great nature photo experiences await. Grab a paddle and head to Lido Key’s mangrove tunnels or Myakka River State Park for landscape and wildlife photo opportunities.

For additional information: VisitSarasota.com, (941) 955-0991.

SEBRING

Sebring is a nature lover’s paradise and truly one of Florida’s most unique hidden gems. Located just 60 miles south of Disney World, Sebring and its surrounding cities of Avon Park and Lake Placid embody the perfect blend of quaintness and “Old Florida” charm that won’t break the bank.

The area is home to a state park, Sebring International Raceway, three historic downtowns, nearly 100 freshwater lakes and Archbold Biological Station, as well as agritourism, art and cultural attractions. Our gently rolling hills, orange groves and the region’s charming small towns provide visitors with a reminder of why everyone loves authentic Florida.

The area’s main nature attraction is one of Florida’s oldest and largest state parks. Highlands Hammock State Park has 15 distinct natural communities on 9,000+ acres, and several are designated as imperiled or of concern, such as the Florida scrub, scrubby flatwoods and cutthroat seep. It is one of the highest-ranking parks in Florida for endemic biodiversity, and it is known for its beautiful old-growth hammock and thousand-year-old oaks. An elevated boardwalk with a historical catwalk traverses cypress swamp, and visitors may observe alligators, birds and other wildlife.

For accommodations, the picturesque Inn On The Lakes not only provides incredible lake views, but the surrounding gardens also welcome all guests. The hotel boasts a wonderful restaurant and bar on-site, and breakfast is included with your stay.

From Mexican to Italian, and coming full circle to classic American, you can indulge in your favorite cuisine in Sebring. Chicanes Restaurant, Cowpoke’s Watering Hole, Don Jose Mexican Restaurant and Faded Bistro & Beer Garden are among the favorites with the locals.

For additional information and a free Visit Sebring Travel Guide: VisitSebring.com, (800) 545-6021.