
EcoTourism: Emerald Coast

The Emerald Coast offers long walks on Sugar-white beaches, dolphin cruises, fishing, scuba and snorkeling. You can also enjoy ecotourism in Northwest Florida's environment and explore the nature through beautiful beaches and parks, bay and river areas.

Oak Tree Nature Park (City of Mary Esther – (850) 243-3566)

A one mile trail rambles through this 25 acre natural area in the heart of Mary Esther. Trail markers identify native plants along the route. Signs along the trail provide information on the park's plants and animals as well as the Native Americans who once inhabited the area and the cultural remains they left behind. A pavilion and picnic area is located at the northern edge and benches along the trail allow visitors the time to enjoy the beauty of this natural park. A number of animal species visit or make their home in the park, including otter, beaver, alligator, raccoon, opossum, fox, bobcat, and squirrel as well as turtles, frogs, toads, snakes and a rich variety of insects. Over 103 bird species have been identified, including migratory songbirds, wading birds, raptors and resident songbirds. The park is home to wildlife that can be unpredictable so, please view wildlife from a safe distance. Entrance to the park is from Hollywood Blvd in Mary Esther.



Gulf Islands National Seashore (Okaloosa Island – (850) 934-2600)



Gulf Islands National Seashore is a place of myriad riches with parks that cover Northwest Florida. It provides habitat for wildlife and buffers the mainland from storms. Supporting a variety of plants and animals behind these islands, waters of the sounds, bays, and bayous are less salty than the Gulf. Here shrimp and fish valuable to fishing pass portions of their lives; creatures like herons, egrets and fiddler crabs reproduce and thrive. Without the protection afforded by barrier islands the plant and animal communities of the mainland

coasts would not be as rich. Swimming, boating and picnicking are available

Henderson Beach State Park (Destin – (850) 837-7550)

A gem on the Emerald Coast with 200 acres, the park has a beautiful three quarter mile nature trail. The nature trail by the beach access winds through a small coastal hammock in a stretch of coastline that



provides visitors with a rare view of some of the last remaining endangered coastal scrub communities in the Florida panhandle. The park is home to four endangered or

protected plant species: Cruise's Golden Aster, Godfrey's Golden Astor, Gulf Coast Lupine and Large Leaved Jointweed, some which are found adjacent to the trail. Watch for migrating songbirds here in Spring and raptors making landfall; or



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follow the dune line in April and October. The park is a haven for shore birds, including six listed and protected species (Plover, Egret, Kestrel, Brown Pelican, Skimmer and Least Tern). Take care not to disturb beach-nesting birds, which are often cryptic and blend easily with the sand they nest upon. Enjoy a leisurely bike ride on the park's mile long paved road. Visitors may try their luck by fishing in the surf to catch popular species such as pompano, red fish, flounder, catfish, whiting and cobia. The park has 60 campsites that can accommodate either tents or RVs. Depending on the season visitors' beach experiences could be highlighted by sightings of dolphins, sea turtles, migratory birds, butterflies and gorgeous sunsets.

Fred Gannon Rocky Bayou State Park (Niceville – (850) 833-9144)



A hidden paradise on the Bayou, a 357 acre park, this waterfront park is on Rocky Bayou in Choctawhatchee Bay and it offers family camping, enchanting hiking trails, a children's playground and one of the best boat ramps on Choctawhatchee Bay with year round saltwater and freshwater fishing. Three nature trails – **Sand Pine, Rocky Bayou** and **Red Cedar** are ideal for birding and nature photography, providing opportunities to see a variety of native flora and fauna. The waterfront

can offer vantages of diving ducks in winter, ospreys overhead and spotted sandpipers on rocky edges in winter. Bird walks are available through the Choctawhatchee Audubon Society. Picnicking along the shoreline provides visitors a scenic view of the water while relaxing in the shade of oak, hickory and pine trees. The park includes two picnic pavilions, playground, grills and several convenient stairways to the shores.

Turkey Creek Park (City of Niceville – (850) 243-6253)

Turkey Creek Nature Trail and Pavilion is a great place for gatherings under the pavilion, swim areas to bring the family to, and quiet spots to enjoy the beauty surrounding you. The three-quarter mile boardwalk runs along Turkey Creek through a river forest of titi, maple, cypress and bay. Watch for green herons stalking minnows on low hanging branches over the water and swimming in the creek. Mississippi kites are common in summer and songbirds like white-eyed vireos breed here. In warm weather, canoeing, kayaking, tubing for all ages and the boardwalk has many places to stop along and enjoy the wildlife, turtles, ducks, and migrating birds. An Eagle Scout project provided identification markers to identify the vegetation. There is truly something for everyone.



Popular Birding Sites (Choctawhatcheeaudubon.org)

- Bluewater Bay Marina & Swamp
- Bayou Plaza Shopping Center & Kiwanis Park
- Florida Park
- Fort Walton Beach Landfill
- Okaloosa County Holding Ponds
- Ferry Park
- Oak Tree Nature Park
- Destin Bridge West Side / Jetties
- Mattie Kelly Park