

ENTERTAINMENT

Wild Florida: Your guide to 9 great kayaking spots in Volusia County's rivers & springs

Mary Helen Moore The Daytona Beach News-Journal

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The impending winter means something a little different for Floridians.

No need to bundle up indoors with hot cocoa and a cozy blanket. No, as the humidity wanes and the scorching summer temperatures give way to 70 degree highs, now is the time we head outdoors.

One of the best ways to spend time in the sun is by kayaking or canoeing into the wilderness. Central Florida is home to some of the country's finest springs, and the Indian River Lagoon is the most biodiverse estuary in North America.

Here's a guide to nine of the best places to go kayaking in Volusia County.

So slather on some sunscreen and bug spray and get out on the water. The gators and manatees will be happy to see you.

A warming climate: Overnight low temperatures are rising in Florida faster than daytime highs. Here's why.

Volusia County mulls taking chance on new tech: Can this seagrass restoration method work even before Indian River Lagoon gets clean?

Legacy of conservation: Environmentalists seek to rename Florida state park for Reid Hughes

Cracker Creek

The slow-moving water of western Spruce Creek cuts through a gorgeous blackwater cypress swamp with palm trees and ample ferns lending the water a tropical charm.

Spruce Creek, a 16-mile round trip, is part of Florida's 4,000-mile network of designated paddling trails.

It's located on 20 acres historically owned by the caretaker of James Gamble's winter retreat, according to the Daytona Beach Museum of Arts & Sciences. Gamble worked for his father's company, Proctor & Gamble, for decades and was best known for devising the formula for Ivory soap. Some historical buildings remain standing on the property.

Rent single and tandem kayaks that cost \$24 (or \$36) for two hours, or \$50 (or \$70) for the full day. Two-seat canoes, which may accommodate a family of four, cost \$36 for two hours and \$70 for the whole day. There is a fee to launch your own watercrafts. Weekend pontoon boat tours give an interactive glimpse into the area's ecology and history.

Open: Wednesday to Sunday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Address: 1795 Taylor Road, Port Orange, FL 32128

Contact: (386) 304-0778 or visit crackercreek.com

De Leon Springs

The two oldest canoes ever found in the Western Hemisphere were discovered in this spring and 6,000 years later, De Leon Springs State Park continues to provide access to 22,000 acres of serene lakes, creeks and marshes in Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge.

The cool, clear waters provide excellent opportunities for fishing and birdwatching, and run a constant 68 degrees. You might spot otters, alligators, manatees, osprey, bald eagles, sandhill cranes and — if you're lucky, a black bear out for a swim.

Its namesake, Juan Ponce de Leon was a Spanish conquistador who landed in Florida in 1513, rumored to have been searching for the Fountain of Youth. The spring was once called Acuera, which translates to "healing waters," by the Mayaca people, the indigenous tribe native to the area.

The paddling trail extends 4 miles west to Lake Woodruff eventually connecting to the St. Johns River. Canoes and kayaks can be rented onsite and parking costs \$6 per vehicle.

Open: Daily, 8 a.m. to sunset

Address: 601 Ponce de Leon Blvd., DeLeon Springs FL 32130

Contact: (386) 985-4212

Tomoka River State Park

The Tomoka River, which extends 13 miles upstream (south) from Tomoka State Park, is part of Florida's 4,000-mile network of designated paddling trails.

A manatee refuge and excellent site for birdwatching, the views vary from lush, narrow canopies to wide, grassy marshes that empty into the wide Halifax River. The land was once occupied by the indigenous Timucua tribe, from which the name Tomoka was derived.

Canoes and kayaks are available for rent at the Tomoka Outpost, with prices beginning at \$20 for a solo kayak and \$27 for a two-person canoe. Parking costs \$5 per vehicle.

Open: Daily, 8 a.m. to sunset

Address: 2099 N. Beach St., Ormond Beach, FL 32174

Contact: (386) 673-0022

Hontoon Island State Park

Hontoon Island is a natural freshwater island that is surrounded by the St. Johns River, Hontoon Dead River and Snake Creek. It's nestled in between Lake Beresford and Blue Spring.

The island can only be reached by boat and features 8 miles of trails that wind through swamps, marshes, pine flatwoods and oak hammocks. The Mayaca natives were believed to inhabit the island some 12,000 years ago and a shell midden remains on the shore of Hontoon Dead River today.

Canoes can be rented at the state park.

Open: Daily, 8 a.m. until one hour before sunset

Address: 2309 River Ridge Road, DeLand, FL 32720

Contact: (386) 736-5309

Gemini Springs

Gemini Springs Park is named for its crystal-clear twin springs, where an estimated 6.5 million gallons of pristine fresh water bubbles up every day.

It's about a 2.5-mile paddle from the county park's dock to Lake Monroe. There are no rentals available onsite, but it's free to park and launch your own canoe, kayak or stand-up paddleboard.

The park sits on 212 acres and is connected to more than 60 miles of trails in Volusia County alone. It marks one of the southernmost stops along the Spring-to-Spring Trail, which connects to the county's newly completed 52-mile stretch of the East Central Regional Rail Trail at Green Springs.

The land was privately owned until a 1994 purchase by the county, with help from the Florida Communities Trust and St. Johns River Water Management District. The park opened two years later.

Open: Daily, sunrise to sunset

Address: 37 Dirksen Drive, DeBary, FL 32713

Contact: (386) 736-5953

Ormond Beach's Central Park

This city park contains five interconnected lakes surrounded by forest and gardens in the heart of Ormond Beach. It's an excellent birdwatching spot, and encompasses 149 acres.

There are six free canoe and kayak launches, though no rentals are available onsite.

Open: Daily, sunrise to sunset

Address: The southernmost parking spot is at 601 Fleming Ave., Ormond Beach, FL 32174. There are also parking spots off Hand Avenue, Division Avenue and Hammock Lane. See this map.

Contact: (386) 676-3250

Highbridge Park on the Ormond Loop

Highbridge Park is a county park that sits on the banks of Halifax River in the northernmost reaches of Volusia County.

Navigate up to 11 miles along Bulow Creek, part of Florida's 4,000-mile network of designated paddling trails and witness the transition from wide tidal marsh to a tree and cabbage palm-lined paradise.

There is a free canoe launch and boat ramp in the county's 1-acre park beside the namesake drawbridge. Much of the creek parallels the Ormond Scenic Loop and Trail. Bulow Creek State Park is about 6.5 miles west of the bridge by water and contains ruins from the Seminole Wars.

Open: Daily, 24/7

Address: 39 Highbridge Road, Ormond Beach, FL 32176

Contact: (386) 257-6000, ext. 15953

Developer cedes 36 acres: Volusia County votes to buy \$1 million land along Ormond Scenic Loop and Trail

Blue Spring State Park

Blue Spring contains refreshingly cool, crystal-clear fresh water and is best known as a winter refuge for manatees. Hundreds of sea cows huddle in the spring during cold snaps, as the temperature remains 72 degrees year-round.

Kayaks and canoes can't enter the spring run, but may be paddled on the St. Johns River, which is also home to alligators, fish and a spectacular array of birds.

The state park is located along the Spring-to-Spring Trail, which will eventually wind 26 miles through western Volusia County. The St. Johns River, Florida's longest at 310 miles, is part of Florida's 4,000-mile network of designated paddling trails.

Kayaks and canoes are rented by Blue Spring Adventures, which also offers a guided tour with a naturalist for \$60. There is a free ramp nearby where you can launch your own boats without having to pay for parking.

Saving the manatees: Florida lawmakers hear Fish & Wildlife agency response to manatee death 'catastrophe'

Open: Daily, 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Address: 2100 W. French Ave., Orange City, FL 32763

(If you have your own boat, don't turn into the state park. Continue along French Avenue as it transitions to a dirt road. The French Landing Boat Ramp is at the end of the road.)

Contact: (833) 953-2583 or visit bluespringadventures.com/rentals

Mosquito Lagoon

The mangrove mazes of the Mosquito Lagoon are vibrant places to explore, home to dolphins, manatees and coastal birds. The Mosquito Lagoon constitutes the uppermost reaches of the Indian River Lagoon, believed to be the most biodiverse estuary in North America.

Put in at New Smyrna Beach's Callalisa Park to trip 7 miles through the shallow Callalisa Creek, which empties at both ends into the lagoon.

Across the intracoastal is Nichols Surf Shop, which rents all sorts of gear for some of the cheapest prices in the area and gives guided tours with Florida Master Naturalists.

There's a 2.1-mile marked trail if you put in at Indian River Lagoon Park in New Smyrna Beach, a couple miles south.

Several miles south, near Bethune Beach, JB's Fish Camp offers kayak and paddleboard rentals for \$15 to \$20 an hour

Open: The city parks are open daily sunrise to sunset. JB's Fish camp rents kayaks from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Nichols Surf Shop's hours vary.

Address:

Callalisa Park is at 598 S. Peninsula Ave., New Smyrna Beach, FL 32169

Nichols Surf Shop is at 307 Lytle Ave, New Smyrna Beach, FL 32168

Indian River Lagoon Park is at 700 Sandpiper St., New Smyrna Beach, FL 32169

JB's Fish Camp is at 859 Pompano Ave., New Smyrna Beach, FL 32169

Contact:

(386) 690-8420 for Nichols Surf Shop • (386) 427-5023 for JB'S Fish Camp • (386) 424-2175 for the city of New Smyrna Beach