

Where the Wild Things Go

Trip Length: 2-3 Days



Manatees, Panthers and Bears - oh my! And these are just a few of the indigenous creatures you can see up-close and personal in the Tallahassee area.

Start off your day by visiting the abundant wildlife at the Tallahassee Museum (3945 Museum Drive; (850) 575-8684; www.tallahasseeemuseum.org). A sanctuary for many endangered animals such as the Red Wolf, Florida Panther and Black Bear, there are also white squirrels, otters, birds galore and usually a “visiting” critter or two in this beautiful natural setting. Plan to spend 2-4 hours here. Early morning is when the animals are most active.

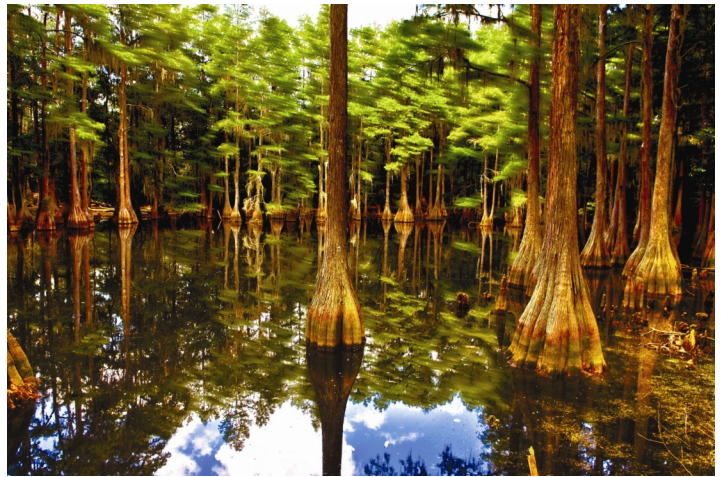
From the Museum, drive 16 miles to Wakulla Springs State Park (550 Wakulla Park Drive, Wakulla Springs; (850) 926-0700; www.floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings). You are almost guaranteed to see an alligator, or ten! A Boat Tour along the river is well worth it to see lots of ‘gators, turtles, and birdlife and where several Tarzan movies were filmed. Grab a bite to eat at the restaurant in the Lodge but save room for a milkshake at the gift shop.

If you’re ready to get out on the water for a good paddling, head over to The Wilderness Way (3152 Shadeville Road, Wakulla Station/Crawfordville; (850) 877-7200; www.thewildernessway.net) to rent a kayak or canoe. The Wakulla River is an easy yet rewarding paddling trip where you can almost float your way down the river with the gentle current. More often than not, you will be accompanied by manatees that call the river home year-round. These gentle giants, related to elephants, are herbivores that will meander along while grazing on the sea grasses along the river bottom. Please remember it is unlawful to harass them in any way.



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Tannin, found in red wine and also in Cypress trees, turns the water to a dark brown resembling sweet tea.



Travel south along S.R. 363 (Monroe Street) to the coast to start your day at the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge (Monarch Migration in Oct.) (1255 Lighthouse Road, St. Marks; www.fws.gov/saintmarks) The Visitor Center will give a great overview of the site and activities, along with a nature-based gift shop. The Refuge is also a “Gateway Site” for the Great Florida Birding & Wildlife Trail, with “loaner” binoculars and scopes available to view the plethora of fine-feathered friends and wildlife found here. The lighthouse is also a must-see. Each October thousands of Monarch butterflies stop over here for food and rest on their migration from Canada to Mexico. With brief training, visitors can “tag” these majestic creatures to help track their incredible cross-continental journey.

Drive just up the road from St. Marks to the small community of Panacea to [Gulf Specimen Marine Lab](http://www.gulfspecimen.org) (222 Clark Drive, Panacea; (850) 984-5297; www.gulfspecimen.org) to hold a prickly Sea Squirt in your hands and see lots of sea creatures up close and personal. Plan to spend 1-3 hours at this working laboratory exploring the many touch tanks teeming with sea life and providing many hands-on experiences.



It’s been a full day so feast on fresh Gulf seafood at a unique fifth-generation local family eatery - [Spring Creek Restaurant](http://www.springcreekfl.com) (33 Ben Willis Road, Crawfordville; www.springcreekfl.com) in nearby Spring Creek. It is a bit remote but definitely worth the drive for the freshest fish, crabs, shrimp and oysters, served in a rustic atmosphere. If you’re lucky, one of the family members will stop by your table to share a tale of life and love of the water. We’d also recommend purchasing one of their books, *Spring Creek Chronicles I or II*, for a glimpse into the local life of the Lovel family that will make you cry and laugh out loud.

Stay another day, especially if it is a Saturday, to go to the incredible [Seacrest Wolf Preserve](http://www.seacrestwolfpreserve.org) (344 Bonnett Pond Road, Chipley; (850) 773-2897; www.seacrestwolfpreserve.org) in nearby Chipley. It’s an unforgettable adventure to see magnificent and powerful Gray, Artic, and British Columbian wolves up-close at the Preserve. It’s a full day trip and public tours are offered on Saturdays year-round, with other trips and tours by request.