

Island Beaches of the Hidden Coast

Vivid white sand beaches edge most of the small islands dotted along the length of the Hidden Coast. They shine like jewels in the placid Gulf and beckon with their remote serenity. All must be accessed by water; most are part of the Cedar Keys or Lower Suwannee National Wildlife refuges, or the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area. Few people visit these beaches. It is quite common to find that you are alone to enjoy the peace and beauty of your surroundings.

CEDAR KEYS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE BEACHES

The Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge is a group of 13 small islands or keys, ranging in size from one to 120 acres, close to the town of Cedar Key. Established in 1929, the refuge has important natural and cultural resources from pre-history to modern



The brilliant white sand beach on Atsena Otie Key is the most accessible of all the Hidden Coast's many island beaches. Only a mile from the Cedar Key waterfront, it is popular with both kayakers and boaters, yet retains its sense of wild remoteness.

historic times, such as bird rookeries and even potential archaeological sites.

The largest and most accessible islands are Atsena Otie Key (a short paddle from the Cedar Key waterfront), Snake Key, Seahorse Key and North Key. Atsena Otie, owned by the Suwannee River Water Management District and managed by the Refuge, has a walking trail (not recommended in summer due to insects), an information kiosk and a basic toilet facility. To protect wildlife and habitat, island interiors are closed to the public with the exception of Atsena Otie Key. If you are tempted to break this rule, remember that away from the beaches, these islands have thick undergrowth with numerous biting insects and poisonous snakes.

All island beaches are open for public use year round except for Seahorse Key, which is closed annually from March 1 through June 30 to protect its special bird rookery. (This closure includes a 300 foot buffer surrounding the island.)

For quickest access to the islands, put in at the Cedar Key Marina boat ramp on Dock Street in Cedar Key. Kayaks can launch from the Cedar Key City Park beach. Before planning a trip, check your weather and

tide conditions. All islands are surrounded by shallow mud flats and even kayaks can be stranded during very low tides.

No surface collecting is allowed on the beaches, with the exception of seashells. Camping and open fires are prohibited. For more information, go to www.fws.gov/cedarkeys.

LOWER SUWANNEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND NORTH

The island beaches of the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, and beyond to the north end of the Hidden Coast, tend to be more remote and less accessible than those of the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge.

Just north of Cedar Key there are several islands in the Shell Mound area with beaches and exceptional bird watching opportunities. Launch from a boat ramp

on the refuge (follow the signs from SR24 just north of Cedar Key to CR347 and the ramp) or travel by boat from Cedar Key. This area is *very shallow* with many barely submerged oyster bars. Tides must be watched.

Following the coastline north to the community of Suwannee and beyond to the north end of the Hidden Coast, there are numerous small islands, many with white sand beaches. Some are set in the placid Gulf, others are cut out from the mainline by narrow creeks.

Depending on an island's location, launch in the community of Suwannee at the boat ramp or marinas, at Shired Island boat ramp on the Refuge, Fishbone Creek on the Refuge, Horseshoe Beach boat ramp or marina, Rocky Creek boat ramp in the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Jena boat ramp, Steinhatchee marinas, Dallas Creek boat ramp (WMA), Hagan's Cove boat ramp (WMA), Keaton Beach boat ramp or marina, or at the Dekle Beach boat ramp.

One of the best ways to identify island beaches along this remote section of coastline is by using the free Google Earth tool (download at <http://earth.google.com>) to zoom in on an aerial view. Beaches pop out from the brown and green background as bright slips of land or edges along an island. Using the names of local features displayed on the screen, the view can be easily matched to a map.

Creature Corner by Lovett E. Williams, Jr.

THE BLACK SKIMMER

The Black Skimmer is a common year-round shoreline resident along the Hidden Coast. It occurs around the Gulf of Mexico and up the Atlantic Coast north to New England and in Central and South America on both oceans. There are two other species of skimmer in other parts of the world. The Black Skimmer is about the size of a pigeon with short red legs, black wings and back, and a long, thin, bright orange bill tipped with black. Both sexes look alike as is in the usual case in almost all

fishing. The bill is as thin as a butter knife so that it can slice through the water as the bird skims the surface of calm coastal pools. When skimming, its lower mandible is in the water. When its mandible strikes a minnow on the surface, but fails to grasp the fish, the bird doubles back to seize the stunned fish for a meal. The lower mandible is longer than the upper to facilitate that style of fishing and the skimmer's legs are very short to prevent them from dragging the water. Skimmers also wade in shallow water to



Photos: Lovett Williams

gull and tern species.

Skimmers nest on small islands and sand spits where they lay 2-3 eggs in a shallow depression scraped in the sand. They also nest on gravel rooftops in south Florida. This has permitted the species to expand its nesting range southward in Florida coastal areas where there is no suitable natural habitat for nesting.

The skimmer has a peculiar way of

pick up crustaceans such as crabs and shrimp. When they pick up something from the ground, they have to turn their bill sideways. The skimmer's fishing style accounts for their colloquial name of "shearwater" (not to be confused the true shearwaters).

Skimmers like to rest on sand spits and bars. They can be commonly seen around Cedar Key at low tide on the sand spits between the condos and Dog Island. They are also seen at Horseshoe Beach and the spoil islands at the mouth of the Cross Florida Barge Canal near Yankeetown. The Hidden Coast's skimmer population is augmented in winter by migrants from the north, creating large flocks of two hundred or more birds.

Sea Kayak Day Paddles on Florida's Hidden Coast by Nick and Sandra Crowhurst describes in detail several paddling trips to island beaches such as Big Pine Island north of Suwannee, or Butler Island south of Horseshoe Beach. This excellent book can be downloaded *free* at hiddencoast.net. Another helpful resource, even if you are not a paddler, is the *Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail* guide which lists boat ramps and other useful information. Purchase online (\$15) at myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_guide.htm. For more information on the Big Bend Wildlife Management area, go to www.myfwc.com. For Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge information, go to fws.gov/lowersuwannee. Camping and open fires are prohibited on all Refuge beaches.

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