



Troop 219

Camping Guide

The ten group camping areas described in this guide are within a few hours' drive of downtown St. Petersburg. We have created this resource to share with other troops in hopes that our scouting family may find new places to explore and enjoy. We encourage you to add to the list. We have also tried to include some ideas for merit badges. Have fun and be safe! Remember, take only photographs, leave only footprints.



Myakka River State Park

13208 State Road 72, Sarasota

(941) 361-6511

Reservations: 60 Days in advance

Price: \$5 adults, \$1 youth

Amenities: Water, bathrooms, no electric

Drive time: 1 hour 3 minutes

Distance: 58 miles

This park gets its name from the nearby river, one of the best waterways in Florida to see big alligators. The word Myakka is Seminole in origin, but the exact meaning has been lost to history. Unlike much of the state, the scenery here hasn't changed since those warriors roamed these woods with their herds of scrub cattle.

One of Florida's great wild and scenic rivers, the Myakka flows through 58 miles of wet prairies, pinelands and hardwood hammocks south of Sarasota. During the summer months, the river often overflows its banks allowing intrepid paddlers to see areas normally too difficult to reach.

You can also explore Upper and Lower Myakka lakes by canoe or kayak. For an easy day trip, start at the Myakka Outpost Concession on the shores of the Upper Lake and paddle down to the bridge, about 3 miles. You'll see plenty of alligators along the way, but don't worry, they keep to themselves. The current is usually light to moderate, so the return trip is an easy paddle. Bring your own canoes or rent at the concession. If you're looking for a more leisurely tour, take a trip on one of the world's largest airboats, the Myakka Maiden or the Gator Gal, both of which offer scenic cruises on Upper Myakka Lake. Like human-powered canoes, the slow-moving, air-

powered watercraft can travel into shallow areas for optimum wildlife viewing. The tour schedule varies during the winter and summer months.

If you want a beginner backpacking trip for scouts, this 37,000-acre wilderness is ideal location. The state park, one of Florida's oldest, has 39 miles of trails that snake through every type of Florida habitat including cypress swamp, pine flatwoods and hardwood hammocks. Backpackers can choose from six primitive campsites, each nestled in its own unique environment, the closest just a few hour's walk from the parking lot.

While most of Myakka's trails follow the forest floor, the Myakka Canopy Walkway will give scouts a bird's eye view of the forest. The elevated boardwalk walkway, 85 feet long and suspended 25 feet above the ground, is the highlight of any trip to this state park. Make sure you take the time to climb the tower at the end of the suspension bridge. It takes about 10 minutes to get to the top but is well worth the effort.

Amateur botanists love the state park's canopy walkway because it offers a chance to view epiphytes or "air plants" at eye level. Most Florida schoolchildren learn about Spanish moss at an early age. According to legend, this long, stringy epiphyte received its name because it resembled the beards favored by the conquistadores. While epiphytes grow on other plants, they generally don't harm their host tree. In fact, they get all their food and water from the surrounding environment, i.e., dew, rainwater, rotting leaves, insect excrement.

The canopy walkway is a great educational opportunity for scouts, but if you want to keep them really entertained, show them something with teeth and/or fangs. After entering the park, you don't have to drive far to see alligators. Pull over after the first bridge and scan the water. Head over to the lake, and you might even see a banded water snake, or perhaps, a water moccasin. But by far, the craziest-looking Myakka critter is the not-so-elusive golden silk orb-weaver, also known as the banana spider. Hike any of Myakka's trails early in the morning and you are bound to get a face full of yellow spider's web.



Fort DeSoto County Park

3500 Pinellas Bayway S, St. Petersburg
(727) 582-3374

Reservations: 90 days in advance – in person if you want to make sure you get in.

Price: no charge

Amenities: Water, bathrooms, electric

Drive time: 33 minutes

Distance: 18.4 miles

When going through your checklist of great places for troop campouts, Fort De Soto has it all: easy access, good facilities, clean water and most important, hungry fish. You won't find a better place to work on the Fishing Merit Badge. Fort DeSoto has shallow and deep-water species to choose from, both the novice and experienced angler will find fishing challenging *and* rewarding.

The Gulf Pier, the longest (more than 1,000 feet) of Fort De Soto's two structures, is closer to the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico, hence its name. There is also a strong current, or tide, flowing through the pier, which means plenty of bait fish moving around. The shop at the entrance of the pier sells frozen bait, tackle, food and drinks and

is open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Budget conscious troops will find this pier the best choice – plenty of room and shelter from the sun – especially if they bring tackle and refreshments from home. Because the pier has open-water access, anglers may catch everything from sheepshead to sharks. This is also a good place to see dolphin. You're likely to see one or two of these marine mammals cruise by in search of mullet.

The Bay Pier is shorter (500 feet) than the Gulf Pier, but it's every bit as attractive to anglers. Because it is located closer to the sheltered waters of Tampa Bay, there is less current, which allows anglers to use lighter tackle and target the more common, inshore species like trout, redfish and snook. Typical catches include Spanish mackerel, ladyfish, pompano, permit and even the occasional tarpon. While artificial lures (jigs, spoons and hard-bodied plugs) can be used, as usual, live bait is still the best choice. Some anglers cast net for bait off the bridge, but this isn't easy. A better choice is to bring along a weighted, gold-hook "Sabiki" rig, jig up your own bait while fishing and "match the hatch." As with the Gulf Pier, spring and fall are the best times to fish. But the summer is good as well and anglers fish all through the winter months as weather permits.

The top three inshore species – spotted sea trout, snook and redfish – all spend at least some part of their lives in the estuarine waters found on the back side of Fort De Soto. The sea grass beds, oyster bars and mangrove islands are prime fishing areas on the West Coast of Florida, and as an added benefit, you don't

have to have a boat to enjoy them. All you need is an old pair of sneakers, a spinning rod and a bucket of shrimp to get started. Most anglers use light line – 8- to 12-pound test – a relatively small hook and a float to mark their bait. Fish tend to congregate in the deep pockets or along the edges of channels where they find it easier to ambush prey. If possible, scope out the area you plan to fish at low tide and look for any unseen obstacles, then return and fish when the water is higher.

Fort De Soto is also a hotbed for kayak anglers. The light, maneuverable, plastic watercraft will take you into the shallow areas where powerboats dare not go. Sit-on-top kayaks are the ideal fishing craft because they are easily transportable (they fit on most car roofs) and can be launched from virtually anywhere. Most kayak fishermen carry two or three rods so they can fish with different artificial baits without having to stop and tie on a new lure. For example, have one rod rigged with a top-water plug to cast around the mangrove roots for snook. Have another rod equipped with a soft-bodied jig to fish the grass beds for spotted sea trout. And finally, have a third rod ready to go with a gold spook to work the oyster bars for redfish. If you don't have your own kayak, rentals are available at the park. These user-friendly boats are available at Topwater Kayak Rentals (as you approach the island, turn right at the ranger station and the kayak rentals will be on the right). You'll be up and paddling in minutes.

Every spring and fall, anglers flock to the waters around Fort De Soto for the annual Spanish mackerel migration. These feisty fighters are literally caught by the dozens by even inexperienced anglers. These "Spannies," as they are called by local anglers, have sharp teeth and will slice through the light monofilament line that most anglers use like kite string. So to avoid getting cut off, increase the strength of your outfit by using 12 to 24 inches of heavier line as a leader. A good rule of thumb: Double the weight of the line. For example, if you are fishing with 10-pound test, use a 20-pound test leader. Don't be surprised if you hook the Spanish mackerel's larger cousin, the king mackerel, while you are fishing. The two species tend to run together. Both fish will hit live or artificial baits. A lure favored by many mackerel fishermen is a simple silver spoon, available at most mom-and-pop bait shops. Buy several, for chances are you will lose a few before the day is out.

Stephen Leatherman, aka Dr. Beach, picked Fort De Soto as America's Best Beach in 2005 and America's Top Beach in 2008 and 2009 by TripAdvisor for several reasons -- sure, it has three miles of unspoiled sand and water, but it also has enough recreational options to keep the whole troop satisfied. Besides the twin fishing piers, Fort De Soto also has an 800-foot boat launching facility with 11 floating docks. Located nearby is a 238-site, full-service camping area with water, electricity, restrooms, showers, washers, dryers, play grounds and a camp store. Fort De Soto Park also has a 7-mile, 12-foot wide asphalt recreation trail for bikers and inline skaters that connects the campground with the north and east beach swim centers and the historic fort. Birders and hikers will enjoy miles of nature trails, and a new 2.25-mile canoe/kayak trail offers a rare glimpse into the world of a mangrove estuary.

Remember - state law requires all visitors to have a saltwater fishing license, unless they are fishing with a licensed guide or on a licensed, private fishing pier. Fort De Soto's fishing piers are private and licensed, so as long as you are fishing from one of the piers, you are not required to have your own license. Non-residents and Florida residents, between the ages of 16 and 65, must also have a saltwater fishing license, unless they are fishing from a licensed fishing pier. Fishing licenses are available at most sporting goods stores or online at myfwc.com/license. You may also purchase a license over the phone at 1-888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356). License activation is immediate and permanent license will be mailed with 48 hours.



Lake Kissimmee State Park

Address: 14248 Camp Mack Rd., Lake Wales

Phone Number: (863) 696-1112

Reservations: up to a year in advance

Price: \$5 adults, \$2 youth

Amenities: Water, bathrooms, no electric

Drive time: 2 hours 11 minutes

Distance: 103 miles

Not much has changed here since "cow hunters" ruled the prairie. You'll see white-tailed deer, bald eagles, sandhill cranes and wild turkeys. Anglers can catch bass on lakes Kissimmee, Tiger and Rosalie. There are also 13 miles of hiking trails, six of which are open to equestrians. The full-service campground is one of the best places in Florida for stargazing.

While Florida might be known today for oranges, but in the 1800s cattle was, literally, the state's biggest cash cow. The Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon can be credited with kick-starting the industry in 1521 when he introduced seven Andalusian cows to Florida's ample grazing lands. Life was hard for those cowboys who drove the cattle through the wild Florida scrubland. In the 1800s, Florida was an open range with no fences, so the great herds of cattle - some with as many as 50,000 head - roamed freely. Florida's first cowboys had to literally hunt their cows in the cypress swamps, pine flatlands and hardwoods hammocks. After a while, folks started referring to these hardened men as "cow hunters."

The cattle themselves, skinny by today's standards, were survivors. These "scrub cows" could scratch out a living almost anywhere. And by the late 1800s, there were cattle operations, or "cow camps" spread out across the state. One of the better-known cow camps was located among the rich grazing lands of the Kissimmee Valley. Locals called it "Cow Town," which was a good fit since most of its residents had hooves.

Lake Kissimmee State Park's "Cow Camp" is open holidays and every Saturday and Sunday, Oct. 1 through May 1. The park has 60, full-service campsites as well as two primitive sites for backpackers. Lake Kissimmee State Park is located 15 miles east of Lake Wales.

This state park is also a great place to know out part of the backpacking merit badge. The 13 miles of hiking trails are well marked as they snake through pine flatwoods, oak hammocks, around freshwater marshes and out to Lake Kissimmee. Pull a permit at the ranger center to stay at one of the two backcountry campsites. If you are new to backpacking, here are a few tips to keep you safe in the woods:

Check the weather report before you head out. Shorts and a T-shirt will be just fine on most Florida hikes, but carry a sweat shirt and poncho in your pack just in case the weather takes a turn. Always tell a friend or relative where you're going and when you plan to be back. Check in at the ranger station or park office.

Ask about trail conditions and any potential hazards. Do your research. Get a trail map and study your route before you set out. Carry plenty of drinking water. Count on at least a gallon a day, and more in extreme heat. Use common sense. Don't tease alligators. Don't pick up snakes. Don't feed raccoons. Pack out what you pack in. As the saying goes, "Take only photographs, leave only footprints."



Hillsborough River

15402 US 301, Thonotosassa
(813) 987-6771

Amenities: Canoe Rentals;
Swimming Pool

Drive time: 1 hour 2 minutes

Distance: 42.9 miles

Hillsborough River State Park, one of nine original Florida state parks, lies about a half-hour north of downtown Tampa. The park is so close and convenient you can pack a pair of comfortable shoes in your trunk and head out for a quick hike after work. The park has four trails ranging in length from 1.1 miles to 3.4 miles that can easily be linked together for an all-day adventure. The River Rapids Nature Trail leads an intrepid hiker down to the Hillsborough's Class II rapids, a rare sight in Florida. Get there early in the morning and you stand a good chance of seeing a pair of river otters that love to play among the rocks.

In 1835, the Fort King Military Road, which linked Tampa with present-day Ocala, ran straight through the heart of the area now occupied by the state park. U.S. troops built Fort Alabama on this spot in March 1836 to defend a strategic bridge that spanned the river. Duty here was hard. Mosquitoes made life difficult, so the soldiers only lasted a few months. Before the soldiers left they booby-trapped the fort, which proved to be quite a surprise for their Seminole enemies. The subsequent explosion destroyed the fort, but the following winter, the soldiers returned and built Fort Foster. This time, the troops lasted two years. The fort was declared "indefensible" and the soldiers left, leaving the banks of the Hillsborough to the gators and wildcats. More than a century later, Fort Foster was rebuilt, down to the finest detail, and on weekends, visitors can tour the grounds and step back to a time when the Seminoles ruled these swamps.

In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps was the first of President Franklin Roosevelt's new agencies to set up in Florida. For the next nine years, the CCC and the Works Progress Administration helped many Floridians feed and clothe their families. Sixty men labored at what would become Hillsborough River State Park for five years, clearing trails and building everything from picnic pavilions to caretakers' cabins. Their most

impressive legacy is the wooden, suspension bridge that leads hikers across the river. The footbridge, built more than 70 years ago, bears testimony to what a few hungry men with tools can do.

For a great scout hike, park in Lot No. 2 and follow the signs to the River Rapids Nature Trail. Before you head into the forest, take a moment to read the "Prayer of the Woods" sign posted at the trail head. It will put you in the right frame of mind. Follow the trail to the water, then along the river. Keep an eye on the trees overhead for everything from pileated woodpeckers to red-shouldered hawks. Deep under the canopy, you may spot barred owls and wild turkey as well. The suspension bridge will take you to the Baynard Trail, named after Oscar E. Baynard, the park's first superintendent who served from 1938-45. Halfway through the Baynard Trail, you'll see the blue blazes of a link trail, which will lead you to a 3.4-mile segment of the orange-blazed Florida Trail. About a mile into this segment, you will find a primitive campsite, perfect for beginning backpackers. The remaining 2 miles of trail meanders about 20 feet above the river, providing a perfect opportunity for gator spotting. The Wetlands Restoration Nature Trail, a 1.6-mile segment that links Dead River County Park with the parking lot west of the ranger station, is really a dirt road available to bikers and hikers.

Scouts may also want to paddle the Hillsborough River, one of the most scenic rivers in the state. The 34-mile designated canoe trail runs from Crystal Springs to Tampa's Rowlett Park. The upper reaches, though wild, can be difficult to paddle. The section below Hillsborough River State Park, called Seventeen Runs, should only be attempted by the most experienced paddlers. The 16-mile stretch between Hillsborough County's Dead River and John B. Sargeant parks, can take more than five hours. Numerous deadfalls make for slow going, and if you do try to conquer this stretch of river, you will get wet and muddy. "The Runs," as it is called by locals, has dozens of downed trees, a myriad of feeder streams and dead-end creeks, which makes it a favorite hunting ground for large alligators. One particular beast, a monster named Big Joe, used to frequent this part of the Hillsborough until he got a little too bold and a state-licensed trapper had to remove him in the name of public safety. But in general, the Hillsborough River is kid-friendly, especially the section below the state park serviced by a local outfitter, Canoe Escape. The river is a pleasure to paddle any time of year. Expect to share the waterway on weekends during the busier spring and fall months.

The Hillsborough is one of four major rivers that begin in the Green Swamp, a 560,000 acre wilderness area that lies between Tampa and Orlando. But don't let the name "Swamp" fool you. Most of the land here is more than 100 feet above sea level, making it a great place to hike and camp. From its headwaters, the river then flows 54 miles through Pasco and Hillsborough counties to Tampa Bay. It is an easy to moderate paddle and ideal for beginners. The current will carry you at 1 to 2 miles per hour (depending on the water level) so a 4-mile trip is ideal for scouts. The Hillsborough River is also an ideal place to work on the birding merit badge. Count on seeing great blue heron, white ibis, osprey and red-shouldered hawks. Keep an eye out for much rarer birds, including bald eagles, wild turkeys and great horned owls. You will also encountered white-tailed deer, river otters and dozens of alligators. Florida panthers have also

been seen by several park rangers and other reliable witnesses. So pack your binoculars, bird book and a notepad so your little ones can start their wild things "life's list." You can rent canoes at the state park of at Canoe Escape, 9335 E. Fowler Ave., Thonotosassa; call (813) 986-2067; e-mail info@canoescape.com or visit www.canoescape.com.



Hog Island Recreation Area

9274 CR 635, Bushnell
(352) 797-4140

Price: \$20 for first 10 and \$2 for each additional camper.

Amenities: water, bathrooms, no electric

Drive time: 1 hour 29 minutes

Distance: 76 miles

Located on the east bank of the Withlacoochee River near Nobleton, Hog Island is a great place to hike and paddle. The 2-mile long Hog Island Nature Trail, part of the Florida National Scenic Trail, is ideal for younger scouts. The 7-mile River Trail is a little more challenging and a good spot for the Hiking Merit Badge. The longer trail is shaded as it runs through a floodplain forest – prone to flooding when the river is high – and loops around several sinkholes, including one with this massive cypress trees. Scouts who want a longer hike can access the orange-blazed Florida Trail in an upland pine forest.

From its origin in the Green Swamp of eastern Polk County, the Withlacoochee meanders 156 miles to its outfall at the Gulf of Mexico near Yankeetown. One of the few rivers in the Northern Hemisphere that flows north, the Withlacoochee has about 83 miles of waterway considered "navigable." You could call the Withlacoochee the iconic Florida River. It starts off narrow and shallow, ideal for canoeing, but 30 miles downstream, the river opens up and that's where the airboats rule.

The river has a little something for everybody. In its upper reaches, the Withlacoochee is stained dark from the tannic acid leaching from the surrounding cypress swamps. Miles downstream, the water runs crystal clear in spots because of deep springs underneath. Up near its headwaters in the Green Swamp, just north of Dade City, you will see little evidence of man. Ibises prowl the banks here in great numbers.

And if you are lucky, perhaps you'll catch a glimpse of a wood stork. If it's sunny, you'll find alligators warming themselves on the banks. There will be a few anglers too, working the weed line for panfish and bass.

As you travel north, you'll pass through every type of habitat the state has to offer: hardwood hammocks, cypress swamps, pine flatwoods, palmetto scrub, freshwater wetlands and salt marsh. Silver Lake, located in the heart of the sprawling Withlacoochee State Forest, is this region's major recreational destination. Here you will find the river's best canoeing, fishing, camping and hiking. The World Wildlife Fund once declared this area one of the "top 10 coolest places you've never been in North America."

But you can't paddle the Withlacoochee without brushing shoulders with Florida history. In 1539, the Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto crossed the river during his ill-fated expedition through Central Florida. Centuries later, Seminole warriors led by Osceola battled federal troops on the banks of the Withlacoochee. Two of the river's many feeder creeks — Jumper and Alligator — still bear the names of two of Osceola's most trusted lieutenants.

But while arcane historical facts may impress scholars, it wasn't until 1962 when the King of Rock N' Roll Elvis Presley filmed *Follow That Dream*, which critics called his "Funniest ... Happiest ... Dreamiest ... Motion Picture," that the Withlacoochee finally earned a spot in the annals of pop culture. In the movie, Elvis, a.k.a., Toby Kwimper, is driving down Highway 40, which runs west out of Dunellon, when his truck breaks down near the bridge at Bird Creek. The fictional Kwimper family, heroes of *Pioneer, Go Home!* (the book on which the Elvis film was based) decide to stay put, claiming squatter's rights. The book is classic tale of little guy vs. big government, and if Elvis had taken the time to travel off the set and look around, he would have seen three of the Withlacoochee's biggest boondoggles: the Inglis Dam, Lake Rousseau and the Cross Florida Barge Canal.

The hydroelectric dam, built in 1909, created the lake that disrupted the natural flow of the river. And if that wasn't enough to rile the spirits of the Seminole warriors who once paddled these waters, the federal government decided to dig a big ditch that just made things worse. Fortunately, the Cross Florida Barge Canal project was abandoned in the 1970s, but its main control structure on the west end of Lake Rousseau was left intact, but inoperable, which this writer discovered on a recent trip, and as a result, was forced to turn around, go back to the dam, undergo a half-hour portage, put back into the river, go down the canal, climb up over the bank, walk through the woods and climb back down into the river again — to a spot a quarter-mile west (and four hours later) past the inoperable lock that initially blocked the way. So stick to the headwaters, which is actually the lower part of the river since it flows north, for your canoeing adventures.



Mutual Mine Recreation Area

4771 East Trail 16, Inverness
(352) 797-4140.

Price: \$20 for first 10 and \$2 for each additional camper.

Amenities: water, bathrooms, no electric

Drive time: 1 hour 38 minutes

Distance: 90 miles

Citrus County's Mutual Mine Recreation Area has group campsite next to a picturesque, rain-filled lake that was formerly a mine pit, and access to great hiking trails. Withlacoochee State Forest is currently the third largest state forest in Florida and is divided into several distinct tracts of land. It draws its name from the Indian word meaning "crooked river" which accurately describes the waterway that snakes its way from the Green Swamp in northern Polk County to the Gulf of Mexico at Yankeetown.

While Withlacoochee State Forest has several "Outstanding Florida Waters" waterways that flow through different portions of the property – Withlacoochee River, Little Withlacoochee River and Jumper Creek – it is the forest's trails that will be of interest to scouts working on the hiking or backpacking merit badges. The Florida Trail, a 1,400-mile network of footpaths that stretches from Big Cypress Swamp to the Gulf Islands National Seashore, runs right through Withlacoochee.

One of the best marked and maintained trail systems in the United States, the Florida Trail is an

ideal warmup for a trip to Philmont. Scouts can thank Miami resident Jim Kern who after returning from a trip on the Appalachian Trail wondered why the Sunshine State didn't have its own long-distance hiking trail. Kern and some friends subsequently formed the Florida Trail Association then set out to hike from Big Cypress National Preserve in South Florida to Highlands Hammock State Park near Sebring.

In 1966, volunteers from the new organization painted the first blaze on a tree at Clearwater Lake in Ocala National Forest. Eventually, the trail would stretch to the Florida Panhandle. The path is well marked with orange blazes and signs. Side trails have blue blazes, and turns are marked with two blazes. Boardwalks guide backpackers through wet portions, and campsites are within easy walking distance of each other. In some areas, the trail is flat. But in others, it can be downright challenging.

One of the most popular segments runs through the Richloam, Croom and Citrus tracts of Withlacoochee State Forest. With nearly 160,000 acres of wilderness to explore, the Withlacoochee hiking and backpacking trails that will challenge beginners as well as experts. The Richloam Tract, 10 miles north of Dade City, has several combinations of 5- to 10-mile loops. The Croom Tract, located east of Brooksville, has three loops that make good day hikes. The Citrus Tract, southwest of Inverness, offers a variety of walks with lengths of up to 40 miles.

In addition to the BSA merit badges, scouts can also get special recognition for the state if they sign up for the Trailwalker program. All they have to do is walk a total of 10 trails in a minimum of five state forests. At the trailhead of each trail they hike, they simply pick up one pre-paid postal survey card for the trail. Fill it in and put in the mail after completing the hike. They can also go online and print out a Trailwalker's Log to record their progress. As the scouts send in their survey cards, the state will send a sticker for the log book. After they have hiked and logged 10 trails and completed the Trailwalker's Log, all they have to do is mail it back and they will receive a Trailwalker Patch for their day pack and certificate commemorating the achievement signed by the Commissioner of Agriculture, Adam H. Putnam.

It doesn't take much to get going. All you need is a pair of comfortable shoes. People hike in everything from lightweight, high-tech boots to old sneakers. Wear wear lightweight, wool socks (yes, even in the summer) because they help prevent blisters and last a long time. If you plan to eventually do a multiday backpacking trip, spend the extra money for a pair of boots with a steel shank. The boots might feel heavy at first, but in the long run, they are better for your feet.

For day hikes, get a small backpack, the kind most scouts use to carry their books to school. Carry plenty of water. Figure on at least a quart per person; more if you're walking under the hot sun. Bring plenty of high-energy food. Leave the submarine sandwiches at home. Instead, bring fruit or trail mix. Check the weather report before you head out. But shorts and a T-shirt will do just fine on most hikes. Carry a sweatshirt or poncho in your pack just in case the weather takes a turn for the worse..

Even though most trails are well marked, do a little advance research. Write ahead to park or forest officials, download information off the Internet or stop by the ranger station or park office for a map. Be sure to let somebody know where you are going and when you plan to be back.

The best advice is to use common sense. Pack out what you pack in. As the saying goes, "Take only photographs, leave only footprints."



**Oscar Scherer
State Park**

1843 South Tamiami

Trail, Osprey

(941) 483-5957

Reservation: 60 days in
advance.

Price: \$5 adults, \$1 youth

Amenities: Water,
bathrooms.

Drive time: 1 hour 5
minutes

Distance: 60.9 miles

Just down the coast in Osprey, Oscar Scherer State Park has great full-facility campsites as well as one of the best youth/group camping areas on the West Coast of Florida. This state park, located near Nokomis, is also one of the one of the best places in the state to see the elusive Florida scrub jay, making it an ideal spot to work on the Bird Study Merit badge.

Scouts can hike 15 miles of trails through the pine flatwoods or plan a paddling trip down South Creek, a tidal, black-water stream that begins north of the park and eventually flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The creek fluctuates with the incoming tide and the brackish (a mixture of fresh and salt water) is home to a variety of estuarine species. Bring your own canoes or kayaks or rent at the Ranger Station.

But the park's true star is the scrub-jay, one of the state's rarer birds, a 12-inch-long jay that prefers classic Florida scrub land. This friendly bird likes shrubs and brush in the 5- to 8-foot range, which means the area must burn frequently. They mate for life and nest in a shallow basket of twigs lined with palmetto fibers, usually about 3 to 10 feet off the ground. Scrub jays live in family groups, sometimes with birds "adopted" from other families.

Scrub-jays exhibit a well-established "sentinel system" and will warn each other about the approach of predators. Their original range, estimated at 7,000 square miles, has been reduced by

development and as a result, they are now considered a Threatened Species by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The Lester Finley Barrier Free Nature Trail, located in South Creek Picnic Area, accommodates scouts with sight, hearing or mobility impairments which makes this an ideal place to begin the Disabilities Awareness Merit badge. Oscar Scherer has a wheelchair accessible fishing dock, butterfly observation area and drinking fountain.

The park also links to the Legacy Trail; a paved “Rails to Trails” project that is ideal for walking, biking, jogging, or rollerblading. The Legacy Trail has great places to stop and picnic, and if you have the energy, add in the 8.6-mile Venetian Waterway Park Trail, which heads south from the Historic Venice Train Depot to Caspersen Beach, where you can comb the beach for fossilized shark teeth, and then continue back up the other side of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.

Be sure to bring your fishing pole because South Creek and Lake Osprey, a three-acre freshwater lake brimming with bream, bluegill, largemouth bass and channel catfish, are great places to wet a line. The lake is periodically stocked with catfish as part of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s urban fisheries program. Afterward, be sure to stop by the park's nature center, a great place to introduce scouts to the ecology of this unique area.



Wekiwa Springs

1800 Wekiwa Circle,

Apopka

(407) 884-2009

Reservations: 60 Days

Price: \$5 adults, \$1

youth

Amenities: Water,

bathrooms

Drive time: 2 hours 9

minutes

Distance: 119 miles

Wekiwa Springs State Park, located near Apopka, has all a scout troop could want – great camping, swimming, paddling and hiking – all in one location. The spring, with 72-degree water, is surrounded by a natural park area that is ideal for spreading out a blanket and enjoying a picnic lunch. This state park hasn't changed much since Timucuan Indians fished it and hunted in the surrounding forests. The river, one of the most pristine in Florida, is popular with canoeists and kayakers. Bring your own canoes or kayaks or rent them from the park's concessionaire.

Forty-two million gallons of pure water flow each day from the springs into Wekiwa Springs Run, which joins with Rock Springs Run to form the upper Wekiva River. Creeks, later called Seminoles, moved in after the Timucuan died off as the result of disease introduced by Spanish explorers. Wekiwa means "spring of water" and Wekiva means "flowing water" in the Creek language.

The park has three primitive group camp sites in a nice wooded area, but remember this is bear country, so you must be on your toes (see below). Scouts can also hike out to Camp Cozy (approximately 3 miles) or Big Fork (approximately 1 mile) located just off the main hiking trail and pitch tents along the Wekiwa. Each site, which come equipped with a fire pit, grill, benches and picnic table, can accommodate up to ten people.

Scouts can also canoe/kayak to one of the two campsites accessible only by water. Otter Camp and Big Buck Camp are located on Rock Springs Run. There are several access points along the Wekiva River and inside Wekiwa Springs State Park. These river camps, like the backpacking camps, are primitive. Both river camps have fire rings and can accommodate up to ten people each.

Scouts and adult leaders should practice bear safety at the group and backcountry campsites. While bear attacks in Florida area rare, and usually occur in residential areas, near undeveloped lands, remember that these animals may look cute, but please keep your distance. Never feed bears or any other wild animals, i.e., raccoons or alligators.

Bears have keen senses and can smell food and garbage from great distances. So do not leave food out at your campsite. Putting it inside a backpack, tent or cooler is just asking for trouble. Secure all coolers in a locked vehicle, preferably in the trunk. The same goes for trash. Do not leave garbage at your campsite. Deposit it in bear-safe trash cans located around the park.

If you do see a bear in your camp, make noise and drive it off. Grab to pots or pans and bang them together. Yell, scream or shout, and if it still does not leave, move to a safe place, such as inside a car. Do not run. If you come across a bear on the trail, make sure it knows you are a human being, not an easy meal, by once again making lots of noise. Move slowly away while maintaining eye contact.

Be especially cautious if come across a bear with cubs. Never get between a momma and her babies. If you run out of things to do at Wekiwa, check out Blue Spring State Park near Orlando. This spring spews 104 million gallons of pure, fresh water every day. Swimming is allowed April through October in a designated area separated by buoys from the manatee refuge zone. For more adventurous souls, scuba diving is allowed in the spring.



J. B. Starkey Park

10500 Wilderness Park Blvd., New Port Richey (727) 834-3247

Reservations: 60 Days.

Price: varies. Amenities:

Water, bathrooms.ric

Drive time: 1 hour 6 minutes

Distance: 39.1 miles.

Located in western Pasco County, east of New Port Richey, J.B. Starkey has more than 20 miles of trails that go through a variety of habitat. This Pasco County Park also has great biking, horseback riding and camping. If time is an issue, walk the 1.6-mile nature trail, one of the best in our area.

This park has more than 8,300 acres of forest to explore. A joint venture of the Pasco County Parks Department and the Southwest Florida Water Management District, J.B. Starkey has a heavily-wooded individual camp sites as well as a group campground.

Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park is part of the much larger Starkey Wilderness Preserve, one of the most expansive undeveloped tracts in Pasco County. Other areas within the preserve include the Serenova Tract and the Anclote River Ranch Tract, which have limited amenities and provide visitors a more rustic outdoor experience

The preserve is the result of the cooperation of local governments and private individuals to fulfill one, Jay. B. Starkey's lifelong dream. Starkey, Sr., bought the land in 1937 and soon developed a profitable cattle ranch and timber operation. In 1975, Mr. Starkey donated several hundred acres to SWFWMD, thereby protecting the land for future generations.

The Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park also features a paved trail that connects to the 42-mile Suncoast Trail, a popular ride with roadies and triathletes. This paved pathway runs through Hillsborough, Pasco and Hernando counties for 41 miles, parallel to the Suncoast Parkway.

The trail crosses several creeks and rivers, making it one of the more scenic long-distance rides on the west coast of Florida. Cyclists can travel for miles without stopping, which makes this an ideal place to log a 50 miler for the Cycling Merit Badge.

Scouts can pitch their tents in the group campsite then get up the next morning and backpack into the woods. There are three remote campsites so this is an ideal place to work on the backpacking merit badge. The trail passes through a variety of natural communities including pine flatwoods, cypress domes, freshwater marshes, stream and lake swamps, sand hill and scrub. Stop by the Environmental Education Center and see artifacts from a 19th century "Cracker" homestead that was discovered, excavated and is now maintained by a local Boy Scout Explorer post.



Colt Creek

16000 SR 471,

Lakeland

(863) 815-6761

Reservations: 11
months in advance

Price: \$5 adults, \$1
youth

Amenities: No water,
chemical toilet, no
electric

Drive time: 1 hour 23
minutes

Distance: 62.5 miles

Colt Creek State Park is nestled in a remote region of Central Florida called the green Swamp. But the term "swamp" is something of a misnomer. Much of the land here is high and dry, a mixture of hardwood hammock, pine flatwoods and sandhill scrub.

Covering some 870 square miles in Pasco, Hernando, Polk, Lake and Sumter counties, the Green Swamp serves as the headwaters to four major rivers: the Hillsborough, the Withlacoochee, the Ocklawaha and the Peace. With its highest point 130 feet above sea level, this region is a major recharge area for the Floridan Aquifer, the state's water supply.

American Indians lived here long before the Egyptians built their first pyramid. The Swamp's inhospitable terrain set the tone for Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto's ill-fated attempt to

conquer the Florida peninsula. Later, during the Seminole Wars, U.S. troops discovered that the Green Swamp provided the ideal backdrop for a protracted guerrilla war. Then, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, homesteaders eked out a living here through the timber and turpentine trades.

But nature has a way of healing all wounds, and the scars of that exploitation are barely visible. True, you can't wander far without seeing some sign of past human activity, but today, the Green Swamp is mostly deserted. You can hike, ride or paddle for hours (perhaps even days) and never encounter another human being. If solitude is what you seek, the Green Swamp is a good place to start looking. With more than 70 miles of the Florida Trail within its boundaries, the Green Swamp is a great place for an overnight backpacking trip.

Colt Creek, relatively new to the Florida State Park Program, has more than 12 miles of great hiking and biking trails that meander through the pine forests, around cypress domes and across great open pastures. The park is also home to three waterways – Little Gator Creek, Gator Creek and the park's namesake Colt Creek.

This a good place to work on the Hiking and Backpacking Merit Badges. There's also unique flora and fauna so scouts can also work on the Fish & Wildlife Management Merit badge. They have identified more than 150 bird species, including the Eastern Bluebird, within the park's boundaries, as well as a variety of mammals such as the bobcat, river otter and Sherman's fox squirrel.

Scouts can also fish in three different lakes for catfish, sunshine bass, bream, bluegill, shell-cracker and largemouth bass. There's good bank fishing and 75-foot long fishing pier on Mac Lake. The lakes, dug in the 1990s as part of a lime rock mining operation, range in size from 2-25 acres and vary in depth from 12-50 feet.

The group campground can accommodate up to 60 people, but if you are looking for adventure, head into the woods where the Florida Panther still roams. Scouts can pitch tents at one of two primitive camps along the Flatwoods trail. But these are "leave No Trace" sites so pack out what you pack in. Take only pictures and leave only footprints.

Terry Tomalin
Scoutmaster
BSA Troop 219
Skyway District
West Central Florida Council
Jan. 24, 2016