

Big Pine Trail Guide

Cat-faced trees

You'll notice wide V-shaped scars on pine trunks throughout Big Pine. These "cat-faced" trees are remnants of turpentine, a huge industry in Florida in the early 20th century. Turpentine was used for everything from treating tuberculosis to cleaning carpets. It was made from pine resin, which was collected by making downward-pointing cuts (reminiscent of cat's whiskers) into the tree's sapwood and collecting the resin that flowed from the cuts. Resin is the tree's natural defense against wounds and insects.



Cat-faced pine

Beetle battle

The story starts in the 1920s, when people began to put out natural fires. Around Brooksville and elsewhere in Florida, loblolly pines spread into areas where natural fires would have kept them out. By the 1990s, age and drought had weakened the loblollies. A tiny insect called the southern pine beetle took advantage of this convenient food supply, and its populations exploded. Longleaf pines normally aren't affected by these beetles, but the drought lowered their resistance, and in 1999 the beetles started killing the trees. Quick action to cut the infested trees saved the remaining old-growth longleaf at Big Pine.



Southern pine beetle

Under reconstruction

Keep a lookout for patches of dead grass. Restoring Big Pine's old-growth forest includes killing invasive plants (such as cogon grass).



Cogon grass

You may also see dead brush as you walk the trails. We are restoring native ground cover by removing shrubby undergrowth accumulated during the years when there was little fire in Big Pine.

Burned and charred areas are signs of progress. Fire is essential to healthy, natural longleaf forests. It stimulates the growth of the grasses and wildflowers that make life possible for some of Florida's most distinctive wild residents, including gopher tortoises, American kestrels, and fox squirrels. Without fire, these animals can't find food.

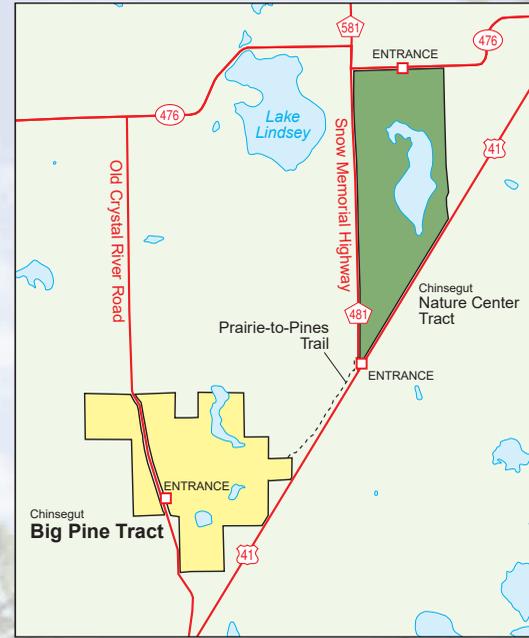


American kestrel



Carolina jessamine

You may continue your explorations along the Prairie-to-Pines Trail and the nearby Nature Center Tract of Chinsegut WEA.



Chinsegut Wildlife and Environmental Area Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

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Photography by Karla Brandt except Southern pine beetle (David T. Almquist, University of Florida, www.forestryimages.org) and American kestrel (Dave Menke, USFWS)

Longleaf range map adapted from Longleaf Alliance and from Cecil Frost (Tall Timbers Research Station, 1993)

Printed 06/2009



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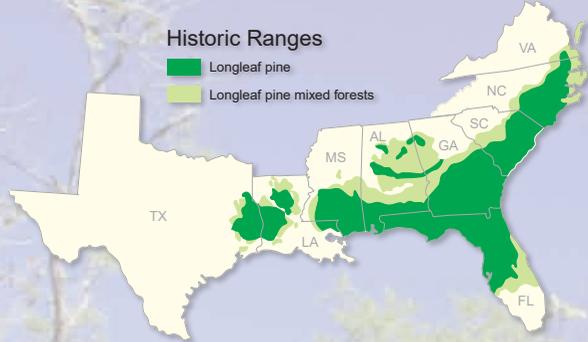


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Welcome to the Big Pine Tract of the Chinsegut Wildlife and Environmental Area

This forest is named for its venerable longleaf pines, which are giants not only in height but also in historical significance. Longleaf was once the dominant tree of the South, covering nearly 100 million acres from Virginia to Texas. During the many decades in America's history



when both commerce and war depended on wooden ships, longleaf provided enormous quantities of tar, pitch, turpentine, resin, and lumber, all mainstays of the southern economy

Longleaf pines are also mainstays of the South's natural history. They grow best with lots of room between them, which lets sunlight nourish lush layers of grasses and wildflowers that, in turn, support a rich array of wildlife.



Before restoration



Prescribed burning



After restoration

Here, these long-standing trees somehow escaped the fate of most of the South's longleaf, although Big Pine, too, has had its problems: starved for fire, attacked by insects, and invaded by exotic plants. Recovery has begun, and in time, Big Pine will look as it did when humans first laid eyes on it.

Trail Guide

Tortoise Loop (0.8 mile)

See some beautiful old longleaf pines, pass by a sinkhole, and go up a gentle rise to the highest point along Big Pine's trails. In warm weather, you may see a gopher tortoise browsing on the grassy trail edges.

Hammock Trail (0.2 mile)

Where the Tortoise and Longleaf loops intersect, you can take a path along the edge of a hardwood forest or "hammock."

Prairie-to-Pines Trail (2.0 miles)

Leave the tall pines behind and head to May's Prairie and the Nature Center trail loop along this scenic trail linking the two Chinsegut tracts. Areas of open pasture make it easy to spot the rolling terrain of the Brooksville Ridge.

Longleaf Loop (1.25 miles)

Watch for subtle changes in the forest as this trail dips gently down toward Burn's Prairie. Note the old-growth longleaf pines; their crowns start to flatten out when they approach their 100th year. You might see a gray fox, eastern towhee, barred owl, or red-tailed hawk. Look for animal tracks in the sandy roads. You might see butterflies flitting among the wildflowers.



Eastern towhee

Burn's Prairie Spur Trail (0.4 mile)

Burn's Prairie, 30 feet lower in elevation than the entrance kiosk, collects water from the lands all around it. Periods of drought allowed shrubs to take hold, and now the edge is walled in by a thicket of willow and buttonbush. Just a couple feet above the basin's bottom, you'll find a forest of red maple, sweet gum, pignut hickory, cabbage palm, and water oak. It's great habitat for warblers and woodpeckers.



*Downy woodpecker
(eyes closed while pecking)*



Gray fox

Trails at Big Pine Tract