

Guana River

Wildlife Management Area

What You Can Do

Step off the beaten path for a memorable experience at Guana River Wildlife Management Area. Whether hiking, bicycling, birding, horseback riding, hunting or fishing, adventurous recreationists will enjoy the diverse habitats at Guana River WMA. Come, discover and explore!

Planning Your Visit

Recreationists will find that Guana River WMA comprises areas of scrub, maritime hammocks, forested wetlands, pine flatwoods and much more. Birdwatchers and duck hunters know Guana River's salt marshes and wetlands attract thousands of migrating birds. Anglers bring poles and dip nets for catches of crabs and fish, while kayakers and canoeists paddle the waters of Lake Ponte Vedra. Miles of trails and unpaved roads wind their way through the uplands and past scenic overlooks – a bonus for hikers, off-road bicyclists and horseback riders.

Find information to plan your trip by visiting MyFWC.com/Recreation. Note that hunts occur on scheduled days, in specific areas. Be aware of hunting activities and restrictions posted online in the regulations summary and on signs posted at the entrances. If you hike during a seasonal hunt, wear bright orange clothing. Planning a picnic? Share your snacks with friends, but not the wildlife – for your safety and theirs.

Wildlife Viewing

Wildlife enthusiasts enjoy Guana River's rich mix of uplands and wetlands, which is a refuge for dozens of seasonal and year-round wildlife species. This coastal location also provides a needed stop for weary migratory birds to rest and refuel. During the peak spring and fall migrations, this Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail site is the best place in

fields of corn, beans, peas and pumpkins. A succession of Spanish, British and early settlers later built dikes, levees, ditches and roads to support farming, cattle, hog grazing and timber harvesting. Intense pine harvesting continued through the 70s.

A dam across Guana River was built between 1957 and 1961 to flood upstream marshes to create waterfowl habitat. The State purchased the land through the Conservation and Recreation Lands program in 1984, creating the Guana River WMA.

Today, FWC managers are restoring the pine forests and controlling the flow of water through the area, conserving the bounty of Guana River for wildlife and human visitors for years to come.

To add beaches and dunes to your coastal itinerary, stop at the adjacent 2,400-acre Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve. Climb atop the observation platforms in the winter and scan for gannets and jaegers offshore. The North Atlantic right whale is occasionally spotted in the winter months. These endangered, 50-ton giants routinely migrate to Florida's northeast coastal waters, the only known calving ground of the population, to give birth to their young.



Brown pelican



LZ Sparks

northeast Florida to see peregrine falcons (FloridaBirdingTrail.com). Use vantage points at Capo Creek and Lake Ponte Vedra to observe wintering white pelicans, as well as osprey, eagles, falcons and hawks during their fall migrations. Soaring swallow-tailed kites are a special summer treat. Wading birds such as black-crowned night-herons, roseate spoonbills, wood storks, ibis, egrets, herons and other water birds are commonly spotted at Big Savannah Pond and several other interior ponds.

Retreat to shady hammocks for a chance to hear resident woodpeckers and owls. The scrub hosts gopher tortoises and their tell-tale burrows. These and other upland areas shouldn't be overlooked in the spring, when many neo-tropical migrants, such as warblers, kinglets, thrushes and sparrows pause to rest on their flights back to northern breeding grounds. Request a free Guana River bird checklist online at MyFWC.com/Recreation. In addition to birds, watch for raccoons and white-tailed deer around the edges of the marshes. You are likely to spot alligators, turtles and the occasional river otter in the impoundments.

Hiking, Bicycling and Horseback Riding

Miles of loop trails and scenic roads are open for quiet, slow-paced exploration. Some trails swing close to the shorelines of Lake Ponte Vedra and numerous small ponds; others lead to observation platforms with magnificent marsh views. The unpaved roads are in good condition, but off-road bicycles are best suited for this terrain. Horses are prohibited during some hunting seasons; check the Guana River regulations summary for seasonal dates. The Roscoe Boulevard entrance features an equestrian parking area, which is indicated on the large map in this publication.

Paddling

Canoeists and kayakers can explore Lake Ponte Vedra along several paddling routes running both north and south. From Six Mile Landing, paddle about 2.5 miles south to the Lake Ponte Vedra tower and approximately 6 miles south to the dam. Distances paddled north from Six Mile Landing will vary with water levels and current flow. Paddlers can also launch from the dam.

Lake Ponte Vedra is open for recreational use from the Guana Dam to a line 2 miles north of the dam at all times. A sign marks this spot. For information on seasonal closing of the remainder of Lake Ponte Vedra (and the interior lakes) see the Guana regulations summary (public access).



LZ Sparks

Fishing

Lake Ponte Vedra yields excellent catches of redfish, sea trout, black drum, and is popular for crabbing. Fish from the dam and along the banks of impoundments and ponds, or launch your boat from one of two boat ramps (subject to seasonal closures and restrictions). Motors in the lake may not exceed 10 horsepower. Boat ramps are located at the dam and off A1A at Six Mile Landing.



FWC

Hunting

Guana River is a favorite destination for duck hunting in the fall, when hunters encounter blue-winged teal, mottled ducks, wood ducks and many other waterfowl species. Check the FWC's website for waterfowl season dates, bag limits and regulations. Deer, hog and squirrel hunting is popular throughout the fall. Check the Guana WMA hunting regulations for details about the spring turkey hunt and for season dates and bag limits for small game. Hunters must apply for quota permits for certain seasons. Florida's quota hunt program helps ensure a high quality hunting experience. Consult the FWC website for details: MyFWC.com/Hunting.



How to get to Guana River WMA

Guana River WMA is located midway between Jacksonville and St. Augustine. From I-95: Take exit 311 (SR 207) traveling north to U.S. Highway 1 North. Then take A1A north about 9 miles to the area entrance on left.

What it costs to visit

The Department of Environmental Protection charges an access fee to enter at the dam. Six Mile Landing boat ramp and Roscoe entrances are free, although subject to seasonal closures and restrictions. To hunt or fish you must possess the appropriate license and permit.

Want to know more?

MyFWC.com/Recreation

Need a hunting or fishing license?

Toll-free at (888) HUNT-FLORIDA (486-8356) or 1-888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356), or MyFWC.com/License

Area lodging, camping and restaurants

St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & the Beaches Visitor and Convention Bureau
Phone: 1-800-653-2489

Website: FloridaHistoricCoast.com

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Guana River Wildlife Management Area



Welcome to Guana River WMA, a natural coastal area with a rich history. Wind-sculpted forests, shady hammocks, scenic vistas of salt marshes and open water – these habitats follow the ancient marine terraces and dune ridges formed by sea level changes over millions of years. Fresh- and saltwater marshes fill the troughs between the pine flatwoods, scrub and hammocks that flourish on the higher ridges. The Atlantic Ocean to the east continues to shape this landscape through onshore winds and daily tides. Maritime conditions at Guana are similar to those of Georgia's Sea Islands.

This WMA includes a 10-mile stretch of wetland habitat critical for wildlife. Today, the area is an oasis amid heavy development along Florida's northeast coast. Yet, indigenous people once hunted deer, fished and harvested shellfish here, leaving behind bone and shell middens. Archaeologists discovered a large shell ring of oyster, clam, conch and coquina on Guana believed to be the remains of a ceremonial center.

When Europeans arrived in the 16th century, they found the Timucuan, descendants of these earlier people, living in villages surrounded by

Fire and Water Help to Create Wildlife Habitat

Water

It's water, water, *everywhere* at Guana—including freshwater, saltwater and brackish water. Flooded twice daily by tides, acres of salt marshes form a narrow fringe along the Tolomato River, defining Guana's western boundary on the Intracoastal Waterway. These nutrient-rich salt marshes are dissected by meandering brackish creeks, which form productive nurseries for fish and crab.



Visitors entering the WMA at the southern entrance cross a dam at Lake Ponte Vedra, a narrow, dramatic waterway. The dam was originally constructed when private landowners wanted to improve habitat for fish and waterfowl. The dam created Lake Ponte Vedra, which is brackish because fresh and salt water flow both ways through the water control structure. Managers adjust water levels and salinities by manipulating this flow. In 1984, the State purchased this property, and the water control structure was rebuilt in 1988.

Today, the dam and other less-conspicuous water control structures scattered throughout Guana help biologists create productive habitat for

wildlife. Since much of Florida's coastal habitat was lost to development, Guana's impoundments provide alligators, largemouth bass, wood ducks, wood storks and other resident and migratory wildlife places to find refuge, feed and raise young.



Managers keep wetlands healthy by mimicking natural cycles of flooding and drying, using dams, spillways and freshwater wells at Big Savannah, Little Savannah, Booth's Pond, Cook's Pond and Diego Pond. Weather patterns, tides and habitat requirements for wildlife determine the timetable for water flow. By controlling the timing, amount and type (salt or fresh) of water flow, managers encourage desirable plant growth in the wetlands for the birds and fish dependent on them. These cycles occur daily in tidal marshes and less predictably in freshwater wetlands, where weather dictates water levels. Natural drought and artificial drawdowns allow mucky bottom sediments to dry and harden. Cattails and other undesirable plants die outright or are burned to release nutrients and create a fertile seedbed for new, native plants to move into when water refills the wetlands. These plants provide food and habitat for shrimp, crab and smaller fish that game fish feed upon.

Generally, water levels are slowly increased through summer and fall, and intermittently lowered from fall through spring. Deeper water drowns undesirable plants, but helps grow wildlife food such as widgeon grass. Deeper areas are stocked with fish and are favored by reptiles and amphibians. In most wetlands, water levels are gradually lowered in the fall to coincide with the arrival of migratory waterfowl, common snipe, shorebirds and wading birds. Receding water concentrates prey for wading birds and exposes muddy shorelines—a favorite shorebird feeding area.

Prescribed Fire

Prior to human settlement, lightning-ignited fires swept across southern pine forests nearly every year, releasing nutrients, stimulating seed germination and preventing the build-up of plant materials that can cause catastrophic wildfires. Fires burn at different rates and intensities, depending on conditions including the habitat, weather and fuel load. Guana's biologists use prescribed fires every five to six years to keep the vegetation in a constant state of renewal.



Wayne Mihalovich

Fire influences plant growth that provides food and cover for wildlife and is an integral part of management at Guana River.



Only a few months after a prescribed burn, the natural area will be lush and wildlife will thrive. Fire helps regulate the plants many animals need for food and shelter.

Prescribed fire helps keep Guana's habitats healthy, even in the wetlands. Once wet areas are drained and dried, wetland plants are burned to rid areas of excessive cattail growth and to release nutrients into the soil. When water refills these areas, native plants take root, and fish and wildlife populations rebound.

Before conducting a prescribed fire, FWC managers create a detailed, area-specific burn plan that outlines how the burn is to be conducted. They clear fire lanes and burn only during favorable wind and weather conditions to protect surrounding communities. Prescribed fire rejuvenates the land, which benefits those animals that depend on Guana River's habitat.



Outstanding Views

Viewing towers provide stunning, bird's-eye views of the Tolomato River, Lake Ponte Vedra, Capo Creek and salt marshes; it's hard to beat these vantage points. Shallow marshes nestle against the pine- and oak-studded uplands, creating rich feeding grounds for wading birds, rails, kingfishers, deer and raccoons.



Wintering Visitors

The large white pelican is mostly a winter visitor in Florida. Watch for these graceful, strong fliers soaring and gliding above the coastline or floating on the water. They catch prey differently than brown pelicans, often feeding cooperatively by herding fish into shallow water, before scooping them up. Brown pelicans generally feed by making dramatic aerial plunge-dives.



What's Biting?

Fishing in Lake Ponte Vedra is first-rate for redfish, sea trout, croaker and black drum – or go net some colorful blue crabs. Fish from the dam and along the banks of impoundments and ponds.



Roseate Spoonbills

The delicate pink hues of the roseate spoonbill are often spotted at Big Savannah, feeding alongside the heavier-bodied black-and-white wood stork. Spoonbills sweep flattened, spoon-shaped bills through the water, grasping prey that the bills touch; wood storks submerge their bills and wait for prey to swim between the open tips. By feeding in small flocks, these waders increase the chance of finding prey stirred from hiding places.



The black-bellied whistling duck is a resident species that sometimes nests at Guana.

Destination for Ducks

Overlooks on Capo Creek and Lake Ponte Vedra provide a view of the marshes and woodlands that attract thousands of ducks, American coots, common gallinules and pied-billed grebes each winter. Guana offers excellent waterfowl hunting in fall and winter. Hunters will find a variety of ducks, ranging from teal to diving ducks.

What Does This Wild Land Grow?



Salt Marsh

Salt marsh makes up most of the natural area at Guana. Estuarine salt marsh along the Tolomato River creates a nutrient-rich, sheltered haven for the young of many species of fishes and crabs. This highly productive salt marsh begins at headwaters of tidal creeks and is flooded by tides and dissected by meandering creeks.

Pine Flatwoods

As the elevation increases, stands of pines begin to dominate the uplands. Slash pines are the most common tree here, with some pond and longleaf pines, cedar and bay. The groundcover beneath the pines is a thick growth of saw palmetto, gallberry and grasses. Restoration through selective thinning and regular burning is ongoing.

Scrub

Between the pine flatwoods and maritime hammocks, stands of oak scrub grow on sandy rises. Myrtle oak, sand live oak and Chapman's oak form dense thickets over saw palmettos. Scrub requires regular burning to regenerate.

Forested Upland/ Maritime Hammock

One type of forested upland found at Guana is the maritime hammock that borders Lake Ponte Vedra's wetlands. Live oaks, red cedars, cabbage palms, magnolias and other hardwoods form a shady evergreen forest. Lovely as they are, the trees we enjoy today are probably secondary growth, a "second" forest that has grown up since land use and human occupation altered the original landscape.

Freshwater Marsh and Forested Wetlands

Except for the brackish waters of Lake Ponte Vedra and Diego Pond, Guana River's interior marshes are freshwater and support a greater variety of plants than brackish and estuarine marshes. Marshes are treeless wetlands; swamps at Guana sprout gums, oaks and cypress.

Atlantic Ocean

Legend

PLANT COMMUNITIES	
	Coastal Uplands
	Forested Uplands
	Forested Wetlands
	Freshwater Marsh
	Pine Flatwoods
	Scrub
	Wet Flatwoods
	Salt Marsh
	Open Water
	WMA Boundary
	Major Road
	WMA Road
	Trail
	State Road
	County Road
	Seasonally Wet Trail
	Hunter Check Station
	Observation Tower
	Lake
	River
	Private Property
	Closed Area
	Designated Entrance
	Parking
	Interpretive Kiosk
	Restrooms
	Picnic Area
	Equestrian Parking
	Fishing
	Boat Ramp
	Wildlife Viewing

These classifications are condensed from the very detailed classifications used by biologists to manage wildlife habitat on this area.