

THE WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

ST. FRANCIS TRAIL

There are many public natural areas within an hour's drive of Victoria Park — State Forests, State Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, county parks, St. Johns River Water Management District areas. The largest by far, at almost 400,000 acres, is Ocala National Forest. This area is vast enough that entire ecosystems are named and represented : Hopkins Prairie, The Big Scrub, Alexander Springs, Oklawaha River, and countless lakes and ponds. Numerous dirt roads penetrate the forest, and driving these public roads provides excellent opportunities to look for wildlife. I've seen bobcats, coyotes, deer, and about a dozen black bears while slowly driving these roads over the past 9 years. (If you do, make sure you get an Ocala National Forest map from one of the ranger stations)

And, of course, there are many hiking trails throughout the forest, including the Florida Scenic Trail which traverses much of our state. At this time, the main recreation centers in the forest, which offer swimming, camping, picnicking, and boating, may still be closed. But there are still places to hike. The closest trail to Victoria Park is the St. Francis Trail, just about 10 miles away. Take route 44 (New York Ave.) west from DeLand, cross the St. Johns River, and then turn right onto route 42. In less than 1/2 mile look for the “River Forest” signs and turn right onto a dirt road that brings you to the trail’s parking area and information kiosk/map on the left.

The entire St. Francis Trail is a 7 1/2-mile round-trip that takes you to the St. Johns River and back. For a 2.8-mile shortcut, turn left when you reach a yellow-marked trail that makes a half-loop and ends back on the original trail a short distance farther from where you left it.

Just turn right at that junction to return to the parking area.

The trail is completely shaded, winding its way through a beautiful forest of sabal palm, sweet gum, southern magnolia, laurel oak, and tall loblolly pine. Several sections include boardwalks across small streams and wetlands. The calls of frogs and songs of birds are the only sounds. (It's probably a good idea to apply insect repellant in case deer flies, mosquitoes, or ticks are a problem.)