

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

HONTOON ISLAND STATE PARK

On these hot summer days it's tempting to stay in the air-conditioned comfort of your home or hang out at the pool. However, it's still possible to enjoy a visit to one of the many public natural areas that have been preserved in Volusia County. One of my favorite places is Hontoon Island State Park, a 1650-acre island on the St. John's River, just 20 minutes from Victoria Park.

Hontoon Island is accessible only by boat, and the Park operates a free ferry to bring visitors from a parking lot on the other side of the river every few minutes. It takes just 2 minutes to

cross the river, and once you're in the Park there are several miles of beautiful hiking trails through pine woods and dense forests of live oak, magnolia, and palm. The most popular trail is the 1 1/2-mile (3 miles round-trip) shaded Hammock Nature Trail that ends at a large shell mound beside a cypress swamp along the banks of the river. This is where the native Timucuan people discarded the shells of snails thousands of years ago. There are 6 additional miles of trails through the Park's pine forests, some of which intersect the Hammock Nature Trail and thus make it possible to return to the start via a different route. You can also bring a bicycle on the Park's ferry and enjoy a scenic, comfortable ride along these 6 miles of pine forest trails.

The Park also has docks where people can park their own canoes, kayaks, or pontoon boats — the best way to experience Florida's abundant wildlife is from its many waterways. Alligators, turtles, manatees, herons, egrets, limpkins, ospreys, barred owls, and many colorful

songbirds can be seen around Hontoon island. The Park also has a campground and rustic cabins for those who want to stay overnight. There is also a picnic area, pavilion, playground, fishing areas, ranger station, store, and even a museum that displays artifacts found on the island.

Hontoon Island is located on River Ridge Road and can be reached from route 44 and Hontoon Road in Deland.