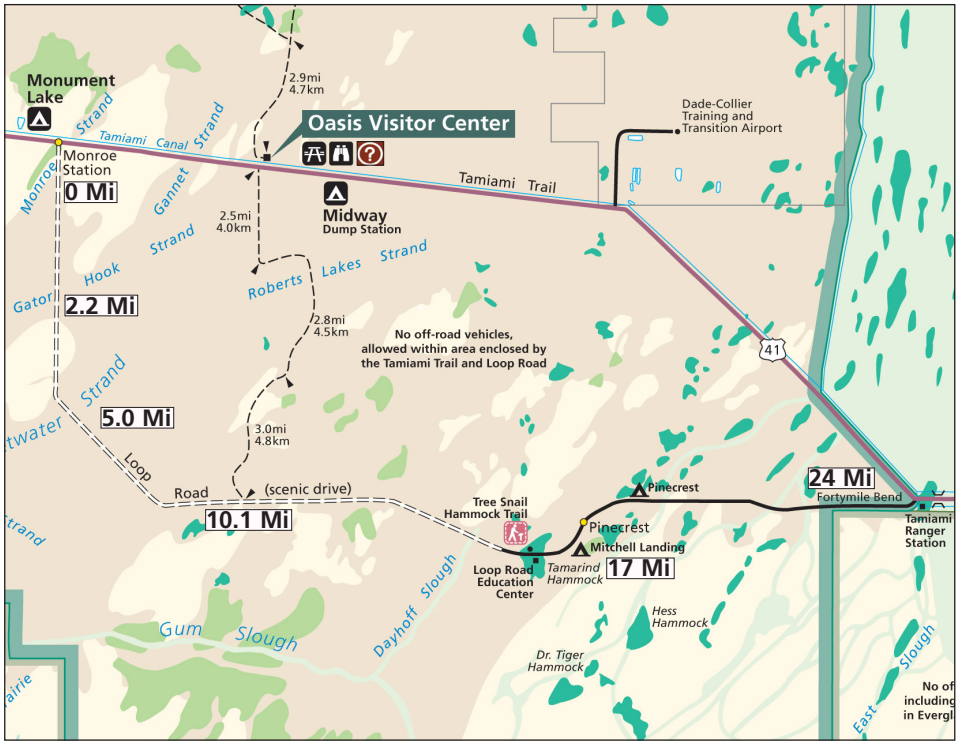
# Big Cypress: A Look Inside

## Loop Road Scenic Drive

Enjoy the journey, not just the destination. Drive this scenic road, and explore some of the more remote areas of the Preserve. Loop Road, otherwise known as County Road 94, was created out of a dispute over the official route of the Tamiami Trail. The road is gravel for most of the route. We recommend asking a ranger about the current road conditions before travel.

Loop Road is 24 miles long and is south of the current path of Tamiami Trail. It spans three counties: Collier to the west, Monroe in the center, and Miami-Dade to the east. Visitors will pass through mostly cypress swamp, which are flooded forests in the summer wet season (May through October), but mostly dry in the winter, except for the areas of lowest elevation - the cypress strands.




**Map of the Loop Road Scenic Drive starting from the intersection of HWY 41 and Loop Road at Monroe Station. Mileages are indicated in a counter clockwise pattern.**

### Mile 0 Monroe Station

Four miles west of Oasis Visitor Center, or 15 miles east of the Big Cypress Swamp Welcome Center, Monroe Station is one of the original buildings along Tamiami Trail. Completed in 1928 or 1929, as one of six service stations built at regular intervals along the road to assist travelers - providing gasoline, refreshments, and assistance for broken-down vehicles. In later years, it was also a tavern and roadside inn. The historic building has stood through many eras and is now closed due to structural problems. It marks the northwestern end of Loop Road, and today is used as a parking area for off-road vehicles. There are off-road vehicle trails here that go both north and southwest into the Big Cypress backcountry. These trails are primarily for the use of all-terrain vehicles and swamp buggies – vehicles often built by their owners and specially designed for driving in the swamp. Off-road vehicle permits are required. The trails may also be accessed on foot or bicycle depending upon conditions.

### Mile 0.1 - 0.4 Beware of Aliens!

You are surrounded by dense vegetation along the roadway – mostly native shrubs, such as the rounded leaves of coco plum, and tall sabal palms – the state tree of Florida. Sadly, not all the vegetation is native to Florida. This region is under alien invasion by many exotic species, including a shrub with compound leaves and clusters of bright red berries, Brazillian pepper. This plant is related to poison ivy, and may cause a similar rash.

Another well-known exotic to the region is the Burmese python, however your chances of encountering the large snake while here is extremely small.

Most snakes in the region are native, however – of the 30 species found here, the ones most often sighted include the black racer, the yellow rat snake, and various water snakes. These are all nonvenemous and serve important ecological roles in the swamp.

Any snake, or other wildlife encountered, should be treated with respect and not approached, harassed, or fed.

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# Mile 0.4 - 5.0 Loop Road Scenic

**Mile 0.4 Hunters Welcome**
Here is the Everglades Conservation and Sportsman's Club, which is one of the many private properties that exist in the Preserve. People who bought land prior to the establishment of Big Cypress National Preserve in 1974, retain rights to their land, as established in the Preserve's enabling legislation, along with many traditional uses of the swamp. Swamp buggies are visible here beyond the fencing, and many local hunters are members of this club. They primarily hunt white-tailed deer, turkey, wild hog, and small game in the Preserve.

**Mile 0.8 – 0.9 Seas of Sawgrass**
Look east to see a sawgrass prairie, with a cypress strand visible beyond. The sawgrass is a dominant prairie species, but ironically it is not grass, it is sedge. Prairies are flooded for less time out of the year, on average, than the slightly lower regions which have cypress trees. Every inch of elevation change counts in the Preserve. These open regions are often good spots to search for raptors, birds of prey that tend to perch in prominent locations such as atop standing dead trees. Drive another mile for a second sawgrass prairie.

**Red-shouldered hawk surveying the area for its next meal.**

The red-shouldered hawk is the most common hawk encountered, and its loud cry is often heard before the bird itself is seen. Northern harriers are also spotted cruising low over the grasses, searching for their rodent prey. After dark, the "night shift" aerial hunters emerge: such as the barred owl, and the smaller insect-eating nighthawks and bats.

**2.2 Gator Hook - Walking the Rails**
Gator Hook Trail is visible to the east, next to a picnic area, complete with pit-toilets and garbage bins. The unmarked trail, itself a 5-mile swamp walk, goes east along one of the historic tram roads, originally built by loggers for small trains to transport cypress trees out of the swamp. Some of the original cypress logs laid down for the tram rails can still be seen, as the wood is very resistant to decay.

The logging industry of South Florida dwindled by the 1950s when most of the marketable wood was harvested. Any large cypress seen today is second growth, few of the original giants remain. The small cypress found in prairie habitats are considered "dwarf" and were not of interest to the loggers. These trees are stunted due to lack of nutrients. Though they look like "young" trees, many of them are hundreds of years old. They are the identical species as the larger cypress found in domes and strands.

**Mile 3.1 – 3.2 Cypress Strand**
To the east at this point along the road there is a good example of a cypress strand. Strands are areas where the elevation drops and more nutrients collect to support larger trees. As an adaptation for stability, and to help withstand hurricane-force winds, cypress knees project upward from the roots. Looking more like organic stalagmites these knees serve to lock together the roots of various trees forming a single mat, which is much more resistant to uprooting than a lone shallow-rooted cypress.

Can you spot any knees among the larger cypress trees and standing water?

**Mile 4.1 Monroe County**
This is the county line, where Collier County to the north meets Monroe County to the south, with road signs to mark the change. Monroe County is more associated with the Florida Keys than the swamp. In actuality, for a long period of time, Key West was best accessed by boat, from the Gulf Coast side of Florida. The majority of the county is on the mainland.

The county receives annual federal payments to help offset losses in property taxes due to nontaxable federal

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**Remember, the Preserve is their home and you are the guest. Respect wildlife and observe from a safe distance.**

# Drive. Look, and Experience. Miles 7.7 - 12.6

lands that are within the Preserve and Everglades National Park.

**Mile 5.0 Sweetwater Strand**
Sweetwater Strand is one of the deepest strands you'll go through along Loop Road, and a popular destination for travelers on this road. It is a shining example of a cypress strand. The cypress trees here have grown quite large, aided by the rich nutrients that collect in the deep strand, and are covered by epiphytes – bromeliads, Spanish moss, and ferns.

The large trees provide a wind-break and shelter to many other organisms. Feel how the air is cooler, and moist? There is usually wildlife as well– both alligators and birds know this is a good source of fish, and the branches above

**Sweetwater Strand is a popular spot along Loop Road.**

harbor songbirds such as the northern parula and black & white warblers.

**Mile 7.7 Head East towards Miami**
The second curve in the road turns you to proceed in generally an eastern direction.

**Mile 9.7 – 10**
**An Inhospitable Swamp**
Into the mid-1900s, the Big Cypress Swamp and the Everglades were considered swampy wastelands by many. Efforts were made to "tame" the region – including the construction of roads, such as this one, canals to drain the swamp, and levees to control flooding. An aerial view of today's Preserve still shows evidence of farming attempts– some prairies have the tell-

**Nearby abandoned plowlines.**

tale geometric pattern of plow lines. Farming was difficult here, however – due to the lack of soil and the extreme flood/drought seasonal rainfall pattern. Today, most canals have been blocked to slow or stop their flow.

**Mile 9.8 – Culvert 30**
This deeper culvert and the surrounding water is more permanently flooded than the surrounding region. Thus as winter dry season continues and water levels drop, fish and other aquatic wildlife concentrate here. One clue to a frequent resident of this area is provided by the large shiny green leaves that can be seen above most of the other vegetation and fluttering in the breeze – the aptly named alligator flag. It only grows in deeper areas such as this, and can be used to identify good alligator habitat. Visitors from northern lands might recognize another water-loving plant – the narrow leaves of a willow.

**Mile 10.1 The Florida Trail**
Here is the southernmost point of the Florida National Scenic Trail, a 1,400-mile hiking trail that extends north up the entire state. The portion through Big Cypress is a swamp walk, and hikers must be prepared for walking in water. This first hiking trail extends eight miles up to the Oasis Visitor Center on Tamiami Trail and easily takes a full day to hike. It's not recommended to start the trip any later than 10:00 AM. Remember that travelling in the backcountry requires a permit.

**Mile 12 Middle of Nowhere**
The midpoint of Loop Road is marked with signs. There is also another large culvert here with alligator flag. You know what that means: keep an eye out for alligators!

**The locally endangered wood stork may often be spotted along Loop Road.**

**Mile 12.2 Pineland = Dry Land**
Slash pines are visible here to the southern side. This region is slightly higher than the cypress, and these pines are more traditional conifers than their cypress neighbors – they do not like to grow in water, and they are evergreen.

The slash pine habitat is familiar to those from farther north in Florida. It is also the home of one of our most endangered residents: the red-cockaded woodpecker. This bird is unique in that it only nests in living pine trees – using the sap around the entrance to protect the nest from predators and pests.

**Mile 12.7 –13.6 Culvert Crossings**
This section of Loop Road has many small culverts. Depending on the time of year, these may dry up as water levels drop during the winter. Not only to protect the road from washing out, these culverts allow a more natural flow of water southwards. The Preserve's

**The elusive river otter is one of many creatures that call Big Cypress National Preserve home**

# Mile 12.7 – 24, Beyond the Cypress

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freshwater is vital to the Ten Thousand Island region of Everglades National Park. Wherever water remains, take time to stop and look for wildlife – river otters are often spotted in Big Cypress.

**Mile 15.6 Tree Snail Hammock Trail**
The Loop Road Eduacation Center is operated by Everglades National Park for educational groups with reservations. Across the street on the north side, the Tree Snail Hammock Trail is maintained by Big Cypress National

**Liguus tree snails are a special sight throughout this area.**

Preserve, and is open to the public. A hardwood hammock is a higher and drier habitat with broadleaf trees such as gumbo limbo. It's a shady resting place where wildlife can "put their feet up" out of the water. The trail is named for the endemic tree snails that can be found here, surviving the dry season by securing themselves tightly to the trunks of trees. Their shells are beautiful to see, but take care not to harm these delicate creatures. The trail here is short and easy, providing an opportunity to stretch your legs.

**Mile 16.3 – 16.7 Slash Pines**
Slash pines dominate this region and beyond. The name "Pinecrest" once referred to this whole area, just west of the Miami-Dade County line, and was in reference to the higher slash pines that looked like a ridge or crest when seen from afar.

**Mile 16.5 - 18 Welcome to Pinecrest**
This stretch of the road is what remains of the town of Pinecrest. It is here, some say, the infamous gangster Al Capone had a home, hotel, and brothel. There was also the "Gator Hook Lodge." The lodge was a rough and rowdy bar and dance club from the late 1920s to the 1970s. In later years, it was also known for the fiddle-player Ervin Rouse. Rouse was famous for writing the musical hit "The Orange Blossom Special." He retired to Pinecrest to escape, living alone in a small shack with two dogs, but this aging old fiddle-player would bring the bar to life whenever he played. The area was featured along with pictures in the August 1976, issue of National Geographic.

The town of Pinecrest once had a population of nearly 400 at its peak in the 1930s, the town started as the center of operations during road construction in the 1920s. Please respect private property.

**Welcome sign that once adorned the entrance to Gator Hook Lodge**

**Mile 17 Mitchell's Landing**
This campground is to the south. This dirt road has campsites scattered along it and is named for the airboat launch at the end. Private airboats are allowed access here, so long as there is enough water and visitors have the proper permits. At nearly one mile beyond Mitchell's Landing is a primitive campground called Pinecrest. It's located to the north and is a single mowed field.

**Mile 21.4 Boundary Line**
Everglades National Park is to the south and east. Big Cypress Preserve is north and west. There is off-road vehicle access by airboat with proper permits.

**Mile 21.9 –23.9 Home Sweet Home**
The houses along the road are home to several members of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida- respect their privacy.There have been people inhabiting this region for over 2,000 years. The first to visit and hunt in Big Cypress were American Indians – mainly the Calusa, having more permanent settlements along the coast of South Florida, but making hunting trips inland. They were sadly wiped out by the 19th century, by Old World diseases brought with the invading Spaniards and Europeans. The native peoples currently in the region are the Miccosukee and Seminole tribes, who were pushed south by European expansion and persecution, and settled here from more northern homelands. There are reservations farther east and north, as well.

**Mile 24 "40-Mile Bend"**
The 40-Mile Bend Check Station is for hunters entering or leaving the region, and is staffed by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. This small building marks the end of Loop Road, and a bend in Tamiami Trail. Since you're about 40 miles from Miami this is called "40 Mile Bend" If you turn right onto Tamiami Trail you will find Shark Valley four miles to the east. If you turn left, you can reach Big Cypress Oasis Visiter Center, 15 miles away.

Loop Road Scenic Drive is a great way to experience the local region. However to have a true swamp experience, you need to get out of the car and get your feet wet.

For more information about Loop Road, or another topic related to the Preserve, please contact our visitor centers at: 239-695-4759, or 239-695-1201.

For information about off-road vehicle permits and information, please call 239-695-1205 for details.

For emergencies, please dial 9-1-1, or Dispatch at 239-788-0511.



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