

Everglades By Car

A Narrated Audio Tour Through Everglades National Park

Featuring the Nature Recordings of Lang Elliott

Written and Produced by Larry Perez
Narrated by Larry Perez and David Hennessey

Track 1: An Introduction to the Everglades

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

Welcome to Everglades National Park! We're about to lead you on an excursion through one of North America's most unique landscapes—the Florida Everglades. Established in 1947, the park now embraces nearly 1.5 million acres—making Everglades the third largest national park in the lower 48 states! And you are about to experience this treasure first-hand!

But before we get started, we've got to make sure you're properly equipped. If you haven't done so already, be sure to stop at one of the many visitor centers found throughout the park. Spend some time touring the exhibits or viewing one of the introductory park films. Guided ranger programs, boat and tram tours are available year-round, so be sure to inquire about times and meeting places to make the most of your visit. And pick up a park map—you'll find it useful for getting around in the Everglades.

Once you've had a look around and gotten your bearings, it's time to get started! While driving through the park, it's important to also remember a few rules of the road. The use of seat belts is required in the state of Florida and should be worn at all times for your safety. And we know you'll want to stop several times along the way to take pictures or view wildlife, so be sure to pull completely off the road and onto the wide shoulders. Posted speed limits change throughout the park and are strictly enforced, so take it slow and soak in the scenery.

[Crows Caw]

Oh, and that reminds me—be sure to watch out for our wildlife. Crows, deer, snakes, frogs and even alligators are often found on the main park road, so keep a sharp eye out for anything on the street.

Now get ready for one of the most picturesque drives in the state! The park road stretches nearly 38 miles southwest to Flamingo and takes most visitors about 1 hour to drive. Along the way, you'll find a variety of stopping points with short trails and overlooks, each of which introduces you to a different South Florida habitat. The park stays open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—so don't worry—you'll have plenty of time to see it all. So sit back and relax as we begin to explore the beauty of the Everglades!

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 1. At this time, go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 2 during your drive between the Main Entrance Station and Royal Palm.

Track 2: Main Entrance Station to Royal Palm

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

Once past the park's main entrance, you are greeted by a seemingly endless expanse of open grasslands. Though relatively dry in the winter months, this landscape is seasonally inundated by our heavy summer rains, which leave behind a shimmering layer of water that stands roughly one to two feet in depth. It is for areas such as these, where grasslands blend peacefully with shimmering, boundless waters that the Everglades are known as the "River of Grass".

Like all rivers, the waters of Everglades National Park flow with a slight current. Due to the very gradual changes of elevation, the flow of this water is nearly undetectable with the naked eye. As you drive between the Main Entrance and Royal Palm, you cross an area known as Taylor Slough. Sloughs are low-lying areas of land which serve to channel large volumes of water southward, emptying ultimately into either Florida Bay or the Gulf of Mexico. The newly constructed Taylor Slough Bridge over which you'll be driving was completed in October of 2000. This slightly elevated stretch of road ensures the unimpeded flow of water through Taylor Slough.

It's easy to find your way around Everglades National Park. Signs along the main park road will direct you to the various points of interest in the area. As you make your way across Taylor Slough, keep an eye out to your right for the sign to the Royal Palm Visitor Center. You'll be approaching the turn off for Royal Palm shortly, so be prepared to slow down and make your first left.

The abundance of shallow water and thick vegetation in the sloughs provides the perfect refuge for a variety of Everglades life. Colorful wading birds stand motionless in the grasses, waiting to ambush whatever fish may wander by. Alligators can often be seen lounging in the culverts alongside the road. And a whole army of amphibians lie hidden among the shallows. These include pig frogs [*pig frog grunts*], Southern leopard frogs [*southern leopard frog croaks*], and the small but noisy cricket frogs [*cricket frog clicks*]. Visitors who stop to admire this landscape might be treated to a symphony of their unusual songs.

[Chorus of singing frogs and toads]

By now, you've probably seen several signs along the road urging you to watch out for Florida panthers. Florida panthers differ very little from the mountain lions and cougars found throughout North America. In fact, they are the same species and, like their distant relatives, they tend to be most active during the early evening and morning. But due in part to their critically endangered status, sightings of the Florida panther are rare at best. A person could spend years exploring the vastness of the Everglades without ever laying eyes on one of these secretive creatures. But keep your eyes open—this area is known panther habitat!

As you continue to follow the signs to Royal Palm from the Main Park Road, you will further explore the waters of Taylor Slough. Sawgrass dominates these open, wet prairies though they are occasionally punctuated with the delicate white flowers of the spider lily, stands of tall, slender cattails, or small pockets of shrubby vegetation known as tree islands. But by far it is the towering royal palms, growing to heights of 80 feet or more, that dominate this flat landscape.

In fact, the visitor center you are approaching was named for the stand of royal palms found here. These majestic and beautiful palms were not known to grow wild in Florida prior to their discovery on this remote island in the Everglades. Because of their significance, the area was designated as Royal Palm State Park in 1916, more than thirty years prior to the establishment of Everglades National Park. Today, the royal palms that can be seen in the distance to your right remain remnants of one of the few documented wild populations known to exist in the entire state of Florida.

Whether you are a first-time visitor or an Everglades veteran, the Royal Palm Visitor Center is still one of the best areas of the park to find wildlife. Lucky visitors will get to spot alligators, birds, fish, turtles, snakes, otters and more amidst a beautiful backdrop of tropical forest and open glade along both the Gumbo Limbo and Anhinga Trails. Snacks and beverages, though available at the visitor center, cannot be taken on any trails, so be sure to eat before walking. For their own safety, pets are not allowed on any trails in the park and smoking on park trails is strictly prohibited. Both the Anhinga and Gumbo Limbo Trails are self-guided and only half a mile in length, so be sure to take a bit of time to explore these two magnificent areas at Royal Palm.

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 2. At this time, go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 3 during your drive between Royal Palm and Long Pine Key.

Track 3: Royal Palm to Long Pine Key

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

After encountering some of our wildlife at Royal Palm, some people might think twice about camping in the Everglades. But for those that are able to put their worries behind them, camping here can be a once in a lifetime experience! The next six miles of your trip will wind from Royal Palm to Long Pine Key, where you'll find one of the most popular campgrounds in the park. Both tents and RVs can be accommodated, though hookups are not available at any of the sites. Reservations are not generally necessary during our slow summer season, but campers ought to be prepared for heat, rain and insects. Winter months in the 'Glades are perfect for sleeping under the stars, but campers ought to phone ahead for availability and to make reservations.

As you work your way from Royal Palm, take note of the scenery around you, as you're about to transition between two different ecosystems in the park. To the south along the main park road, you will begin to find samplings of the pine forests for which Long Pine Key is named. To the North, you will continue to encounter the boundless expanse of sawgrass prairie that is the "River of Grass".

Everglades National Park preserves only the lower one-fifth of the historic Everglades ecosystem. But it is here, at the southernmost tip of the Florida peninsula, that visitors encounter the only subtropical wilderness of the continental United States. Due to its proximity to the true tropics, the Everglades climate is ideal for the growth of many unusual, tropical hardwood trees with names like gumbo limbo, strangler fig, poisonwood, and paradise tree. Many of these trees can be seen growing together in clusters that seemingly emerge from the horizon, disrupting the otherwise monotonous landscape of the open sawgrass prairies.

Trees more familiar to the northern visitor, such as oaks, cypress, willows, and red maples also grow within these tropical tree clusters. It's from this beautiful blending of the tropical and temperate climates that the Everglades received their rich biological diversity.

By now you may have already noticed some unusual equipment on your drive along the main park road. Depth gauges, hydrologic data loggers, insect traps, drift fences, and transects are but a few of the many tools scientists use to learn more about the Everglades ecosystem. Park rangers are always happy to discuss the research projects being performed at the park. The opportunity to study a healthy, natural area such as this is one of the most valuable benefits derived from our national parks. The work our scientists do today may ultimately yield the key to a healthy Everglades forever.

The Long Pine Key Camping and Picnic area is a great place to spend an hour—or spend the night! Restrooms, picnic benches, grills and water fountains are available for day visitors and accommodations can be arranged for overnight stays. A twenty-five mile

hiking trail system is available for would-be adventurers, as well as a shorter, half-mile nature loop for the first-timer.

[Crows Caw]

And always remember, whether you're spending the night or enjoying a peaceful meal in the wilderness, be sure to secure your food properly. Crows and raccoons are much smarter than most people give them credit for! And remember—the feeding of wildlife in the park is strictly prohibited both for your own safety and the well-being of the animals. Have fun exploring the Long Pine Key area and remember to keep your camera handy—you never know what you'll find out among the pines!

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 3. At this time, go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 4 during your drive between Long Pine Key and the Pinelands.

Track 4: Long Pine Key to Pinelands

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

The next two miles of your journey will take you between Long Pine Key and the Pinelands Trail. Along the way, note the tall stands of pine forest on either side of your vehicle. Dade County Pine is the towering species here, growing to heights of 80 feet or more. The dense understory of these forests is dominated by sabal palms and saw palmettos, though a variety of grasses, vines and wildflowers are found here. These pinelands are considered to be the most botanically diverse ecosystem in the Everglades.

It's important to drive through these pine trees slowly, since you're now traveling up the mountain of Everglades National Park! Though you might not realize it, these magnificent pine forests grow on the highest point of elevation in the area. Here, a limestone formation known as the Atlantic coastal ridge thrusts a whopping eight feet above sea level. This ridge continues in a northeastern direction out of the park, following the path of modern-day US1. Historically, this ridge formed the eastern lip of the flooded Everglades and supported the growth of a continuous stand of pine forest that extended from Long Pine Key to North Miami. Today, development seriously threatens the continued existence of these imperiled areas and has left only two percent of these pine forests intact outside of Everglades National Park.

South Florida is the lightning capital of North America, registering more strikes than anywhere else. In the early summer months, after the arid winter weather has left the landscape parched, our summer electrical storms cause frequent, intense wildfires. The pine rocklands are not only tolerant of these blazes, but are dependent upon them. Frequent fires serve to reduce excessive fuel loads, release stored nutrients in the soil, and prune back encroaching vegetation—thereby keeping the pinelands thriving. Realizing the importance of fire in this ecosystem, visitors arriving in the early summer months might encounter park personnel setting prescribed burns to these same forests. During such operations, smoke may be prevalent along park roads. Be sure to keep a sharp eye out for fleeing wildlife and be prepared to stop if necessary.

The half-mile Pineland Trail is a self-guided journey into the heart of a South Florida pineland. The trail is a quiet, easy walk and is the perfect way to stretch your legs after a long drive. Summer months reward visitors with a living kaleidoscope of some of the showiest flowers around, including the pineland jacquemontia, devil's potato, and West Indian lilac. During our mild winters, birds are everywhere! While they might not always be seen, astute visitors may hear some of our year-round residents belting out a tune. Listen carefully and you may be able to make out the song of a cardinal [*cardinal sings*], the rhythmic drumming of a pileated woodpecker [*pileated woodpecker pecks*], or the call of the elusive Eastern bluebird [*Eastern bluebird calls*]. No matter what time of year you're visiting, the pinelands trail is always well worth a stop. Be sure to take some time to stroll around this endangered South Florida habitat.

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 4. At this time, go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 5 during your drive between Pinelands and Rock Reef Pass.

Track 5: Pinelands to Rock Reef Pass

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

Everglades National Park preserves areas of rich cultural importance for the aboriginal people that once called this landscape home. Archeologists believe the Tequesta and Calusa tribes dominated the South Florida coast for the better part of the past 10,000 years, making occasional forays deep into the interior. These indigenous cultures prospered from the rich resources the Everglades offered, yielding only to the disease and weapons brought by early European explorers. By the mid-1700s, most tribesmen that survived the onslaught fled to nearby Caribbean islands, leaving behind only a few reminders of their early habitation. Today, astute visitors to Everglades National Park can still find the enormous shell mounds and ancient canals created by these extinct tribes.

Farther north, under pressure from European settlers throughout the early United States, numerous tribes from the deep south were displaced from their ancestral lands. Many divergent tribes from the Creek confederation emigrated into Northern Florida, then a Spanish territory, and became known collectively as the Seminoles. Under Spanish rule, the tribe enjoyed relative freedom and goodwill.

During this time, runaway slaves from the South often sought refuge among the Seminoles in Florida. Many were assimilated into the tribe and afforded protection, enraging slave owners to the north who demanded their return. Spain's rule in Florida was weak and ineffective, and allowed for frequent skirmishes along the border. These aggressions escalated in 1817 when President James Monroe authorized Andrew Jackson to use military strength across the Spanish border to chastise the Seminoles. This action would initiate what would later be known as the first Seminole War.

The territory of Florida was transferred to the United States by the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, threatening the Seminoles once more. Soon after in 1825, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, a federal policy to move all Indians west of the Mississippi.

[Sounds of gunfire and shouting]

Prolonged battles over slaves and tribal land ensued, and the Seminole Wars of the early 1800s ravaged Florida for over forty years. The violent skirmishes that typified these wars forced many Seminoles to either submit to U.S. forces and emigrate West or flee further and further south.

Ultimately, those that would not surrender sought refuge in the deep recesses of the Everglades, a landscape yet unexplored by their white pursuers. The impenetrable wilderness afforded both ideal protection and a host of new possibilities. Within the Everglades ecosystem, an area that European settlers saw as little more than a mosquito-infested swamp, the resourceful tribe found a new means to survive and prosper.

The sheltered, upland tree islands you see around you provided the perfect locations for dwellings and limited farming. It was here that the tribes built their chickees—open-air shelters constructed of cypress logs and cabbage palm thatch. These dwellings were elevated to protect against summer floods and wildlife. Nearby, acres were cleared for the planting of familiar crops like corn, beans, peas and pumpkins. Those Seminoles which made contact in the West Indies also farmed bananas, limes, coconuts and pineapples. Remnants of these old farms still persist even today.

Traditionally, the Seminoles were an agricultural society. In north Florida, grassy meadows were used to pasture cattle and horses and cultivate a wide variety of crops. However, the unusual Everglades landscape afforded little grazing land for livestock, and only a few suitable areas for farming, so the tribe depended greatly on hunting and gathering.

[Sound of water splashing as canoe is poled]

The Seminole learned to move about the Everglades with ease, using long, flat dugout canoes made of cypress. Poling these lengthy vessels across the open sloughs, the Indians would gather an abundance of turtles and gar fish from the shallow waters. Sometimes, these canoes were fitted with masts and sails to harness the powerful winds over long distances.

From the pinelands, the Seminole would hunt deer, squirrel and turkey. It is here, also, that they would gather the starchy root of the coontie and smilax plants from which they produced flour. The tender growth bud of the sabal palm, sometimes referred to as “swamp cabbage” and sold today as “hearts of palm”, was eaten either raw or cooked. Various wild fruits such as plums, grapes, and berries were collected here. Numerous plants were gathered for the medicinal properties they were said to contain.

Early in the twentieth century, the federal government recognized the need to preserve large tracts of tribal land from encroachment by new Floridians. By 1935, three reservations had been created for the Seminole tribe. Due in part to a persistent suspicion of the government’s attempts to move them from their land, migration to these reservation was slow, and many refused the move altogether. By the 1950s, when most Seminoles spent at least part of the year living on these fairly modern parcels of land, there was still a dozen or so Hitchiti-speaking Seminoles living in the vicinity of the present-day Tamiami Trail who took no part in reservation life, and retained the culture of their ancestors.

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 granted American Indian tribes the opportunity to incorporate, form their own tribal governments and elect their own public officials. Under this act, the Seminole were finally granted sovereign nation status in 1957 and are known officially today as the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The small band of conservative Indians living along the Tamiami Trail also followed suit and became known five years later as the Miccosukee Tribe of Florida.

Though both tribes still live and thrive in the heart of the Everglades ecosystem, they take great pride in noting that their ancestors never signed a peace treaty or ever surrendered in battle. They are truly an unconquered people and will no doubt continue to flourish for many years in the vast expanse of this fruitful landscape.

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 5. At this time, go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 6 during your drive between Rock Reef Pass and Pa-hay-okee.

Track 6: Rock Reef Pass to Pa-hay-okee

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

The stretch of road between Rock Reef Pass and Pa-hay-okee gives visitors their first look at the cypress communities of the Everglades. Winter visitors may find this landscape rather ghostly and eerie. As one of the few deciduous trees found in South Florida, cypress will drop their leaves and enter a period of dormancy during cooler weather. The pale, gnarled trunks of the cypress look as if they've been dead for years!

The onslaught of summer rains brings verdant new growth to the area. Visitors to the park at this time will notice that the cypress grow in what appears to be standing water. Cypress growth tends to occur in one of three visible forms. Stunted, miniature cypress trees, often called "hat-rack cypress", grow sparsely over large prairies. These dwarf cypress can be deceptive—the tiny trees can be literally hundreds of years old! Larger trees can grow in what appear to be long walls of cypress, known as cypress strands. While still other trees might grow in what appears to be a dome formation, with smaller cypress surrounding their larger counterparts in the center.

Keep your eyes open and you'll be able to spot dwarf cypress prairies, cypress strands and cypress domes on your drive from Rock Reef Pass to Pa-hay-okee. But to really get to know these wet cypress areas, you've got to park your car and start walking! Ranger-guided tours through the cypress are one of the most popular activities in the park. Slogging, as it's called, is best during winter, but can be done anytime. Those who make it to the center of a cypress dome are treated to a stillness and beauty that most visitors never get to see. The proliferation of ferns, air plants, orchids and wildlife found here make these cypress domes one of the park's best-kept secrets.

[Sound of great blue herons squawking]

The Pa-hay-okee Overlook Trail is definitely worth a quick stop if time permits. Visitors can explore a quarter-mile boardwalk where alligators, deer and a variety of birds, like the great blue heron, can often be found. From atop the thirty-foot observation tower, visitors can look out over the broad expanse of Shark River Slough. This is one vista you won't want to miss.

By the way, here's a tip: The Pa-hay-okee Overlook is one of the best areas in the park to experience one of our famous South Florida sunsets. The crimson hues that paint the horizon in late evening are worth scheduling a second visit! Be sure to ask a ranger for sunset times...

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 6. By now, you've got the idea. Go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 7 during your drive between Pa-hay-okee and Mahogany Hammock.

Track 7: Pa-hay-okee to Mahogany Hammock

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

Just as the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes found reward from the River of Grass, so did Florida's other inhabitants. Through the years, industry has flourished both in and around the Everglades ecosystem.

Turpentine, one of the state's first industries, was produced from the refined sap of slash pines like those found along the main park road. From these same pine forests came the harvest and production of arrowroot starch which fueled the growth of Miami and Ft. Lauderdale. Hunters could amass a fortune overnight in the early 1900s, when bird plumes were all the rage in women's fashion. Populations along the coastal mangrove fringe profited considerably from the fisheries of the Gulf and Florida Bay. Even today, drained Everglades marshes yield their most lucrative spoil—land for booming developments and year-round agriculture.

Prior to the establishment of Everglades National Park in 1947, another industry reaped great rewards from the South Florida landscape. Commercially prized wood grows abundantly throughout the Everglades ecosystem. During the roaring 20s, timber industries cut logging roads throughout the region for the harvest of many thousands of trees. Many of these old roads have been converted to a system of trails that explore the park, though what hikers see today is but a shadow of the area's former majesty. Gone now are the immense stands of old growth slash pine, live oak, and cypress that once fueled the timber industry of south Florida.

West Indian mahogany, sometimes called Madeira, is native to the Everglades landscape and was of special commercial importance during the British and Spanish periods of Florida's past. The handsome, reddish wood of mahogany was not only prized for its appearance, but also for its density and strength. Though found in limited quantities, great effort was made to locate stands of mahogany for ship building and furniture production. Even in the early 1900s, at a time when flight was a fairly new endeavor, airplane reconnaissance was being used to spot mahogany stands in wild, hard-to-reach locations.

John C. Gifford, an early south Florida naturalist, wrote about this mahogany craze back in 1946, with these words:

[Sounds of birds singing, rats scampering, and a snake rattling]

Unknown to the public, there was a spot in South Florida where a group of virgin mahoganies was surrounded by swamp. These trees were three or more feet in diameter, breast high. They were broad-spreading with humus a foot or more in depth beneath. Living in the surface duff were rats, which fed on the seeds of the mahogany and false mastic trees. Rattlesnakes, in turn, fed on the rats. Lysilomas and fish-poison trees were also present. These trees have all been cut. Perhaps there are other such spots that might

be preserved to show this and coming generations what once was widespread. We fail to realize that the landscape is constantly changing through man's interference, and what some of us saw in Florida of old will never be seen again.

Visitors to the Mahogany Hammock Trail have the unique opportunity to view one of the last remaining "virgin" mahogany stands in the park. Due largely to its isolation, this tropical tree island has escaped fire, hurricanes, and the saws of the logging industry.

Now preserved in the confines of the national park, Mahogany Hammock will forever continue to showcase the lost grandeur of the Everglades—seen in the great live oaks and mahoganies that line the half-mile boardwalk trail. Today, we can look back to all that the Everglades have offered us in the past and look forward to what it may offer us in the future...

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 7. So go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 8 during your drive from Mahogany Hammock to Paurotis Pond.

Track 8: Mahogany Hammock to Paurotis Pond

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

By now you've probably noticed that birds are everywhere in the Everglades! The park is a home for over 350 different species, so there's no better place in Florida to get to know our feathered friends. Throughout the year, visitors find stately great egrets standing motionless in the open, flat sawgrass prairies. Large, black American crows are encountered loitering along the roadway. Along the main drive, tricolored herons search for the small fish trapped in the roadside culverts. And mockingbirds, grackles and Eastern meadowlarks are seen in abundance, fluttering off nervously as vehicles approach.

With this much variety around, Everglades National Park is a hotspot for the birding community. South Florida lies in the midst of a major flyway, and is a crucial stopping ground for thousands of migrating birds every year. During the winter months, bird watchers worldwide journey to the Everglades for the amazing avian spectacle. Between the months of October and April, numerous ducks, kestrels, hummingbirds and a variety of colorful warblers fill the area with a feathered fervor.

John James Audubon, perhaps the best-known of all birders, visited the Florida Bay area in 1832 and marveled at the mass of bird life feeding on the mud flats. Audubon described in detail throngs of frigate birds, gallinules, gulls and ibis. And it was here that he discovered the largest of all North American wading birds, the great white heron, as well as several other species which have not been seen in Florida since.

During his time in the waters of Florida Bay, Audubon recorded this amazing sight:

“We observed great flocks of wading birds flying overhead toward their evening roosts... They appeared in such numbers to actually block the light from the sun for some time...”

Today, no such spectacles can be found anywhere in the Everglades. Over the course of the last one hundred and fifty years, wading bird populations have suffered terribly, due in part to plume hunting at the turn of the century and in part to man's disruption of the natural water cycles that are so crucial to their prosperity. Since the 1930s, South Florida has seen a 90% decline in its wading bird populations, though today evidence suggests these populations may be on a the rebound.

Occasionally, visitors can find areas in the park somewhat reminiscent of what Audubon might have seen back in 1832. The upcoming Paurotis Pond Picnic Area, gives visitors the opportunity to grab a bite to eat while looking out at one of the park's most prolific bird rookeries. During the winter and spring months, the endangered American woodstork nests in abundance in the trees that surround this picturesque lagoon.

The woodstork is one of the twenty-three threatened or endangered species which find refuge in Everglades National Park. The conspicuous, bald, black head of these large

wading birds contrasts sharply with their white plumage, making this bird one of the easiest to identify in the park. Often, the woodstork is found here nesting alongside egrets and ibises, while miscellaneous herons and roseate spoonbills are seen foraging in the shallows.

Be sure to stop and spend a few moments observing the wildlife at Paurotis Pond—its one of the best areas of the park to get acquainted with many of our feathered inhabitants. And if you're impressed by what you find here today, well just imagine what Audubon would have seen....

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 8. At this time, go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 9 during your drive between Paurotis Pond and West Lake.

Track 9: Paurotis Pond to West Lake

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

The road between Paurotis Pond and West Lake winds through a botanical wonderland. Everglades National Park boasts the largest mangrove forest in the Western Hemisphere. The word “mangrove” is a generic term used to describe many trees that grow well in salty water. In south Florida, red, black and white mangroves come together to form a tangle of dense foliage that harbors some of the area’s most diverse marine life. There is perhaps no better way to explore this landscape than in your very own canoe or kayak. The peace and tranquility of gliding through this subtropical forest is simply amazing! As you travel between Paurotis Pond and West Lake you’ll be passing some of the park’s best paddling trails.

Some names in the park can be deceiving. For example, the Nine Mile Pond Canoe Trail you’re about to pass is really only about a five mile loop. It was actually named for the location of the small pond where the trail starts, which lies roughly nine miles north of Flamingo. Winding through shallow sawgrass marsh and mangroves, this trail affords visitors the opportunity to view abundant bird life and perhaps have a chance encounter with an alligator.

Farther down the road, you’ll find the Noble Hammock Canoe Trail. This two-mile loop is sheltered almost entirely by the dense mangrove cover, and is perfect for a windy day. All the canoe trails in Everglades National Park are well-marked with numbered, white poles—making it virtually impossible to get lost. Visitors wishing to stray from the designated trails ought to think twice—the endless labyrinth of the monotonous coastline can be confusing, and rescues of disoriented paddlers are often necessary.

Just past Noble Hammock is the entrance to the Hell’s Bay Canoe Trail. Old timers in the area claimed the bay itself was “hell to get into and hell to get out of”, making this one of the best trails in the park for brushing up on your paddling skills. Backcountry camping is available along this popular route with a permit, and it is the perfect place for an overnight adventure. The 5.5 mile trail ends in Hells Bay, leaving visitors two options: either circle back or continue to paddle into the unmarked wilderness. Nautical charts, tide tables, and a knowledgeable guide can help you better plan your backcountry excursion.

Everything in Everglades National Park is protected by law for the enjoyment of future generations. Mangroves also receive protection throughout the state of Florida. No cutting or trimming of these trees is allowed without a permit and the regulations are strictly enforced. The role of mangroves in preventing coastal erosion has been recognized repeatedly. In fact, because they grow on the coastline, mangroves are our first line of defense against tropical storms and hurricanes.

As you drive further along the park road towards West Lake, open your windows for a minute and take a deep breath. As you approach the coast, you may be treated to the salty

smell of the impending ocean. Then again, you might also catch a whiff of something that smells vaguely like rotting eggs. You see, its in these mangrove swamps that the freshwater flow from the interior meets the tidal influence of the ocean and stagnates, producing a hydrogen-sulfide odor of decay. Despite their often unpleasant aroma, these mangrove areas provide the foundation of life for south Florida's marine environments. Many of our most important recreational and commercial ocean species begin their lives hidden deep in the protective recesses of the mangrove coast.

The West Lake Trail provides a rare opportunity to stroll effortlessly through a mangrove forest. The quarter-mile boardwalk gets you up close and personal with these impressive trees. Look closely and you'll likely see scores of air plants and orchids. The walk leads you to a magnificent view of West Lake, one of the park's most popular areas for boating and fishing. That's right—fishing! Fishing is allowed in most areas of the park with a valid license. So be sure to check with a ranger for further information and regulations.

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 9. So you can go ahead and pause or stop this recording. Proceed to Track 10 during your drive from West Lake to Flamingo.

Track 10: West Lake to Flamingo

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

Your final approach to Flamingo ought to be filled with anticipation for seeing all the wildlife that makes the Everglades famous—except Flamingos! The small fishing village was given its colorful name in 1908, following the unusual appearance of over 200 flamingos in Florida Bay that year. Still, sightings of these famed wading birds have always been rare at best and they continue to elude most visitors even today!

All right, so you probably won't see any flamingos, but you'll still get a chance to encounter all sorts of terrific wildlife along the way. Hiking trails abound in the Flamingo area and afford visitors the chance to mingle with our flora and fauna. Trail lengths vary anywhere from a half-mile loop to a fourteen-mile round-trip, so be sure to consult your maps before embarking on your excursion.

How about a hike down the Snake Bight Trail! Sound intimidating? Well rest assured, the word "bight" refers to a shallow bay or inlet—and that's exactly where this trail leads. This paved three-mile round-trip hike leads visitors to a magnificent view of Snake Bight. Try this trail during winter months at high tide, and the spectacle of bird life foraging for food on the mud flats will simply be unbeatable.

[Whining sound of mosquitoes fades in]

But be warned, many summer visitors find that the mosquitoes on Snake Bight, and all the other trails in the Flamingo area, can be unbearable. Extra planning and precautions are necessary when going outdoors this time of year. Cover up with light-colored clothing as much as possible, since mosquitoes are attracted to darker hues. Apply plenty of repellent—preferable before exiting your vehicle! And try to avoid both shady and grassy areas, since these tend to harbor large amounts of mosquitoes.

[Sound of car door slamming shut]

But sometimes, in the thick of summer, the best thing you can do is just stay in your car! Fortunately, Coot Bay and Mrazek Ponds offer motorists a chance to pull off the road and observe wildlife from the comfort of their vehicles. Throughout the year, these areas provide beautiful vistas where wading birds can be seen fishing for prey. Occasionally, alligators can also be found lounging about the banks. And during the dry winter months, when water becomes a scarce and precious commodity, these ponds become an Everglades oasis for our wildlife.

Along the main park road lies the entrance to the Rowdy Bend Trail. This is one of several trails open to bicycles, but this ride is far from smooth and not for the faint of heart! Adventurous souls can ride or hike this trail through 2.6 miles of beautiful coastal prairie and buttonwood forest before it joins with the Snake Bight Trail. The Christian

Point Trail farther down the road provides a jaunt of only 1.8 miles one way for visitors wanting a shorter hike along the coast.

Just past Christian Point Trail, you'll be crossing a short bridge that spans the Buttonwood Canal. This straight-cut waterway is the gateway to a variety of opportunities for backcountry campers. If you can pack your gear and paddle it, carry it, bike it, or sail it with you, Everglades National Park has a full array of exciting opportunities to try. You might find yourself camping on a deserted island, or pitching your tent along a white sand beach, or setting up camp just above the waterline on a wooden platform in the middle of nowhere. Permits are needed for any type of backcountry camping, so be sure to inquire about this unique experience at the nearest visitor center.

By now, you've probably already seen your fair share of alligators and egrets exploring the freshwater interior of the park. But the saline waters around Flamingo team with a different cast of rare and exotic creatures. The endangered American crocodile can be found lurking in the bays and inlets along the mangrove coast. The shallows of Florida Bay are a year-round playground to dolphins and sea turtles. And during cooler months, manatees migrate to the south, seeking refuge in the warm waters of south Florida.

Winter visitors to Flamingo can also expect to find a kaleidoscope of bird life. Migratory birds flock to this subtropical paradise to escape harsh winters elsewhere. The half-mile EcoPond trail is a favorite among birders for its seasonal displays of wading birds, while the mud flats of Florida Bay are often crowded with skimmers, tern, pelicans, and a host of other shorebirds.

Lodging and food are available year-round at Flamingo. The marina offers guided boat excursions, guided fishing charters and a full array of canoes, kayaks, fishing skiffs, bicycles and houseboats for rent. The marine store carries a full supply of camping gear and grocery items. And be sure to stop by the Flamingo visitor center for more information on activities and guided programs.

We hope you enjoy your time here, and have fun exploring what many old timers used to call the "end of the world".

[Music Fades In and Ends]

Congratulations, you've made it down to Flamingo! But you still haven't seen it all. If you'd like more information on the Shark Valley Visitor Center entrance to the park, skip ahead to Track 11 now. Or if you'd like more information on the Gulf Coast Visitor Center, proceed to Track 12. Or if you'd just like to learn more about the restoration efforts here in Everglades National Park, skip ahead to Track 13.

Track 11: The Shark Valley Visitor Center

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

Despite the name, don't expect to see any fins in the water as you tour Shark Valley. And don't expect much of a valley for that matter! Remember that the Everglades are a land of subtleties—what constitutes a valley in this landscape needs to only dip a few inches in elevation!

We've already seen that the Everglades are a large, broad, slow-moving "river of grass". The main avenue of water flow in the park is Shark Valley, known otherwise as Shark River Slough. Sloughs are low-lying areas of land that serve to channel water during the rainy season. The Shark River Slough is a valley that is contained by the higher elevated areas of the Big Cypress Swamp to the west and the Atlantic Coastal Ridge to the east. During our wet summers, this broad, shallow riverbed captures and diverts rainfall in a southwesterly direction, draining ultimately into the Gulf of Mexico. This flow of water reaches its widest point in the park at the Shark Valley Visitor Center, spanning nearly twenty-one miles in width! Here, one can witness a seemingly boundless display of sawgrass and sky and all of its hidden treasures.

Stopping at the Shark Valley Visitor Center gives you access to one of the most popular attractions in the park. A fifteen mile paved loop meanders through the open marshes of the Shark River Slough. Whether by foot, bicycle or guided tram tour, visitors find an abundance of Everglades life lurking about! Alligators keep careful watch while otters splash in water nearby. Birds grace every turn, while turtles and water snakes are often found crossing the roadway. And for those visitors able to make it to the end of the trail, a towering 50-foot observation platform affords visitors an unparalleled aerial view of the slough.

Still the question remains... Why is it called Shark Valley?" On the park map, visitors will note that the Shark River Slough is denoted by a light green swath that begins widely at Shark Valley and narrows as it flows southwest. Take note how the water in the "valley" empties into the gulf via several rivers along the coast, the largest of which is the Shark River!

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 11. For information on the Gulf Coast Visitor Center proceed to Track 12. Or for information on Everglades restoration jump ahead to Track 13.

Track 12: The Gulf Coast Visitor Center

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

On December 6, 1947, President Harry Truman dedicated Everglades National Park from a makeshift stage overlooking the Ten-Thousand Islands not far from the present day Gulf Coast Visitor Center. Federal protection of the Everglades and their inhabitants came only after decades of work by scientists, community organizations, naturalists, politicians, and concerned citizens. Through their dedication and concerted efforts, we can rest assured that our future generations will also have the opportunity to marvel at the wonders of this subtropical landscape.

One of the leaders in the creation of the national park was a professor of tropical forestry at the University of Miami named Dr. John C. Gifford. In 1934, more than ten years prior to the park's dedication, he wrote on his impressions of the Ten-Thousand Islands as follows:

[Sounds of paddling through the water]

“Like many lost lands of the tropics it sleeps in peace unknown and along except for the roar of wind and wave... It is one of the strangest and wildest of tropical shores, with countless islands and countless watercourses affording drainage to that sea of saw grass in that bowl of muck called the Everglades... Much of it is neither land nor water. Sometimes it is one, sometimes the other... I refer to the thousands of islands more or less, the so-called Ten Thousand Islands south of Pavilion Key, backed by a great delta-like territory fit mainly for the home of the countless wild creatures, plant and animal, that are native there. I have ascended all its rivers and can think of no other uses to which it could be profitably put, but [as a National Park]... It is fit simply to marvel over, and fit for the home of creatures that once lived there in countless numbers. It has in addition a great scientific interest. It is natural, unaffected by man's interference, one of the few places on earth that we can hand to posterity without mutilation if we hurry in the process of preservation.”

The mangrove forest protected today in Everglades National Park is the largest found in the Western Hemisphere, and the Gulf Coast Visitor Center serves as the gateway to exploring the labyrinth of greenery and ocean. Canoes and kayaks are available for rent to explore the many waterways to be encountered here, and backcountry camping is also available. Park-guided boat tours are also offered year-round, so be sure to stop by the visitor center to ask for details.

[Music Fades In and Ends]

This concludes Track 12. For information on current efforts at Everglades restoration proceed to Track 13 now.

Track 13: Everglades Restoration

[Music Starts and Fades Out]

To many early South Florida settlers, the Everglades expanse was little more than a soggy wasteland. Not only did these swamps breed pestilence and dangerous animals, but the area constantly subjected homesteaders to its seasonal flux of fire and flood.

Efforts to drain the Everglades basin date back to the late 1800s. Over a span of some 70 years, nearly 1500 miles of canals have been constructed solely for this purpose. Completed by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1950s, this massive network of waterways, gates, levees, pumping stations and other water control structures provides flood protection and water supply to a current population of some 6 million people and nearly 1 million acres of agricultural lands.

Though this drainage effort triumphantly achieved many of its intended goals, the South Florida ecosystem has suffered in turn. The historic, flowing band of water that once characterized the Everglades has been interrupted and fragmented. The seasonal water changes that nurtured much of the area's wildlife have given way to man-controlled water management. Much of the Everglades landscape has already given way to development and agriculture, while invasive, exotic species threaten to infiltrate and disturb the areas that remain. In short, the Everglades are one of our most imperiled ecosystems.

Recognizing this, the U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan on November 3, 2000. This 7.8 billion dollar plan, known simply as the Restudy, promises to be one of the largest restoration efforts ever undertaken. Over a 30 to 40 year time frame, the Restudy will attempt to replicate the natural quantity, quality, timing and distribution of water to what remains of the Everglades.

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan is a cooperative effort between federal, state, local and tribal governments. Together these agencies hope to accomplish four basic objectives:

First, alter water control structures to more closely mimic the historic sheet of water that flowed from north to south in Florida. Second, create an increased capacity to store excess water. Third, continue to provide flood protection and water supply for ever-growing south Florida communities. Finally, create and test a variety of pilot projects to determine the effectiveness of new and developing technologies for possible future use.

Updates on the progress of the Restudy are due to Congress every five years during the implementation phase. With the accomplishment of these four objectives, scientists believe the Everglades ecosystem will begin to show signs of recovery. Scientists believe the ecological rejuvenation of the area will shortly follow hydrologic restoration. To find out more about Everglades Restoration or to check out periodic updates on the project, point your internet browser to www.evergladesplan.org

But the best way to follow the progress of the restoration is to keep on visiting! If all goes according to plan, the park will just keep getting better every time you see it. We hope you've enjoyed your visit to South Florida's River of Grass and hope to see you back again very soon! And bring some friends—the alligators can't wait to see them!

[Music Fades In and Ends]