

Treasures along the Gulf Coast

Gulf Islands National Seashore is a place of myriad riches—sparkling blue-green waters, magnificent white beaches, and fertile coastal marshes. Its 12 areas include historic forts, shaded picnic areas, trails, and campgrounds. From Cat Island, Mississippi, it stretches eastward 160 miles to the Okaloosa Area east of Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

Congress established the national seashore in 1971, to protect the barrier islands, wildlife, salt marshes, historic structures, and archeological sites along the Gulf of Mexico, and to provide recreational opportunities. The long, narrow islands are composed

of white sand carried seaward by rivers draining from the Appalachian Mountains. The islands act as a barrier as they help block ocean waves during violent storms that would otherwise strike the mainland with greater force.

Evidence of the American Indians who settled in the forests and marshes provides clues to help archeologists understand the native peoples' long history. Discovery by Europeans was followed by a long struggle for the region's control. Eventually Florida and Mississippi became part of the United States. The first federal tree farm was developed at Naval Live Oaks Area in 1828 for the

single purpose of cultivating live oaks, used for shipbuilding. To defend the mainland against foreign invasion, the US government began fortifying Pensacola in 1829, and Ship Island, Mississippi, in 1859. In 1862, during the Civil War, the Union Army staged the capture of New Orleans from this fort. By the end of the war new inventions like rifled cannon and ironclad warships required new defenses. The US Army Coast Artillery Corps developed underwater mines, searchlights, a complex system to track moving targets at sea, and huge guns in concrete batteries. These coastal defense systems became obsolete after World War II, and the military eventually abandoned the fortifications.

How Barrier Islands Change

All theories about the islands' formation involve waves, winds, and fluctuating sea levels. Longshore currents wear away the eastern ends and build up western areas, resulting in the islands' steady westward movement. Shifting winds sculpt the dunes. Violent storms can also alter the islands' shapes as they wash over the surfaces and rearrange the sand. Such changes are constant, slowed only by the protective covering of grasses and other plants on the dunes and island interiors. Sea oats, with their elaborate stem and root systems, play a vital role in holding these islands together.



Dunes of snow-white sand on Horn Island, Mississippi.



Fort Pickens, completed 1834, on Santa Rosa Island, Florida.



The waters of the sounds, bays, and bayous are less salty than the Gulf.



A great blue heron at sunset.



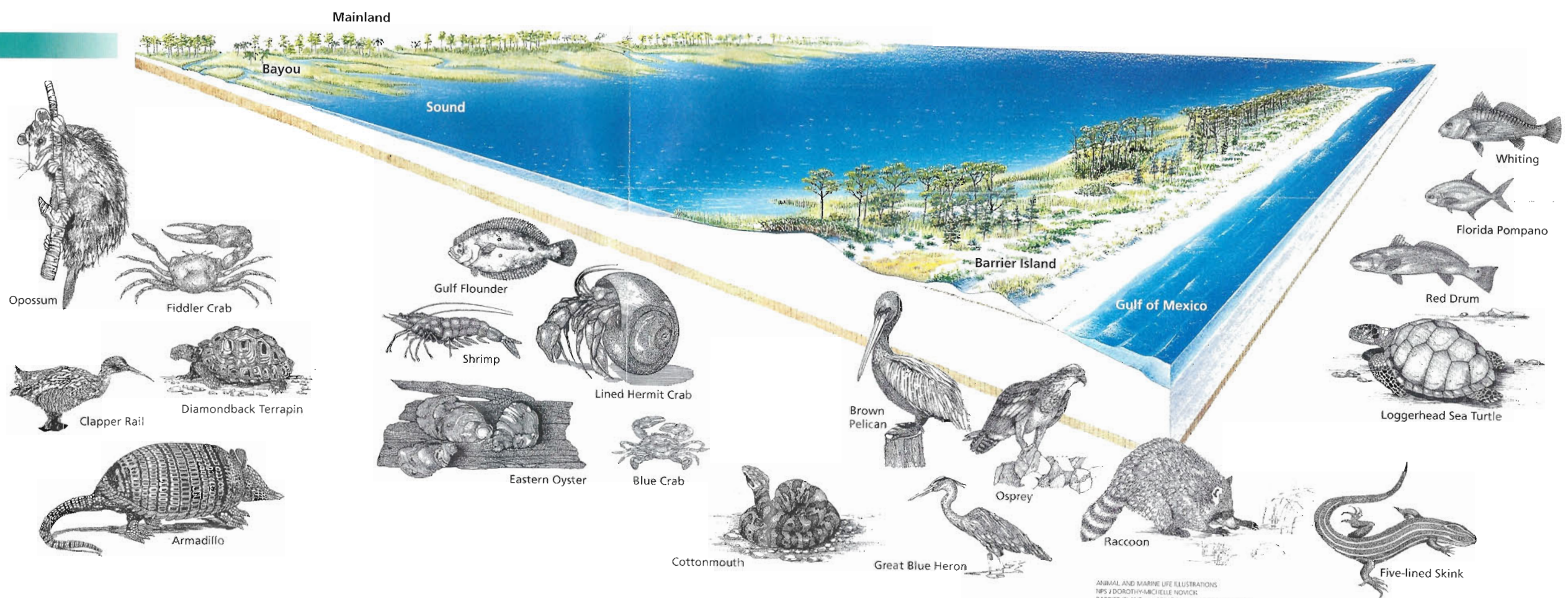
Saw palmetto grows under stands of pine and oak. American Indians found medicinal uses for its berries.

Homes for Plants and Animals

Despite nature's unrelenting forces, life clings tenaciously to the barrier islands. Grasses and other plants slow the constant process of change. Cordgrass can tolerate fluctuating sea levels. Submerged roots break down and help create a "nursery ground" where finfish and shellfish grow. Shrubs and some trees stand only a little higher than the dunes that protect them from salt spray.

In the island interiors, marshes collect rainwater and support many plants and animals. Nutrients washed from the mainland enrich the waters of the bays, sounds, and bayous, which are less salty than the Gulf. Here shrimp and fish pass parts of their lives. Herons, egrets, and fiddler crabs reproduce and thrive.

The barrier islands also protect plant and animal communities on the mainland coast.

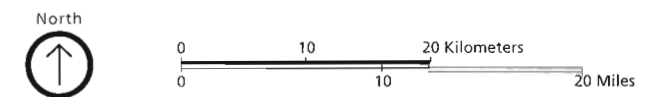


ANIMAL AND MARINE LIFE ILLUSTRATIONS
NPS / DOROTHY ARCHIELE NOVICK
BARRIER ISLAND ILLUSTRATION NPS / ROBERT VL TOPE

Exploring Gulf Islands



- | | | | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Fortification | Gulf Islands National Seashore | Wheelchair-accessible | Swimming area | Campground | Boat launch |
| Trail/boardwalk | Multi-use trail | Ranger station | Picnic area | Primitive campsite | |



VISITING THE MISSISSIPPI DISTRICT

On the mainland, William M. Colmer Visitor Center in Davis Bayou, near Ocean Springs, offers information, a bookstore, maps, exhibits, and films. Open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. For programs and boating and fishing regulations, check the park website, www.nps.gov/guis, or call 228-230-4100.

Follow signs for Gulf Islands National Seashore along I-10 and US 90. Davis Bayou campground (open year-round, no reservations) has electricity, water hookups, a sewage dump station, group tent area, picnic pavilions, and a boat launch. Self-guiding hiking and bicycling trails are available.

The barrier islands, about 10 miles offshore, offer dramatic scenery, but facilities are limited. You can reach Cat, East Ship, Horn, Sand, and Petit Bois islands only by private boat. Use your own boat or hire a licensed operator from the list available at the visitor center in Davis Bayou and on our website.

To visit West Ship Island, take the passenger ferry from Gulfport, March through October, or dock your boat near Fort Massachusetts, during daylight hours only, year-round. Free exhibits and tours are available seasonally. Follow the boardwalk to the swim beach, pavilions, restrooms, showers, and snack bar. Fishing, boating, and dogs are prohibited in the swim beach area.

Primitive camping is allowed on East Ship, Sand, Horn, and Petit Bois islands. (Groups consisting of 10 or more individuals are required to get a permit). Camping is allowed on Cat Island on National Park Service land. Camping is not allowed on West Ship Island or on privately owned land on Cat Island.

Bring all your food and drinking water. Practice "Leave No Trace" principles and remove all trash. For information visit www.lnt.org.

State fishing regulations apply.

Boaters follow NOAA charts 11372, 11373, and 11374.

VISITING THE FLORIDA DISTRICT

Visitor centers at historic Fort Barrancas, Fort Pickens, and Naval Live Oaks offer information, bookstores, and exhibits. Visitor centers are open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. All Florida areas are open daily and close at sunset unless otherwise posted. For programs and guided tours, check the park website, www.nps.gov/guis, or call 850-934-2600.

To reach the mainland forts and National Naval Aviation Museum, use the main gate entrance of Pensacola Naval Air Station. For Perdido Key take Barrancas Avenue, FL 292, from Pensacola. For Fort Pickens, Naval Live Oaks, and Santa Rosa, take US 98 east across Pensacola Bay Bridge. Fort Pickens Road is subject to flooding. For forecast, call

850-934-2656. For Okaloosa take US 98 east past Fort Walton Beach.

Camping reservations are highly recommended. Visit www.recreation.gov or call 877-444-6777 for reservations. Naval Live Oaks Youth Group Camping Pavilion (see map below) is for organized groups.

Swim beaches are at Rosamond Johnson Beach on Perdido Key, Langdon Beach at Fort Pickens, Opal Beach at Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa. Do not swim in shipping channels.

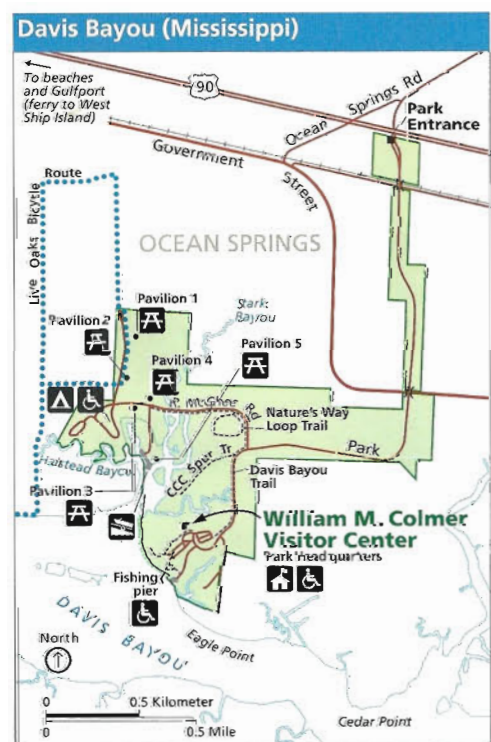
Fishing is allowed from Fort Pickens fishing pier without a license. Otherwise, state fishing licensing and regulations apply.

Boaters follow NOAA chart 11378.

Hike self-guiding trails at Perdido Key, Fort Barrancas, Fort Pickens, and Naval Live Oaks.

Dunes may be closed to restore vegetation.

Entrance fees apply at Perdido Key Area, Fort Pickens Area, and Opal Beach, or show valid National Parks or Federal Recreational Lands pass. Night-owl permits, available at entrance stations (additional fee), are required for after-hours entrance to Perdido Key and Fort Pickens.



Davis Bayou, on the mainland, has no swim beach. To reach public beaches go west on US 90, turn south at the Ocean Springs business district onto Washington Avenue, and proceed to Front Beach.

FOR A SAFE VISIT

Never swim alone. Beware of sharks, jellyfish, rip currents, stingrays, Portuguese man-of-war, and barnacle-covered rocks. Watch for sudden storms. Do not stand on piers, beaches, or fortifications during thunderstorms. Use caution if exploring forts and batteries. Carry a flashlight for dark passages. For your safety, some fortifications are closed. Sunlight is intense. Wear protective clothing, drink plenty of fluids, and always use

sunscreen. Watch for changing surf and weather conditions. No glass containers on beaches. Carry out all trash. Metal detectors prohibited anywhere in the park. Motor vehicles must stay on the roads. Bird nesting areas may be closed during nesting seasons. Pets must be leashed at all times. Dogs are prohibited on Horn and Petit Bois islands, at the West Ship Island, MS, swim beach, at FL beaches, on tour boats, in historic

structures, and in buildings. Do not feed or disturb wildlife. Spearfishing is not allowed anywhere in the park. Federal law protects all wildlife, plants, and historic objects.

For firearms regulations check the park website.

Emergencies call 911.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Call or check our website.

ISLAND WILDERNESS AREAS

In 1978 Congress designated Horn and Petit Bois islands—among the few undeveloped barrier islands on the Gulf coast—as wilderness areas. Uncommon species of birds, animals, and marine life are protected here. These areas also preserve the land's natural conditions and

provide opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. Preserving wilderness benefits generations to follow.

Before visiting Horn and Petit Bois islands, ask a ranger about wilderness area regulations and the difficulties of visiting places without water,

shelter, communication, or facilities. Park rangers can help you plan carefully. For information visit www.wilderness.net or www.nps.gov/guis.

Practice "Leave No Trace" principles while visiting these wilderness areas.

MORE INFORMATION

Gulf Islands National Seashore is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities visit www.nps.gov.

Mississippi District
Gulf Islands National Seashore
3500 Park Rd.
Ocean Springs, MS 39564-9709
228-230-4100

Florida District
Gulf Islands National Seashore
1801 Gulf Breeze Pkwy.
Gulf Breeze, FL 32563
850-934-2600

Visit www.nps.gov/guis, or follow us on Twitter.

Fort Pickens, Fort Barrancas, Advanced Redoubt, and Naval Live Oaks (Florida)

