

Twelve Mile Swamp Conservation Area Interpretive Trail Map

Self-guided trail

Twelve Mile Swamp Conservation Area was purchased in 2001 by the St. Johns River Water Management District and the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund of the state of Florida. The conservation area provides significant water resource protection, buffering a wellfield that supplies drinking water to St. Johns County. The 21,898-acre property is under a long-term timber lease. However, 378 acres of the property have been designated a recreation area. This recreation area is composed mainly of planted pine forest with several small cypress domes scattered within. Recreation here includes hiking, bicycling, equestrian activities and wildlife viewing.

1. Industrial silvicultural operations

The conservation area is dominated by thousands of rows of pine trees. At the time of acquisition, Rayonier Forest Resources, L.P., was leasing the property. Rayonier opted to keep a long-term lease on the timber within upland areas of the property; the District purchased wetland timber rights from Rayonier. Rayonier will continue to manage the leased portions of property as an industrial timberland until the lease termination in 2025.

As an industrial silvicultural site, Rayonier typically plants fast-growing species that can be grown, harvested and replanted on a short cycle. In Florida, one of several pine species is the optimal choice for growing trees in a plantation, and which species is chosen depends on soils type and conditions on a portion of the property. Several pine species are planted within this conservation area.

Another sign of the site's purpose as an industrial silvicultural site are the planting beds. Bedding is a site preparation method used to increase survival and growth of tree seedlings on wet soils and soils prone to flooding. This technique involves construction of parallel beds and furrows from surrounding soil. Seedlings are planted on top of the beds where they are protected from excess water and where they benefit from a concentration of nutrients and organic matter.

2. Remnant dune lines and dry natural communities

This conservation area is a mosaic of flatwoods and scrub/scrubby flatwoods with depressional wetlands interspersed throughout. The scrubby flatwoods and scrub areas occur along relict sand dunes. These sand dunes are linear ridges that are oriented in a generally north-south direction, paralleling the coast. These relict sand dunes are easily recognized due to the white sands on which they occur. Typical species include a variety of scrubby oaks, such as myrtle oak and sand live oak, shiny blueberry, pawpaw, lyonia, and the occasional clump of wire grass. The dry, open conditions of these natural communities make them prime gopher tortoise habitat.

3. Swales and associated wetlands between dune lines

Swales lie between the remnant dune ridges. These swales function differently from the dune ridges; they tend to be depressional areas that support varying-sized wetlands. An area crossing this portion of the trail supports a moderate strand swamp. While small, isolated wetlands are

peppered throughout the property. In sharp contrast to the soils of the dune ridges, soils in the interdunal swales are dark with moderate amounts of organic material. Species found in the wetlands include sweetgum, maple, cabbage palm and buttonbush. A variety of wetland grasses and ferns are common as well, while pine is noticeably absent.

4. Sand pine scrub and wildlife management area

As you travel along the trail, you will notice that the landscape begins to change as you look to the west. Mesic and wet flatwoods are the dominant natural community type at the northernmost portion of the property. These areas have been planted in slash pine. Sand pine is a fast-growing tree that grows readily in the driest of conditions. It occurs on the well-drained sands that typically support scrub, sandhill or scrubby flatwoods communities. Often a mixture of scrub species can be found growing nearby. Other common species include saw palmetto, a variety of grasses and small shrubs, and gallberry in wetter areas.

While in this area, you may notice signage designating the majority of the property, approximately 19,696 acres, as a wildlife management area (WMA). The WMA is managed cooperatively by Rayonier and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Please exercise caution while near the WMA, and do not enter the WMA from this trail. Access to the WMA is permitted only via the two designated WMA entrances and only to those possessing a valid permit. Access is permitted only from the Saturday two weeks prior to the archery season through the last day of the spring turkey season.

5. Industrial silviculture and natural areas management

In 2025, when the timber lease across the conservation area expires, the Florida Forest Service will begin to manage the property. With the transfer of management rights, the goals for the property will change. As the Forest Service assumes the role of the property's lead manager, restoration will begin. The site will likely be replanted in appropriate species and managed as a natural area.