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Ecotourism in Pasco Florida

"A string of counties studded with emerald-like gulf waters, deep springs and rivers, stretching along the same Florida coast." This was how world-famous naturalist John Muir described The Nature Coast in 1867. Nature-lovers will enjoy Pasco County's expansive wilderness opportunities. Check out these unique tours that are educational and adventurous.

Crystal Springs Preserve

Pasco County is home to Florida's premier living laboratory, a fabulous 525 acre environmental education center located on Crystal Springs Preserve. Visitors are encouraged to arrange a tour of the site, take guided nature walks, explore the boardwalks along the Hillsborough River, view Crystal Springs and participate in the educational programs designed for all ages. The pristine wilderness offers amazing opportunities for wildlife viewing and birding. The nature center features native reptiles and amphibians.

Crystal Springs, just south of Zephyrhills, is the largest natural spring system south of Weeki Watchee. The 40 million gallon per day flow from Crystal Springs triples the down stream volume of the Hillsborough River as it wanders through the preserve.

Tours require a minimum of 15 people. Programs can be tailored to fit any groups' needs, accommodating seniors, families, scouts and school groups of all ages (pre-school through college). A nominal per person fee and advanced reservations are required. For more information and to register, go to

<http://www.crytalspringspreserve.com> or call (813) 715-9707.

Giraffe Ranch

Giraffe Ranch is located in beautiful east Pasco County 45 minutes north of Tampa. The eco-friendly tour is operated on 47 acres of rolling countryside. With huge live oaks, native orchid sand lush pastures and wetlands, the ranch is also a native wildlife preserve. Every night up to 200 sand hill cranes roost on the grounds. Experience the Giraffe Ranch farm tour with an experienced driver/guide in customized 4-WD safari tour vehicles taking you deep into Pasco pastures. You will be safe, comfortable and get a terrific view of the wildlife, as each vehicle is fitted with shade canopies and stadium seating. You will learn about native and exotic animals and their habitats from your safari guide. You will see ongoing conservation efforts with endangered species and some that are extinct in the wild.

On safari you can feed giraffe, zebra and other animals from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. See a working herd of Austrian Haflinger horses and tiny Irish Dexter cattle. Giraffe Ranch has one of the largest herds of these diminutive cattle in Florida. Giraffe Ranch is not a zoo or theme park. It is a hands-on real working game farm and wildlife preserve where animals have room to roam. Family-owned and operated for over 10 years, Giraffe Ranch is open by reservation only. Giraffe Ranch operates two tours per day at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Tours are strictly limited in size and are fun, educational adventures. Giraffe Ranch is accredited by the Zoological Association of America (ZAA) and licensed by USDA.

Wild Things Zoo

Dade City's Wild Things is the latest attraction to boost Dade City as a unique tourist destination. The zoo is an outreach program of Stearns Zoological Rescue & Rehab Center Inc., a non-profit sanctuary zoo located on a 22-acre facility in the heart of Pasco County in historical Dade City, Florida.

"We pride ourselves on providing a natural botanical garden landscape environment for the animals in our facility," said Kathy Stearns, the zookeeper of more than 150 exotic animals. Big cats are walking the grounds like tigers, lions, jaguars, leopards, cougars and a Florida Panther. Plus, there are lemurs, bears, deer, porcupines, monkeys, exotic birds and the cutest little and entertaining river otter. The downtown Dade City Gift Shop features zoo-themed home décor, jewelry, photography and gifts for all ages. Visitors can relax and enjoy downtown Dade City or get a video preview of the exciting zoo. Then it's time to hop on an authentic trolley and experience an once-in-a-lifetime tour that brings visitors within four feet of the animals.

Attendees will be amazed at how close the tigers are stalking, bears playing, lions roaring, monkeys playing, otters swimming, birds calling, and much more. It's an experience young and old will not forget. For more information, contact Kathy Stearns at 352-567-WILD or visit www.dadecityswildthings.com

Kayaking

Paddling Pasco

With 20 miles of shoreline as well as numerous estuaries, lakes and rivers, Pasco County is a paddler's wonderland. Explore the sheltered shoreline by boat, sea kayak or canoe, and fish for snook, redfish or spotted sea trout in the morning and largemouth bass in the afternoon.

[Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park](#) in **Port Richey** has quickly gained a reputation as one of the best sea kayaking areas on the west coast of Florida. The park is brand new and doesn't have launch facilities, but paddlers can put in outside the park's boundaries and paddle in to explore four miles of protected coastline. The salt spring may not look like much, but it is actually more than 300 feet deep.

[Withlacoochee River Park](#), located on the other side of the country at the edge of the [Green Swamp](#), is the place to go for canoeing. The river, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico north of Pasco, flows through a variety of

habitats, including high sand hills and low riverine swamp. In addition to great paddling, the 610-acre park provides other recreational opportunities, including hiking, camping, cycling and in-line skating.

The [Pithlachascotee River](#), or **Cotee River** for short, has a great six-mile paddle that starts on the outskirts of civilization and ends up in a wilderness preserve. The difficulty rating is moderate, making this an excellent choice for paddlers of any skill level.

[Self Tours](#)

[Anclote Key](#) is a Florida State Preserve located three miles off the mainland accessible from [Anclote River Park](#). The island measures 3 miles long and 1/4 mile wide, making it an ideal place to explore by sea kayak.

A fine white sand beach covers the entire gulf side of the island. If you look carefully, you'll find many interesting shells and maybe even a few sand dollars. Sea turtles may be seen in the blue-green waters, particularly near the south end of the island. For the bird watcher, Anclote Key supports over 40 different species on the island, including bald eagle and osprey. Camping is permitted on the north end of Anclote, so bring a tent and sleeping bag and make the trip an overnigher. Camping is first-come, first-served and free but contact the park headquarters at 727-469-5942 before your arrival.

The only access to Anclote Key is by private boat, and there's no better way of getting there than by kayak. Watch for bad weather as the crossing between the mainland and the island can become quite rough if you encounter strong winds. (Information provided by Ed Schessel, www.clubkayak.com)

[Bird Watching](#)

Bird Watching at its Best

Pasco County is home to more than 100,000 acres of public land to access and explore. These public areas consist of Pasco County parks, Florida state parks, the Southwest Florida Water Management District recreational lands, Florida State trails, state forestlands and private ranches. These diverse areas provide a wide range of natural habitats for a variety of birds. Salt marsh, mangrove, barrier island, oak scrub, pine flatwoods, cypress swamps, coastline, pasture and ranch land all encourage diversity of bird species. Historically, the area has yielded more than 325 species of birds.

Pasco County is [a great birding destination](#) because of its west central location; birds from both the north and south Florida areas can be observed. The broad-winged hawk, a more northerly species, and the short-tailed hawk, a more southern species, can both be found here. Rare birds, such as the western vagrants like the scissor-tailed flycatcher can be viewed here as well. The state identified Pasco's coastal areas as an important resting and feeding station for migratory birds because so much of the coastline to the south is developed.

Pasco offers many modes of bird watching opportunities. Boating in the Gulf of Mexico, canoeing or kayaking the salt marshes and rivers, nature trails (for hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding), piers, observation towers and boardwalks are all available in Pasco County.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission created The Great Florida Birding Trail — a collection of sites throughout Florida selected for their excellent bird watching opportunities. Ten of these sites can be found right here in Pasco County. They are:

- [Withlacoochee River Park](#) — This county park features sand hill bluffs overlooking the Withlacoochee River, as well as a small wet prairie and some seasonal wetlands. This park offers amenities like picnic shelters and restrooms for family birding.
- [Green Swamp West](#) — This 37,000+ acre property safeguards the Green Swamp which gives rise to the Withlacoochee River, while providing excellent recreational access to upland pasture, sand hills and “Wildcat Swamp.” A bike makes the size of this site more manageable.
- [Crews Lake Park](#) — This delightful little park offers a high tower overlook of Crews Lake, where overwintering waterfowl like sandpipers, ring-necked ducks and dunlin loaf and forage. Sedge wrens call from grassy margins and migratory songbirds like bobolinks exploit the edges between the wetland and oak hammock. According to the Great Florida Birding Trail, this is a “must-see.”
- [Eagle Point Park](#) — This is a brand new passive park which has just completed construction and is now open to the public. The park consists of 17 developed acres and approximately 661 acres of conservation land. There is canoe/kayak access to the Gulf of Mexico and you can fish off one of the three docks. There is a shell fitness trail with five fitness stations to exercise, a playground for the children to enjoy and there are plenty of picnic benches and bar-b-ques throughout the park as well as two picnic shelters and restrooms. It is absolutely a beautiful and peaceful park that you and your family can enjoy.
- [Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park](#) — This vast park stretches nearly 3,500 acres along the Gulf of Mexico. A one-mile scrub trail is currently open; a boardwalk is planned across a shady, freshwater slough, and trails will resume on the other side, leading all the way to the Gulf. Bring water and insect repellent. Monthly bird walks are available; call (727) 816-1890 for details.
- [Robert K. Rees Park at Green Key](#) — This compact peninsular park is a birding gem, with clapper rails, reddish egrets and roseate spoonbills year-round; wintering shorebirds, marsh and sedge wrens; and a tendency for remarkable songbird landfall events in spring migration. The entrance gate area can be excellent for hordes of spring migrants near dawn in April (bring insect repellent.) Gray kingbirds also breed here.
- [Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park](#) — Behind the nature center, bird the boardwalk out across the floodplain forest to the Pithlachascotee River. The best birding by far is along the paved bike trail. A bike helps cover ground; listen for brown-headed nuthatches and Bachman’s sparrows as you pedal through flatwoods past occasional cypress domes. In nice weather, there are bird walks on the first Saturday each month. Loaner optics available at nature center.

- [James E. Grey Preserve and Pithlachascotee River](#) — This new 100-acre park includes a canoe launch and trail along the river with easy views of an eagle's nest. Hike the trail or paddle the river, which changes quickly from a wide waterway, to a winding stream over-arched with vegetation. Look for yellow-crowned night herons and limpkins by the water; migrants like cedar waxwings in the canopy.
- [Key Vista Nature Park](#) — Another of Pasco's quaint nature park provides hiking trails through sand pine uplands, a viewing tower of mud flats where shorebirds and waders feed at low tide, as well as a sand beach on the south side of its peninsula for loafing terns and skimmers. Good for songbird fallouts in migration, this site is also nice for wintering water birds.
- [Anclote Gulf Park](#) — An extensive fishing pier gives good access to mudflats and open water for wintering ducks, feeding shore and wading birds, as well as flyovers from terns and gulls. In winter, scope for bufflehead, common loons and horned grebes out to sea. Like many coastal areas in Pasco County, gray kingbirds are possible in summer.
- [Anclote River Park](#) — A small park with waterfront worth checking for reddish egrets and black-bellied plovers on flats and in shallows of the Anclote River. Osprey nest nearby, as have great horned owls in past years. This site has a popular boat launch that can get very busy on weekends; come early, or on a weekday.

To view the entire Great Florida Birding Trail, or to learn more about the ten locations in Pasco County, visit www.floridabirdingtrail.com

For information about other natural attractions in Pasco County, visit <http://www.visitpasco.net> or contact the Tourism Office at 1-800-842-1873 or tourism@pascocountyfl.net.

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