

Bicycling Loop Road by Patty Huff

One of the all-time great bike rides in south Florida is located in three separate counties: Collier, Monroe and Miami-Dade. Loop Road, south of the Tamiami Trail. This area has an interesting history in itself but the beauty of the environment is one of its outstanding features. You will see lots of wildlife as you bicycle through this rural area just 4 miles west of Shark Valley (another great bicycling destination) in Miami Dade County. We started on the far western section at the former Monroe Station site in Collier County, 17 miles east of Everglades City.

Last spring a friend of mine and I arrived at Loop Road around 1:45 pm which turned out to be an ideal time with the bald cypress, slash pine and sabal palm trees providing shade from the afternoon sun. Just a little over two miles of cycling, Gator Hook Trail has a picnic area (with toilets). If you decide to take a walk, you can hike for 5 miles into the swamp along the historic logging road.

Staying on Loop Road the first 4-5 miles will be rough (like a washboard) along a gravel lane until you reach Monroe County; then the roadbed will smooth out. You will pass by the southernmost point of the 1,400-mile long Florida National Scenic Trail



which extends north to the Big Cypress Oasis Center and continues through the entire state of Florida. There are many culvert crossings in this area where you will find wildlife to photograph. We saw lots of alligators alongside the road, great white and blue herons, egrets and one roseate spoonbill; a real treat for any nature enthusiast!

At 15.6 miles there is the last public trail: Tree Snail Hammock. We didn't venture out onto the trails but it's a good opportunity to get off your bike here and take a short hike into higher ground to find the tree snails which attach themselves to the trunks of trees. As you bike along the paved section of Loop Road (at mile 16.5) you will be cycling through the old town of Pinecrest where Al Capone had a home, a hotel and a brothel. Gator Hook Lodge was once a bar and dance club serving as the social center for Loop Road. The fascinating history of this location includes fiddle-player Ervin Rouse whose famous "The Orange Blossom Special" would entertain the guests. After nearly 20 years the lodge closed in 1977, shortly after Big Cypress National Preserve was established. Many people still live in Pinecrest and members of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians have homes along the eastern end of Loop Road so please be respectful of the property owners when you bike or hike here.

Rather than go to the end of the 24-mile Loop Road and cycle on the heavy traffic area of US41, we turned around at mile 17 and enjoyed a peaceful ride back through Big Cypress National Preserve. If we had gone another five miles we would be at the boundary line where Everglades National Park is to the south and east and Big Cypress Preserve is north and west. All part of the greater Everglades ecosystem and a wonder to behold!

For detailed information about Loop Road, visit the National Park Service website:
<https://www.nps.gov/bicy/planyourvisit/upload/bicy-loop-road-scenic-road-final-2.pdf>

"Nothing compares to the simple pleasure of a bike ride."

- John F. Kennedy