

# THE NATURAL PLACE To Be

BY KEVIN FRITZ

W estled on the Gulf shores in Florida's Big Bend, Wakulla County is an outdoor paradise teeming with history. Its prominence as a shipping port during the cotton trade built its communities, which now offer a more laid-back lifestyle. Known as "The Natural Place to Be," 73 percent of the county is made up of natural lands, ranging from the botanical and wildlife splendor of the Apalachicola National Forest to the salt marshes and tidal flats of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

Glimpse a wading pink roseate spoonbill or a majestic bald eagle soaring overhead. Explore hidden beachfront communities or hike through a forest. Watch Spanish moss sway from mighty oaks, creating a magical setting. If it's the outdoors you crave, your search is over.

## MUST SEE/MUST DO

Originally settled in 1528 at the confluence of the St. Marks and Wakulla rivers, St. Marks was a major shipping port in the 1800s. Florida's first railroad, built in 1836, connected the port to Tallahassee for the exportation of the cotton. Today, you can still travel the abandoned rail line, now a popular bicycle and equestrian trail.

The St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, which encompasses 68,000 acres of protected habitats and ecosystem, is a birdwatcher's



Wakulla County is renowned for its abundance of wildlife.

haven. Visit the historic St. Marks Lighthouse, the second oldest in Florida, which rests on a base of limestone rock taken from nearby Fort San Marcos de Apalache. Stop by the San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park and learn how the fort, originally built in 1679, survived occupation by Spanish, English, American and Southern Confederate forces.

Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories in Panama has the largest array of touch tanks in

The St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge is a birdwatcher's haven.

the continental United States. Observe some of the oddest and most interesting creatures from the Gulf of Mexico and learn how to protect fragile sea life.

In downtown Crawfordville, the county seat, visit the Old Wakulla Courthouse built in 1894, one of only three existing wooden courthouses in the state. Look skyward to witness the cypress weathervane, hand-carved in the shape of a mullet. In the 1800s, the bony fish played a major role in everyday life here for eating, trading and bartering. The Old County Jail across the way is now a museum.

Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park is home to one of the longest and deepest freshwater springs in the world. The unspoiled natural look and crystal-clear waters of Wakulla Springs has captured Hollywood's attention over the years, in such classics as *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

Visit or stay at the 27-room Wakulla Springs Lodge, the state's only park lodge, circa 1937, home to the world's largest-known marble bar. Other accommodation includes the Best Western Plus and The Inn at Wildwood, both of which are located on the Coastal Highway.

Visit the beach of Mashas Sands in Ochlockonee Bay where freshwater meets the salt water of Apalachee Bay. Watch for dolphins, picnic or walk the sandbars at low tide.

Shell Island Fish Camp on the Wakulla River is an ideal spot to drop your line in the water.

Kayak and canoe enthusiasts flock to Wakulla County for its many access areas and adventures. Explore the 10 segments of the new Apalachee Bay Maritime Heritage Paddling Trail system; most of its trails are located along the coast between Panacea and St. Marks. Paddle three designated paddling trails—the Wakulla River Paddling Trail, Sopchoppy Paddling Trail and the Lower Ochlockonee River Paddling Trail.

If hiking is your muse, the Florida National Scenic Trail traverses approximately 75 miles through the county, which features two designated gateway communities: the cities of St. Marks and Sopchoppy. The trail weaves through the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and the Apalachicola National Forest, the latter of which encompasses most of the western side of the county.

Take a drive on the 220-mile Big Bend Scenic Byway that meanders throughout the county to view unmatched scenery, historical sites, recreation areas and wildlife.

Festivals are an integral part of life in Wakulla County, the most intriguing being the annual Worm Gruntin' Festival in Sopchoppy, which involves calling earthworms to the surface of the forest each April. Also in April, "Wild About Wakulla" week features special events scheduled throughout the county. In May, head to the Annual Panacea Blue Crab Festival on scenic Dickerson Bay and fill up on boiled crabs and fried shrimp. The St. Marks Stone Crab Festival and the Monarch Butterfly Festival take place every year at the end of October.

## LIVE IT UP

Seafood may be the meal of choice in the Sunshine State, but in Wakulla County seafood is king. Retail markets along the county's coastline sell locally caught mullet, flounder, grouper, red snapper and cobia that will have your mouth watering.

For the freshest seafood from mullet to blue crab and oysters, much of which is caught and served by the venerable Lovell family, stop by their Spring Creek Restaurant in the village of Spring Creek. Posey's Up the Creek Seafood Steam Room and Oyster Bar in Panacea is renowned for fresh shrimp, clams and crabs. Ochlockonee Bay is home to the famous Angelo and Son's Seafood Restaurant that re-



cently returned to dish out its classic fare after being severely damaged during Hurricane Dennis in 2005.

If slow-cooked barbecue is your fancy, Hamaknockers in Crawfordville serves fall-off-the-bone ribs and smoked wings, juicy beef brisket, chicken and pulled pork. For barbecue, seafood and 'gator, look no further than the newly opened Pirates Landing Bar and Grill in St. Marks. On the river, the Riverside Cafe serves up great views and seafood.

## SHOP

If you're an antique lover, Wakulla County's only antique business, the White Elephant Antique Mall, has catered to visitors and residents of Crawfordville for 20 years. Crawfordville is also home to the Art Warehouse, an art gallery promoting local artists.

While exploring Panacea, visit Crum's Mini Mall, a one-stop shop that has been family-owned and operated for more than 40 years.

## INSIDER'S TIP

Find serenity in the quaint fishing village of St. Marks at the Sweet Magnolia Inn, the only bed and breakfast in Wakulla County. Originally housing a General Store, it was rehabbed back to its glory days in 1990s. The Magnolia Room, close to the back porch, is a crowd favorite. **FL**

## FEATURED LINKS

### Visit Wakulla

[visitwakulla.com](http://visitwakulla.com)

### Angelo & Son's Seafood Restaurant

[angeloandsonseafoodrestaurant.com](http://angeloandsonseafoodrestaurant.com)

### Best Western Plus Wakulla Inn & Suites

[bestwestern.com/wakullainn](http://bestwestern.com/wakullainn)

### Big Bend Scenic Byway

[floridascenichighways.com/big-bend-scenic-byway](http://floridascenichighways.com/big-bend-scenic-byway)

### Crum's Mini Mall

[panaceaminimall.com](http://panaceaminimall.com)

### Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park

[floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings](http://floridastateparks.org/wakullasprings)

### Florida National Scenic Trail

[fs.usda.gov/fnst](http://fs.usda.gov/fnst)

### Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories

[gulfspecimen.org](http://gulfspecimen.org)

### Riverside Cafe

[riversidebay.com](http://riversidebay.com)

### San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park

[floridastateparks.org/sanmarcos](http://floridastateparks.org/sanmarcos)

### Sopchoppy Worm Gruntin' Festival

[wormgruntinfestival.com](http://wormgruntinfestival.com)

### Spring Creek Restaurant

[springcreekfl.com](http://springcreekfl.com)

### St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge

[fws.gov/refuge/st\\_marks](http://fws.gov/refuge/st_marks)

### Sweet Magnolia Inn Bed and Breakfast

[sweetmagnoliainnbandb.com](http://sweetmagnoliainnbandb.com)

### The Inn at Wildwood

[innatwildwood.com](http://innatwildwood.com)

### Wild About Wakulla

[wildaboutwakulla.com](http://wildaboutwakulla.com)