

Hillsborough And Pasco County Parks, So Much More Than Just Walking

By Karen McBride

As you drive along the busy street known as Dale Mabry, you may be unaware of the hidden oasis, named Lake Park. The 589 acre park has a lot to offer including five lakes, an equestrian area, BMX bicycle track and a two mile hiking trail.

Whether you are looking for a fun way to tire out your children at the playground, or want a relaxing day reading a good book under a shady tree, Lake Park is for you. Fishing is permitted from the shore, and only electric powered boats are permitted in the lakes. If you are lucky enough to catch a fish, a volunteer catch and release program for bass is encouraged and there is a limit of two catfish per day.

The park hosts many events throughout the year, including the Native American Festival, an annual art show, and Tampa BMX Raceway races. During the winter months, the park is open from 8 am to 6 pm. In the spring, summer and fall from 8 am to 7 pm.

Another park in Lutz is perfect for the dog lover. Be sure to visit Carolyn Meeker Dog Park, 122 1st Ave. SW, Lutz. Located near Johns 4 Meat (aka John's Butcher Shop) and the Lutz Library, the park has five acres with a six foot chain link fence. The area is split into two separate access areas for small and large dogs. In addition, there are water fountains for people and dogs, park benches, dog washes, a hitching post, and doggie mitt receptacles.

Further east is one of the first parks I visited when I moved to Florida. Lettuce Lake Park opened a few years earlier, in 1982, and over the years has added amenities, such as picnic areas, playgrounds, and a fitness course. The 3500 foot boardwalk meanders along the Hillsborough River to an observation tower for a birds eye view of the beautiful surrounding

nature. A canoe and kayak launch has added another option for the nature observer. The 240 acre park is located at 6920 E Fletcher, Tampa.

Traveling north on 301, you will find Hillsborough River State Park. It is one of the oldest parks in Florida. It opened in 1938 at 15402 US 301 N in Thonotosassa. With over seven miles of nature trails, it is a hiker's paradise. Bicyclists can ride the 1.6 miles Wetlands Restoration Nature Trail as well as the 2.2 mile

on Saturday and Sunday after 1 pm. Settlers and tradesmen will be dressed in historical clothing to make you feel as if you traveled back in time. Craft demonstrations and a variety of food will be available. Thursday and Fridays will be school days (but the public is invited as well). The cost is \$2 per student and teachers and chaperones are free.

Like many of the parks in Hillsborough County, there is a \$2 entry fee at each of these parks

trail met the river, and that was near the pay station. There's a dock where you can launch a canoe, but the water level was very low on our visit.

The park is the home of the Withlacoochee Living History Primitive Art Festival. Flint knapping demonstrations (where artists make arrow and spear points), fur traders and craftsmen from the 1800s lead to the authentic feel of the festival. Visitors can buy arrowheads, spear points, and stone working tools. The annual festival is being held on February 17, 2012 from 9 am to 5 pm. The cost is \$2 per person, children 12 and under free or \$5 per car.

After taking in all the history at Hillsborough River State Park and Withlacoochee River Park, we decided to travel west. Of course, in Florida, you can only go so far before you hit water. We found three beautiful parks along the same road, Key Vista Nature Park, Anclote Park, and Anclote River Park are all located on Baillies Bluff Road in Holiday.

Key Vista Nature Park is a 101 acre park located at 2700 Baillies Bluff. The nature trail meanders through the woods among tall beautiful pine trees. The only sounds are leaves rustling and the marsh grass blowing in the breeze. As we continued along the path, enjoying the tranquility, we saw a bald eagle perched high on a tree branch. It spread its wings and flew off, before we could get a close up view. The nature hike continues onto a boardwalk with breathtaking views of the Gulf. Benches are all along the trail, for you to rest and enjoy the nature around you. Photographers will enjoy the abundance of wildlife at the nature park. We were pleasantly surprised to see an owl sleeping in its nest high overhead. The park has a \$2 parking fee and restrooms.

For another dog park, visit



Withlacoochee River Park

loop around the campgrounds. If you don't own a bike, you can rent one for \$10 per hour. Surreys (for two or more people) can be rented for \$20 per hour.

Camping, swimming in the pool, enjoying the picnic areas, fishing, canoeing and kayaking are just some of the things to do at the park. Rangers can take you on a tour of Historic Fort Foster on Saturdays at 2 pm or Sundays at 11 am. The cost for the tour is \$2. Fort Foster is a reconstructed fort from the Second Seminole War. Artifacts found at the fort site are on display along with maps showing both sides of the conflict between Seminole Indians and US Forces.

Fort Foster Rendezvous will be held Thursday, February 9 through Sunday, February 12. Historical reenactments featuring military and Seminole Indians will be held

(not including the dog park). Canoes and Kayaks can be rented for \$25 for two to four hours (times vary depending upon the park), \$10 each additional hour. For more information, go to www.hillsboroughcounty.org/Parks

Hillsborough County is not alone in the "beautiful parks department." Pasco has many places to visit. In fact, too many to include all of them in this article. Withlacoochee River Park is located at 12449 Withlacoochee Boulevard, Dade City. The park has a playground, 40 foot observation tower, campgrounds, and 5.2 miles of hiking trails, but the most unique part of the park is the 1840's replica of an Indian Village with a School House, Church, Trading Post and Cracker House as well as a Log Cabin. We found only one location where the hiking

Anclote Park, 2305 Baillies Bluff. As you enter the park, there are two large play areas for the dogs. The double gated entry allows the larger dogs (over 35 lbs) to play in one area and the smaller (under 35 lbs) in another. There are benches for the owners to sit with a few shady spots, while the dogs run and play. Water fountains help to keep the dogs hydrated.

Located along the Gulf, the park is a popular fishing spot, either with a boat or along the two piers. A children's fishing tournament is scheduled for March 3, 2012. Check the Pasco County Parks calendar for more information. http://portal.pascocountyfl.net/portal/server.pt/community/parks_and_recreation/248/calendar/1980

Wildlife is all around this park, as well. A sign showing "Manatee area" is displayed to alert visitors to be on the lookout for the slow moving creatures floating through the warmer waters of the canal. Pelicans, eagles, and a variety of

birds make their home in Anclote Park.

Further down the road, is Anclote River Park, located at 1119 Baillies Bluff. There are many amenities for your family to enjoy, including 300 foot swimming area on the Gulf, picnic tables, volleyball and horseshoe pits. With six boat ramps and four docks, it is a good place to launch your boat, canoe or kayak. The cost to use the boat ramp is \$5 per day. The park entrance fee is \$2.

Heading north, you will find Crews Lake Wilderness Park. Crews Lake was once the largest lake in the county. It was very sad when the lake dried up many years ago during the drought. But the park still has a lot to offer and assured its visitors that it wasn't going away by opening a train ride. Free rides are offered on the 2nd Saturday of each month by The Central Pasco & Gulf Railroad, Inc. from 10 am to 4 pm. The train depot is located near Shelter

#2 by the log cabin. The train can be reserved for birthday parties as well. Contact (727) 639-7639 for more information or visit their website at www.cpgrr.org.

The train ride, picnic areas, hiking trails and playgrounds ensure that families will have a great day visiting the park. Crews Lake Wilderness Park is located at 16739 Crews Lake Drive, Spring Hill. The park is open from dawn to dusk.

Whether you are a bird watcher, photographer, hiker, or parent with energetic kids (including the 4 legged kind), you will be able to find a park for you. So put on your hiking shoes, pack a picnic and enjoy your walk in the park.

Parking Passes

Hillsborough County Parks - annual passes for \$50 (individuals) or \$100 (families) can be purchased



Beautiful views at Anclote Park in Holiday

at Hillsborough County Regional Parks, Administrative Office, 15502 Morris Bridge Road, Thonotosassa. The application can be downloaded from the website and mailed. <http://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/parks/resources/forms/AnnualPass.pdf>

Pasco County Parks - annual passes for \$60 will allow you to enter 11 county parks. Passes can be purchased at several different locations including the Central Pasco Professional Center, 4111 Land O' Lakes Boulevard, Suite 202, Land O' Lakes.

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