

Let's Go Walking in Florida

Follow these 10 easy
steps
to getting off the couch
out the door
and
on your way to
discovering
Authentic Florida



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*Note: I've written an award-winning book titled **50 Great Walks in Florida** by Lucy Beebe Tobias, 2008, University Press of Florida, 316 pages, cost \$24.95. Includes maps, photos and trip essentials. Walks are in urban areas, parks, botanical gardens and surprises like a moonlight walk on a beach. Buy your own copy of **50 Great Walks** and enjoy. Each chapter has a personal log so you can fill in the date you did the walk plus names of family and friends who came with you and your thoughts. When you start walking, this is a fun book to read. It is even more fun to do!*

In the beginning, God made a world that includes Florida - a prickly paradise shaped like an upside-down boot 1,000 miles long and surrounded by water on three sides.

God was good to us. The Creator made Florida flat. This lack of elevation appeals to all those over the age of 50, plus burned-out Boston marathoners strolling along with teenagers lacking the patience to climb up mountains and all mothers pushing strollers.

Flat land does not mean familiar land. Florida is not like Up North. Do snakes here really sun themselves on every sidewalk? Is it true mosquitoes are the state bird? Hey, you are saying, I'm in paradise now, can I walk everywhere barefoot and shirtless? Not if you want to go in a restaurant. Shirt and shoes are usually requested. So, welcome to walking ***one step at a time***.

Step One . . .

A life without shoes sounds great but does not work on pavement (picture hot concrete on summer days), or on beaches with unknown sharp objects buried in the sand nor on forest trails with pine-needles covering solid tree roots located right where you just stepped. Ouch.

Do invest in a good pair of walking shoes, running shoes, training shoes, thick soled sandals - anything with vibram soles and ventilated sides. I suggest socks with your shoes. So, it looks a little dorky, but honestly do you like surprises that sting your skin? I don't. I'm talking insects and plants too - if you stray off the beaten path and encounter some poison ivy, you'll want all the socks and long-sleeved shirts you can get.

Walking Wardrobe

- ⇒ Long-sleeved light-weight shirt to go over a T shirt, can stay on or come off and be tied around your waist. It is sun protection.
- ⇒ A good pair of walking shoes with socks.
- ⇒ The trousers that unzip the legs to make shorts are pretty cool (literally!).
- ⇒ A hat of your choice - straw is funky, baseball caps shade your face but you'll find the back of your neck can burn. Wide brimmed hats work well, get one with a chin strap for windy days.
- ⇒ Rain gear - a parka or poncho. Keep it in the car at all times, stuff in a pouch or pocket when you walk. You know the drill - the sun is shining right now, rain to follow in 15 minutes.
- ⇒ A fishing vest - very nice to have. Lots of pockets. They are unisex.
You can stash your digital camera, maps, car keys, water bottle, energy bar, etc. in the vest, leave your hands free for eating ice cream. That works.
- ⇒ Sunglasses - 2 pair, polarized for glare, amber for fog and twilight.
- ⇒ Put a spare shirt, shorts, sandals and a towel in the car in case you fall into a lake or the rain really comes down.

Step two . . .

Let's talk about some *not's*

Walking is *not* hiking, no very long distances.

(The longest walk in **50 Great Walks** is 4 miles, the shortest is 1200 yards)

Walking is *not* an overnight event - no backpacks required.

Walking is *not* just something you do off road. There are lovely walks in urban areas on paved paths.

Walking is *not* an endurance sport.

Walking is *not* a race.

I recommend *not* wearing a watch (put it in one of those many fishing vest pockets).

Most important - turn your cellphone to off, mute or vibrate.

Do *not* have the phone on.

Why? Because constantly checking time and looking at the phone (will my sister call? Will we be done in time for lunch?)

means you cannot appreciate the fine art of **meandering while walking**.



Meander: n. A winding path or course.

I like to take the definition in Websters

Unabridged Second Edition and stretch it

- meandering includes taking time to sit,

to smell the roses, to look at a flower close up or watch a butterfly flutter by.

Some of the one-mile walks in **50 Great Walks** have a time of one hour. That long? Indeed, time is built in to inhale the fragrance of the season, to be still.

Botanical gardens are great places to meander. In fact, they are designed that way - winding paths make you slow down, you can't see what comes next so you look on either side of you and slow down.

Once I was a straight line person, going from Point A to B. I learned how to meander in botanical gardens. So can you.

Harry P. Leu Garden in Orlando has a good listing of Florida gardens. Check [Other Florida Gardens](#).

Photo: A winding path invites meandering at Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Sarasota, Photo by Lucy Beebe Tobias ©2006



Step three . . .

At book talks I'm often approached by women who say they want to start walking, and yes, they'd like to go on some of the 50 Great Walks BUT, and this is huge, BUT they do not want to walk alone.

Neither do I. What fun is that? And it can be scary. Who wants to get lost? I walk with friends, with family, with my dogs, with neighbors and often with groups being led by guides.

Three cheers for guides. In my humble opinion, guides are one of Florida's best kept secrets. These people from all walks of life, some paid, some volunteer, absolutely love their speciality piece of paradise - the park ranger who leads you into back country at Rainbow Springs State Park, the gardener talking about roses at Leu Gardens, the birds you may encounter on a walk with a birder at say Silver Springs State Park, the knowledgeable guide who takes you on an hour walking tour of the Art Deco District in North Miami Beach.

Each one of them helps fulfill the definition of a Great Walk as a walk where you get some exercise, LEARN NEW THINGS

and are done in time for lunch.

How do you find guides? They are just a few clicks away. For example, the third Saturday of the month (except summer months) a birder will lead Coffee With the Birds, about an hour's walk at Silver River State Park in Ocala. You can find guided activities in state parks by looking under [Special Events](#) in any park listing.

What is the cost? Six dollars to get in the park (unless you have a pass, see Step 9), no charge for the bird walk itself. The most expensive guided walk in 50 Great Walks is the [Art Deco walk](#) in North Miami Beach - now \$20 and worth it. Most guided walks are either free or, if at a park, then pay park admission. Some guided walks require a minimum number of people.

Step four . . .

Like a little extra cache with your walking? A whole lot of folks who never really walked before have strapped on their walking shoes and followed the trail to the latest craze - the high-tech treasure hunt called geocaching.

Did you know there are 960,114 geocaches in the world? In the downtown zip code for Ocala alone there are 935, and the numbers keep rising. Geocaches are hidden in places off the beaten path, well, not always, and you get there by GPS coordinates. Once you find it, log in, leave a small something, take a small something (not always). The main site for all geocachers is <http://www.geocaching.com>

Geocaching is a game of hide and seek for the electronic age. You need a hand held GPS or get a GPS application for say, an iPhone. Birders like to keep life lists, what they have seen and where they have seen it. Geocachers are the same way - they went out, walked and found the coordinates, then gone on line to blog about it to the whole world.

Geocaching - A pretty good excuse to get outdoors and get walking.

Step five . . .

Ah, seasons. Walkers can follow the seasons and all the subtle and dramatic changes.

The beautiful azaleas to the right are blooming in March at Rainbow Springs State Park in Dunnellon.

(Photo by Lucy Beebe Tobias © 2006)

Flowers in bloom are always good time for a walk. You'll know the season is here by checking Web sites for updates.

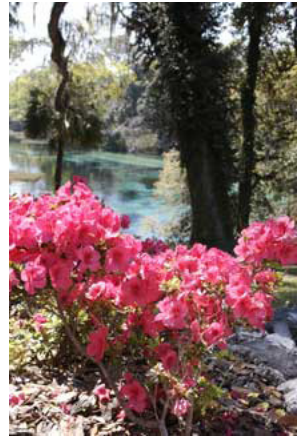
Another example - Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park in Tallahassee has a Camellia walk in December. Even if the camellias (for which they are famous) are not quite all out, the scene is enchanted with millions of holiday lights.

Here's where I answer the question - are mosquitoes the state bird of Florida? No, it only seems that way in the summer-time.

I advise going to the Everglades any season but summer. There are 30 different kinds of mosquitoes in the Everglades. You don't want to be best friends. Don't walk at dawn or twilight hours anywhere in any season. These are the peak times for mosquitoes.

In the fall forest trails are carpeted with oak leaves and pine needles. The skies open up to view as the trees shed leaves. Winter sees crisp days, brisk walking weather and lovely vistas covered up in other seasons. Spring comes early to Florida and creeps in like a cat coming in unannounced though a cat door. Suddenly, maybe even as early as December, weather permitting, there are azaleas in full riot, followed in February by dogwoods in bloom and then the showy white flowers on magnolias in March.

Get out now. Go walking. Enjoy walking until May. Summer is a good time to go swimming. Save walking for fall. Fall brings new colors, some yellows and oranges as leaves change. It is all good, all worth the walk.



Step six . . .

Bugged by bugs? That is why Florida crackers wear long-sleeved shirts. These shirts can also serve as sunscreen. Bugs (mosquitoes, deer flies) are an issue in summer and late spring.

Bug spray with DEET usually works. Don't walk before the sun comes up or after it goes down, prime time for hungry mosquitoes. Do stay on the marked trail, don't wander off the trail into poison ivy and other obnoxious things. Trails have been cleared and marked for a reason - so you can walk with a reasonable expectation of safety. That works for me.



Step seven . . .

At some point in your walks you will dance with wildlife. If you see a snake, give it the right of way, step back, give it lots of room. Don't even bother counting rings, figuring out color patterns. Just remember - they are the natives, you are the visitor. Respect works with snakes.

Walking on the levees at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge made a big impression on me. I realized these man made structures (actually the flat tops of dikes) are great for sight lines - looking at birds in wintertime from an elevation, for walking - levees are flat and usually mowed - and for wildlife protection. What self-respecting bear is going to walk on a levee? It is wide open, no cover. Bad for them, good for you. You could see a snake a block away.

Let's move on to alligators. I'm going to tell you a true story and try not to cry. In Everglades National Park a guide was gathering people together for a guided walk along the Anhinga Amble (Ch. 46 in *50 Great Walks*). A man walked up to her and asked if it was all right to take a picture of his four-year old daughter on top on an alligator sunning itself off the road and next to the swamp.

I am not making this up. I was standing right there. The ranger was speechless. Finally she managed to say "You realize that is a live animal and perfectly capable of eating a child."

The man was surprised and said: "It was so still I thought it was an inflatable."

Ah, inflatables. We've all been to theme parks full of inflatables. Trust me there is nothing inflatable about Florida wildlife. They are solid, living, breathing life forms.

Deer run across the trail. Wild turkeys strut their stuff. Owls hoot in the trees. Bears walk in the woods. Possums bump into trees because their eyesight is so bad. Ospreys fly overhead with a fish in their talons. And alligators sun themselves between meals.

Do not be deceived. Wildlife has two things on its mind - survival and the next meal. Don't threaten their survival and don't be their next meal.

DO bring cameras with lots of zoom - zoom in from a distance and get great pictures.

Step eight . . .

If ever there was a reason to get up off the couch, out the door and walking in Florida, this is it -

the Great Florida Birding Trail.

It is a self-guided 2,000 mile highway all over the state, taking you to 489 sites that are loaded with bird watching opportunities and bird education. Free guides, downloadable from the Internet or at each location, tell you what



birds might be found where. A new trip-planning tool at the same GFBT site uses Google maps to tell you about birds in a particular area. **50 Great Walks** has 23 references to the Great Florida Birding Trail.

The word “snowbirds”, used to describe winter tourists who walk in two legs and arrive in a car or by plane, also applies to real birds. Some of the best birding for wading birds happens in the winter when they come to Florida to warm up.

A great example - [J. N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge](#), Sanibel (Ch. 38 in 50 Great Walks) has masses of wading birds and seabirds, mostly concentrated in the months from January to April. Note two things: the Refuge is closed on Fridays and you need to check the tides before you go, low tide is best.

There is a drive through the refuge with lots of room for parking. That is what you will be doing, parking along the five-mile drive, getting out of the car to stare. Volunteer birders patrol the drive with large scopes for you to get close up views. Do bring binoculars if you have them.

If you get into birding, there will be some additions to your walking wardrobe - a pair of binoculars and a digital camera are two “must haves” along with a good bird guide like the National Audubon Society book called *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, written and illustrated by David Allen Sibley.



Photo: White pelicans at J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge, Sanibel
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Step nine . . .

You are ready to go, right? Walking is your thing now. But wait, let's check your wallet. Why pay for individual admission to places when you can buy season passes for a lot less (the less comes because you are going to go there frequently).

An individual [annual pass](#) to Florida State Parks is \$60. Since the going rate to get in is \$6 a visit - 10 visits and the rest is gravy. Florida has 160 parks so an annual pass is a good buy, especially in these economic times - much cheaper than a theme park for one day!

Consider getting the Passport booklet at \$13.07 each. Most state parks have them or order online at the same annual pass Web site above. As you visit each park, they will stamp your Passport page and you have space to put in your comments plus most parks have pictures and text about what you will find. Pretty cool.

I'm sure there are days when you think that growing older is a bummer (and there are those days!). But not when you are 62 or older - you are then eligible for an America the Beautiful - The National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Use Pass (whew!).

For a mere \$10 you get a Senior Pass good for life (if you lose it, you have to buy another one).

This pass gets you into lands managed by five federal agencies - Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish & Wildlife Service, USDA Forest Service and National Park Service. And there are local discounts for extended amenities such as camping.

Those under 62 can still buy an annual pass for \$80. You know, these passes really work in Florida with our natural bounty of 3 national forests, 3 national parks, 2 national seashores and 28 national wildlife refuges - for starters!

Step 10 . . .

Going walking? Be sure to tell someone (a neighbor, a friend, e mail a relative, whatever works) where you are going and what time you expect to return home. Humor me.

Yes, carry your cellphone if you have one (I didn't say turn it on, just be there in case you need it). Be advised that cell phone reception is lousy to none in out of the way places like national forests.

Carry water with you and have more in the car. I like a stainless steel bottle which gets rid of the toxic issues associated with plastic containers and you are making less waste. Fill up your stainless steel bottles before leaving home.

In your car have a small box with things you might need - bandages for cuts or blisters from feet rubbing against shoes. A spare pair of shoes to change into for driving is nice indeed. Cleaning wipes work as quick disinfectants for bug bites or scratches.

Authentic Florida is full of history, mystery, natural beauty and drop dead gorgeous sunrises and sunsets. Be there. Put on your walking shoes and go - one step at a time.

*walk in peace
Lucy*