

# KITCHING CREEK NATURE TRAIL

## JONATHAN DICKINSON STATE PARK

We invite you to walk this 1 mile trail loop and enjoy the variety of plant and animal life found along the way that winds westward through low pine flatwoods and along Kitching Creek.

The points of interest along the trail are numbered and are described by the numbered paragraphs in this booklet. Leave only footprints, take only pictures.

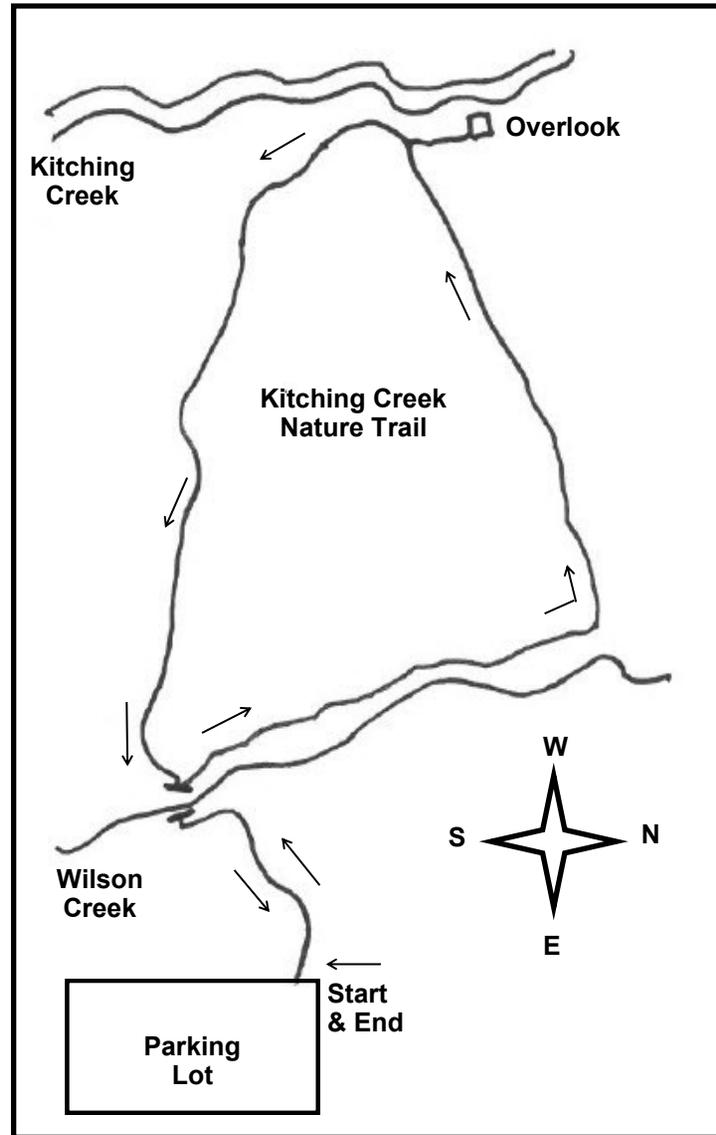
**1. JONATHAN DICKINSON** - In 1696, Jonathan Dickinson and his crew shipwrecked on Jupiter Island, less than 5 miles from here. He recorded information about the Jaegas, the local tribe of indigenous people. By following their example, his crew were able to survive the wilds of Florida.

**2. PINE FLATWOODS** - This plant community occurs where the ground is so flat that there is little drainage of water off the land or into the soil after it rains. The most common tree in this community is the slash pine. Under the pines, you will notice a lower growth of plants that includes saw palmetto, gallberry and wax myrtle.

**3. SAW PALMETTO** - The most abundant plant in this area is the saw palmetto. In some places it grows so thick that it is nearly impossible to walk through. This plant's name comes from the saw-like teeth along the leaf stalks. The upper part of the plant will burn in a forest fire, but it is very fire re-sistant and is seldom killed.

**4. FERNS AT WILSON CREEK** - More kinds of ferns are found in Florida than in any other state. Here in the water and growing close to the edge of the creek, we see several types of ferns; the tallest is the leather fern with royal fern and swamp fern growing here too. An "exotic" (non-native) climbing fern called *Lygodium* could take over this area if not regularly treated.

**5. BECOMING A PARK** - This area became a state park in 1950. It encompasses 10,500 acres of land with 16 distinct natural communities that create the mosaic of Jonathan Dickinson State Park, the largest state park in Southeast Florida.



**6. NATURAL BOUNDARIES** - At the boundary of land and water, everything seems to have its place - St. John's wort in the wetter areas, a ring of saw palmettos around the wet prairie and slash pine on higher ground. However, drainage of the land around the park has lowered the water table that sustained what used to be wet areas. By installing weirs (dams), we have restored the natural wetland system that existed here prior to people.

**7. SLASH PINE** - Notice the pleasant smell of pine needles and resin, the quiet whisper of the wind through the branches and the cool shade created by the tall pines. The south Florida slash pine is found nowhere else in the world except the southern part of Florida. In the days before this was a park, the early settlers sought out the hard, termite-resistant wood of these pines for their homes.

**8. HARD LIVING** - Imagine yourself as an early pioneer in this environment. Early settlers had to be both physically and mentally hardy. Many cleared the land by hand to grow crops. They labored long hours under harsh conditions without benefit of heavy equipment.

**9. WIRE GRASS** - The most abundant grass in the flatwoods area is wire grass. This grass was named for its blades which look and feel like fine wire. When flowering, the seed head of the plant has a wheat-like appearance. The plant is fire-dependent, flowering best if burned during the wet season (April - September). It is a common food of the gopher tortoise.

**10. CYPRESS** - The buttressed, furrowed trunk of the bald cypress rises out of the water of this small creek. The flaring bases lowers the trees' center of gravity, helping it to balance its great height. These cypress trees drop their needles in the dry season (October - May), going bald.

**11. KITCHING CREEK** - In 1886, the Kitching family bought land around this creek from the State of Florida for \$1.25 an acre. Born in England, Walter Kitching was the first of the family to visit the area in 1882. He later set up a trade boat business between Titusville and Jupiter. At the time, travel in south Florida was generally restricted to the water. Kitching would travel by boat to the riverfront homes of settlers with his merchandise for sale.

**12. STRAND** - Kitching Creek is called a cypress “strand.” A strand is a long narrow band of trees that follows a natural shallow water drainage system. Unfortunately, some of the cypress trees were cut for lumber in the 1940s. However, the area is still a valuable remnant of a unique environment that lies largely within the boundaries of the park.

**13. Dependent on FIRE** - Views, such as the one before you, would eventually change if fire was excluded from this pineland. Many more oaks and hardwoods would appear and the pines would gradually disappear. Not to mention the various plants that rely on fire to seed and the animals that benefit from this ecosystem. Prescribed fires mimic this natural fire cycle and also reduce the danger of wildfires by removing excess plant matter.

**14. FLOWERS** - Numerous flowering plants grow in the pinelands. The wildflowers of this area change with the seasons giving visitors different views with every visit. Look for pink ground orchids, yellow St. John’s wort and the white tarflower.

**15. LISTEN** - By the time you reach this point, you may have heard many insect sounds, birds singing or the drumming of a woodpecker. A rustling noise in the bushes or dry leaves could have been caused by a lizard or a bobwhite. At night, opossum, raccoons, deer and bobcat may also be seen in this area.

**16. CABBAGE PALM** - There is no mistake that the trees by the river are “The State Tree of Florida.” However, when young they are often confused with the similar saw palmetto. Cabbage palm fronds extend from a pointed tip while saw palmetto fronds extend from a straight line.

**17. SNAGS** - You might have noticed many dead trees standing among the living. These “snags” are great homes for woodpeckers, squirrels, insects, and owls. When they fall and decay, they return nutrients to the soil.

**18. KEYSTONE SPECIES** - Have you spotted a burrow with an apron of soft white sand at the entrance? This is a gopher tortoise burrow, a keystone species in Florida. Gopher tortoises create burrows which can shelter a variety of endangered wildlife such as the indigo snake, gopher frog, and Florida mouse. By protecting the well-populated gopher tortoise, we in turn protect more vulnerable species that depend on its burrow.

**19. UP IN THE SKY** - Many birds make the pine flatwoods their home. Woodpeckers such as the large pileated and the endangered red-cockaded can be heard hammering on the pine trunks for insects. Ospreys, or fish hawks, make their nests close the water while red shouldered hawks chatter endlessly while soaring above the trees on the look out for prey.

**20. TURKEY OAK** - Usually growing to a height of 20 to 30 feet, the turkey oak is one of the most common oaks found with pines in dry, sandy soils, named for its turkey feet shaped leaves. It is interesting that even growing at the warm southern end of its range, it still undergoes its characteristic dropping of leaves in the fall.

**21. TRAIL’S END** - As you leave the Kitching Creek Nature Trail, stop and think about the many changes that have occurred in this pineland. Seed by seed and plant by plant, you can come to understand that your next walk along this trail will never be the same; but it can provide a feeling of returning discovery.

You may keep this brochure or return it to the box for use by another visitor.  
If you have any questions, please contact the Ranger Station at (772) 546-2771.

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FOOT TRAFFIC ONLY, NO BIKES  
DOGS MUST BE LEASHED AT ALL TIMES

