

BROOKER CREEK P R E S E R V E



The Friends Trail

Welcome to Brooker Creek Preserve, Pinellas County's largest remaining natural area. We hope you enjoy getting back to nature along this 1.75 mile loop trail.

This brochure provides information about Brooker Creek Preserve and the Friends Trail. Inside you will find the text version of an audio tour available along the trail. As you approach the numbered posts along the trail read the matching numbered section. If you prefer, you may use your smartphone to scan the QR codes found on the numbered posts and listen to the audio tour.

Please:

- Remain on the designated hiking trail (*marked with red trail blazes*)
- Yield to horses where the path intersects with the Exercise Horse Trail
- Properly dispose of all trash

We hope you enjoy your walk at...



A Pinellas County Government Program

BROOKER CREEK P R E S E R V E

Brooker Creek Preserve is managed by Pinellas County's Parks and Conservation Resources Department.

Our mission is to provide sound stewardship to the County's wild lands and waterways and opportunities for the appreciation of their intrinsic value. Established in the early 1990s by the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, Brooker Creek Preserve remains the largest natural area in the County. At over 8,700 acres, the Preserve protects a wide diversity of natural communities and provides vital habitat for many species of plants and animals. Since Brooker Creek flows into Lake Tarpon, managing the lands surrounding the creek also protects the water quality of the lake.

Since 1999, this trail has provided visitors an opportunity to experience the Preserve. In 2001 this trail was renamed The Friends Trail in honor of The Friends of Brooker Creek Preserve, Inc., a not-for-profit citizen support group dedicated to the long-term conservation of the Preserve. To learn more about the Friends visit www.friendsofbrookercreekpreserve.org.

We also offer:

Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center, 3940 Keystone Road, Tarpon Springs, FL 34688

- Interactive exhibits
- Hikes – both guided and self-guided
- Classes, workshops and special events
- A nature store
- Picnic facilities

Call (727) 453-6800 for more information.



WELCOME TO THE FRIENDS TRAIL

About this Trail:

The Friends Trail takes hikers through pine flatwood habitats, past a swamp under restoration, and eventually to the banks of Brooker Creek! Some portions of the trail may have standing water during the rainy season (May-October). No restrooms or picnic facilities are available. A small footbridge allows hikers easy access over the steep banks of a drainage ditch that bisects the trail. An elevated wildlife observation deck with benches is located just a short distance from the footbridge.

Please help us manage this trail for your enjoyment and the protection of our natural resources.

The following are prohibited:

- All domesticated animals, except service animals
- Unauthorized vehicles, including bicycles, motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles
- Alcoholic beverages
- Glass containers
- Weapons or fireworks
- Drones
- Smoking

Trail Hours:

Open daily, sunrise to sunset

Please Note:

Under the Pinellas County Code Chapter 90, all plants and animals are protected. Feeding of wildlife is not allowed.

1| FRIENDS TRAIL

Welcome to The Friends Trail. This trail system is part of Brooker Creek Preserve, the largest remaining natural area in Pinellas County. You may have noticed a trailhead for the horse trail here too. The exercise horse trail is for horses only. Hikers are not permitted. The Friends Trail starts with a wide path heading west before you cross a bridge to get to the start of the 1.75-mile loop trail. You can take a short detour to visit the observation deck before you cross the bridge; more about that at the next stop.

2| OBSERVATION TOWER

Here you can take a short detour over to the observation tower or walk alongside a small wetland site. You might think this wetland looks somewhat out of place and you're right! This wetland was planted in 1998 as part of a mitigation project. Mitigation refers to an action implemented to remedy, reduce or offset known negative impacts to the environment. When East Lake Road was expanded south of Keystone Road, the surrounding environment was impacted. To make up for those impacts, this former pastureland was dug out to create elevations consistent with a wetland site and planted with cypress trees and other wetland species.

3| BRIDGE

The water below your feet is collected from ditches that run along Lora Lane (the road you took to get here) and water that runs over Brooker Creek Preserve land to the east. During storm events, water collects in this system of manmade ditches, serving as flood prevention for area neighborhoods. This water flows west into another system of drainage ditches along Ranch Road and eventually flows into the main channel of Brooker Creek. These trenches are dug and maintained by Pinellas County Public Works.

4| FOREST TREES

Notice the mix of pine trees, oak trees, and other tree species around you. On your left you'll see saw palmetto, a common small evergreen palm. Palmetto berries produced by this plant are an important food source for a variety of Florida wildlife, from white-tailed deer to insects. Saw palmetto gets its common name from the row of tiny teeth along the petiole or stalk. To your right you'll see a pine flatwoods habitat. Pine flatwoods are dominated by—you guessed it—pine trees! This habitat is fire dependent and typically occurs on low, flat land with sandy soil. Pine flatwoods are important for many wildlife species. Listen closely and maybe you will hear a pileated woodpecker!

5| OLD LOGGING

While we would love to say Brooker Creek Preserve is pristine, this land has had a lot of human impacts over the years. Looking at historical aerial images, the land was cleared for pasture prior to the 1970s, and then planted with trees. These trees were planted to be harvested in the future for timber. When trees are planted for later use, they are planted in rows. This technique assists property owners with maintenance of the trees, providing clear pathways for roads, equipment and machinery. The planted pines were then logged in the mid 1990's, but some trees were left as "seed trees" to allow the land to return to a more natural state like what you see today. Evidence of trees planted in rows can still be seen. See if you can spot this feature as you hike along the trail.

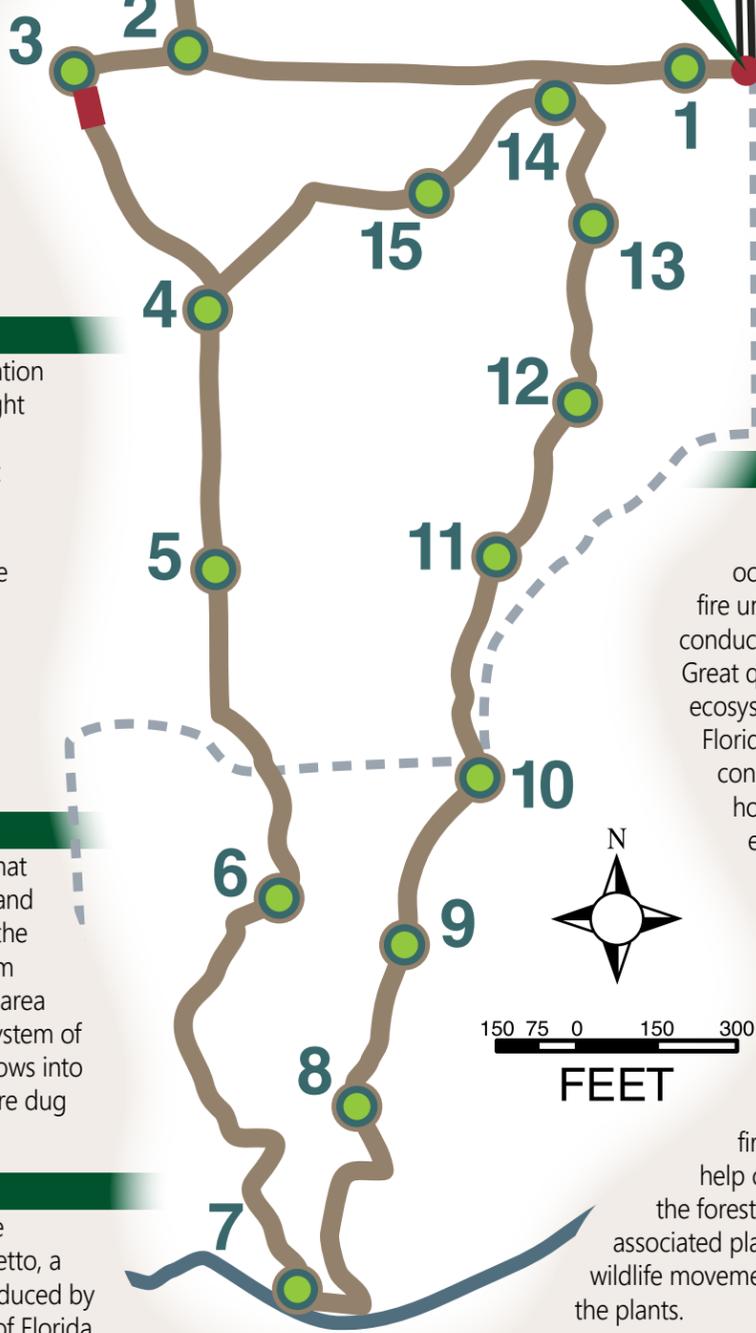
6| WILDFIRE

Wildfire is a part of Florida's natural history and has helped shape its unique ecology. Historically, wildfire caused by lightning would spread in all directions with no one around to put it out. Over thousands of years our plants and animals have adapted to this natural cycle. Fire was the original land manager in Florida. Today, Florida ecosystems like pine flatwoods are not only adapted to fire, but they depend on fire to survive and flourish. In recent history as we began to develop the land, fire was suppressed to protect homes and people. Fire suppression allows plants not adapted to fire, like oak trees, to grow and eventually shade out the pine flatwoods habitat. There have been two wildfires in this area in recent history. One in March 2014 that burned 12 acres and the other was in July 2018 burning 2.5 acres.

7| BROOKER CREEK

This is the main channel of Brooker Creek. The headwaters of this creek are a series of cypress domes in northwestern Hillsborough County. This channel travels 15 miles from the headwaters to Lake Tarpon and is fed by 12 other smaller channels within the Brooker Creek watershed. A watershed is an area of land that drains all the streams and rainfall to a common outlet, in this case, Brooker Creek. Over 500 species of plants, more than 20 species of amphibians, 50 species of reptiles and 40 species of mammals live within this watershed. The Preserve protects approximately one third of the Brooker Creek watershed, having a crucial and positive effect on the water quality that eventually enters Tampa Bay. The dark color of the water is a result of fallen leaves. These leaves leech their tannins into the water as it meanders through the Preserve. Think of this like tea. You start off with clear water from the rain, but when you add fallen leaves from trees, the water is stained from the tannins, just like when you add a tea bag to a cup of clear water. During the dry months (November through April), it's not unusual for all channels to dry up, which is why scientists call this an **ephemeral** system. Ephemeral means "lasting a short time," so this refers to the water only being around for periods of time throughout the year.

TRAILHEAD



8| BAY TREES

As you have been walking this trail, you may have noticed some small, evergreen trees with odd lumps on their leaves. These growths (called galls) are particularly obvious in the summer but tend to persist throughout the winter as well. The trees? These are red bay (*Persea borbonia*) trees. Red bay is characterized by the dark green, elongated leaves with a pointed tip. If you crush one of these leaves, it will give off a spicy-sweet aroma; this is due to oils found in the leaf tissues. Yes. The leaves of this species have been used as "bay leaves" in cooking. The lumps? Those are created by an insect larva that tricks the tree into creating these small caverns for the larva to live inside of and feed on the plant in private.

9| PRESCRIBED FIRE

You heard about the wildfire that happened here at Stop 6, but what about prescribed fire? Prescribed fires occur when land managers purposefully set the land on fire under very specific conditions. Why would we need to conduct prescribed fires if wildfires are happening naturally? Great question. While wildfires are a natural part of Florida's ecosystems, we are not. As more and more people moved to Florida and developed the natural lands there was greater concern when wildfires did occur because people's lives and homes were now at risk. Over time, land management efforts changed from allowing wildfires to burn, to working on how to put them out. For fire to occur, there must be three elements: heat, fuel and oxygen. When wildfires were put out instead of allowing them to burn, remaining vegetation was able to grow and dead material (leaves, downed tree and branches) would accumulate, becoming a major source of fuel. A lot of fuel can lead to a bad wildfire. So, how do we keep fuel levels low? You guessed it! With prescribed fire. In addition to keeping fuel levels low, prescribed fires help control invasive species, allow more sunlight to reach the forest floor, maintain certain fire-dependent ecosystems and associated plants and animals, open densely vegetated areas for wildlife movement, and help to cycle nutrients into the soil and eventually the plants.

10| HORSE TRAIL

You are now crossing the Exercise Horse Trail. This trail is just under four miles long and was designed with local horse enthusiasts in mind. It meanders through pine flatwoods and open fields. This is one of two equestrian trails available on the Preserve and they are maintained by periodic mowing. Please note that pedestrians are not permitted on the horse trail.

11| ABSENCE OF FIRE

Remember back to the area where the wildfire occurred? (Stop 6) Looks a little different here, doesn't it? Not quite as open. Less wildflowers. What else do you notice? This area hasn't seen fire in a long time. As mentioned in Stop 9, when there is no fire, fuels can build up in the form of vegetation. Here you will see more oak trees, which are not adapted to survive fire. Think back to the area where the wildfire occurred. Did you notice as many oak trees there?

12| GALLBERRY

Another small evergreen shrub that is common along this trail is the gallberry (*Ilex glabra*). Gallberry is a type of holly, but since its berries are black, it's not referred to as a holly. Another reason for its particular name is the fact that the berries are profoundly bitter; like bile, which is produced in the gall bladder. Does this make you want to avoid eating them? We hope so! Remember: all plants and animals are protected here in the preserve.

13| NATIVE AMERICANS

Native Americans used many of the plants you see today for food, shelter, transportation, clothing and more. Pine tree trunks were used to make dugout canoes for traveling on creeks and bays. Saw palmetto and palm fronds were used as thatching for roofs. Parts of the palm and palmetto were twisted into ropes. Look around you and imagine how you might use the plants around you to survive. But remember, just use your imagination as everything here is protected.

14| OAKS

All around you are towering oak trees. There are several different types of oaks found in this part of the preserve, and they are very different than the types found north of Florida. Our native oaks tend to have smaller leaves that are much rounder in outline than the jagged-edged leaves of the northern oaks. An exception is the turkey oak. The deeply lobed leaves of this oak have pointed tips and three main forks that resemble a wild turkey's footprint. Some oaks with oval or paddle-shaped leaves include the live oak, sand live oak, laurel oak and water oak.

15| ALL DONE!

Congratulations! You have completed the Loop Trail and will exit to your right here to return to the trailhead. We hope your walk has raised your awareness of the importance of these types of natural areas. It's a special opportunity to experience the Preserve and we invite you to visit the Environmental Education Center for further educational opportunities and access to another four miles of hiking trails!

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www.brookercreekpreserve.org

If you are lost or need help please call 911

This trail is located on land partially funded by the Florida Communities Trust P2000 program.



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Pinellas County complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act. To obtain accessible formats of this document, please contact us at (727) 453-6900/TDD-Text Phone (727) 464-4062.