

The Suwannee River originates in Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp at about 120 feet elevation and flows 235 miles (206 in Florida) to the Gulf of Mexico. It is the second largest river in Florida in terms of flow, size of drainage basin, and length. The Alapaha, Withlacoochee, and Santa Fe rivers are its principal tributaries. The Suwannee changes from a shoaled stream confined within limestone banks in its upper reaches to a meandering river with a broad, wooded flood plain and a coastal marsh as it nears the Gulf.

*Of all the major rivers in the United States, the Suwannee is among the least polluted and the least modified by dams and flood control structures.*

The upper river is tannin-dyed, tea-colored, low in nutrients, and acidic. The middle basin features the porous limestone geology of the near-surface Floridan aquifer, characterized by underground conduits and caverns that direct the flow of groundwater into 105 first and second magnitude springs and another 92 minor ones. The springs, in turn, discharge clear, hard, calcium-rich water into the Suwannee or its tributaries. The lower river and its coastal wetlands make up one of the largest undeveloped river delta-estuarine ecosystems in the U. S.

The Suwannee basin is an area of bottomland forests, creeks, lakes, isolated cypress wetlands, freshwater swamps and marsh headwaters, springs and spring runs, and river floodplains. Periodic flooding creates and maintains the habitat of the floodplain.

*native species of fish, aquatic insects, reptiles, and plants reach their eastern or southern limits at the Suwannee. The characteristic species of peninsular Florida begin to appear. The northernmost stand of mangroves is near Cedar Key, 8 miles south of the mouth of the Suwannee River.*

## **FISH.**

As the river courses downstream nutrients increase and fish habitat improves -- as does the variety and numbers of fish. The lower reaches of the river offer excellent sport fishing for both freshwater and saltwater species; salt water works its way upstream 5-6 miles, and tidal influence reaches 30 miles. Commercial fishing for shellfish, crabs, and mullet is of considerable economic importance in the tidal, estuarine zone.

*At least 62 species of freshwater fishes are found in the Suwannee and its tributaries. Many are small fish, but important to the food chain and the maintenance of sport and commercial fishes.*

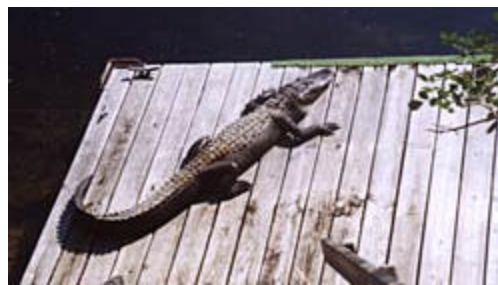


Most sport fish are members of the sunfish family. Of the 17 found in the Suwannee, the redbreast sunfish (redbelly) and spotted sunfish (stumpknocker) are most important to the catch. Bluegill (bream) and redear sunfish (shellcracker) grow large and prefer slow moving pockets and creek mouths. Flier are found in small creeks and adjacent swamps. The largemouth bass is highly desired, as is the Suwannee bass (a Florida species of special concern). The mud sunfish and blackbanded sunfish are too small to catch on hook and line; they are classified as rare species by the State.

Among the Suwannee's seven species of catfish, the channel and white are most desired, but the yellow and brown bullheads are commonly caught. The spotted bullhead is classified as rare, and the secretive tadpole madtom and speckled madtom seldom grow to four inches and are rarely caught.

Chain pickerel (jack) and redbfin pickerel (pike) are sometimes taken by fishers. The longnose gar, Florida gar, and bowfin (mudfish), though common, are generally considered undesirable by anglers; but they are important and reflect the natural balance within the fish community.

*Anadromous species, those that spend part of their life in salt water and enter fresh water to spawn, are limited to Alabama shad, skipjack herring, striped bass and Gulf sturgeon. All are rare; and the Gulf sturgeon, the Suwannee's prize, is classified as a "threatened species" under the Endangered Species Act. However, the Suwannee River supports the largest and most viable Gulf sturgeon population in all the coastal rivers of the Gulf of Mexico. The area where the Alapaha River enters the Suwannee (130 miles from the river mouth) is a major sturgeon spawning site.*



The American eel lives throughout the river, but returns to salt water to spawn. Some of the killifishes and livebearers are equally at home in fresh, brackish, or salt water. The grass carp, an exotic species introduced into Florida to control nuisance aquatic plants in specific water bodies, has been caught at the river mouth.

As with many of Florida's other spring-influenced rivers, the Suwannee is noted for the presence of marine species far upriver in fresh water, possibly due to the hard, calcium-rich

spring water. Because of its jumping habits, the striped mullet is the most commonly seen. Others include the southern flounder, hogchoker, gray snapper, Atlantic needlefish, and Gulf pipefish (found in grassbeds in the lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee rivers).

***The freshwater flowing from the Suwannee to the Gulf creates an estuary that is home to more than 140 species of fish. Such prize fish as spotted seatrout, red drum, mullet, spot, pompano, permit, sheepshead, and others depend on the estuary during some period of their life cycle. Young fish settle into tidal creeks linked to the Suwannee basin; these creeks and marshes are vital to the continued health of the lower Suwannee ecosystem.***

## **WILDLIFE.**

The Suwannee basin is home to a wide variety of terrestrial and aquatic wildlife: white-tailed deer, gray squirrels, the endangered Sherman's fox squirrel, gray and red fox, pocket gophers (termed "salamanders" or "sandy mounds" by many locals), and marsh rabbits. Other furbearing animals such as raccoon, mink, otter, beaver, opossum, and bobcat, are common. Feral hogs are so plentiful as to be considered destructive pests and are hunted to control their numbers. Armadillos, having migrated from Texas, are now common in much of Florida and thrive on their diet of grubs. They, in turn are a favored food of bobcats (and of panthers and bears where those are found). The jaguarundi and capybara, immigrants from Central America, are seen occasionally along the Suwannee.



***Endangered West Indian manatees are seen sporadically all months of the year at Manatee Springs. They are also common at Fanning Springs and throughout the lower river in the warmest months, and they have been seen in the Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers. The lower Suwannee and the estuary are manatee birthing and nursery grounds.***



More than 250 species of birds frequent the basin. Looking to the sky one may spot endangered wood storks, threatened bald eagles and sandhill cranes, the sensational swallow-tailed kite and Mississippi kite, red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks, and turkey and black vultures. Wild turkeys, pileated woodpeckers, barred owls, wood ducks, and bobwhite quail always thrill the viewer when spotted in the forest.

Commonly seen over nearshore waters of the Gulf are ospreys, brown pelicans, American oystercatchers, least terns, and raucous laughing gulls. Black skimmers, gracefully cut through the water with their lower beaks.

Large wading birds such as the great egret and great blue heron are always picturesque. Many wading birds are now listed as species of special concern: white ibis, little blue heron, tri-colored heron, and the comically lurching reddish egret. Occasionally, a roseate spoonbill appears.

Birds of the forest include most of the eastern woodpeckers, yellow-billed cuckoo, gnatcatcher, Carolina chickadee, tufted titmouse, parula and prothonotary warbler, and many species on migration during fall and spring. ***Among the most common animals in the basin are the aquatic invertebrates. Those that thrive where the water quality is good enough include mayflies, caddis flies, dragon flies, damsel flies, Dobson flies, gilled snails, clams, and crayfish.***

***Save Our Suwannee has a water quality team that periodically samples the invertebrate life of the Suwannee and Santa Fe to add to the observations made by water quality professionals working in the basin.***

The rich collection of butterflies in the area keeps butterfly watchers fairly busy around the year. The same is true of moths; particularly striking are the distinctive hovering of the hummingbird moth, the pale green beauty of the luna moth, and the mystery of the underwing moths which rest in barklike camouflage and fly off with a flash of patterned color.

Other insects and spiders, in great numbers and variety, make nature-watching in the Suwannee basin a full-time pleasure.

The reptiles and amphibians of the basin are also numerous. Everyone enjoys watching for alligators; and boaters see turtles, perched on downed trees and branches over the water and quickly slipping into the water as disturbance threatens. The Suwannee cooter, the alligator snapping turtle and the gopher tortoise are listed as species of special concern in Florida. The

"gopher" is still fairly common; but many now suffer health-threatening tumors, and they are all limited by constant loss of habitat. The beautiful Eastern indigo snake is listed as a threatened species nationwide. The "cottonmouth" water moccasin is well known and feared, though usually a very placid snake. Other water snakes are typically much more active; a few of them, though not-poisonous, are aggressive if put on the defense. The Eastern diamondback, pygmy rattlesnake, and coral snake are present but rarely seen.



### **THE FUTURE.**

***The wildlife of the Suwannee region are dependent on diversified habitat, historic water quality, and seasonally appropriate water quantity. Imprudent development, water pollution, and excessive water withdrawal will curtail the richness of the wildlife we now enjoy. Save Our Suwannee is dedicated to preservation of water quality and the natural resources of the basin.***

The natural wonders of the Suwannee Basin are sheltered in refuges and parks stretching from the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge at the top to the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge for the last 25 miles. In Florida, state parks along the way include Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center, Suwannee River State Park, Peacock Springs State Recreation Area, Fanning Springs Recreation Area, and Manatee Springs State Park. On the tributaries there are Ichetucknee Springs State Park and O'Leno State Park. In addition to the national refuges and state parks, there are many Water Management District preservation and recreation areas, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission wildlife management areas, county parks, and private recreation and camping facilities.

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