General Coffee State Park

General Coffee State Park is one of southern Georgia’s “best kept secrets” and is known for interpretation of agricultural history at its Heritage Farm, with log cabins, a corn crib, tobacco barn, cane mill, barnyard animals and other exhibits. Seventeen Mile River winds through a cypress swamp where the park hosts rare and endangered plants. The threatened Indigo Snake and Gopher Tortoise make their homes in this Longleaf Pine/Wiregrass community. Overnight accommodations include camping, cottages, and the Burnham House, an elegantly decorated 19th century cabin perfect for romantic getaways. The park was donated to the state by a group of Coffee County citizens in 1970 and is named after General John Coffee, a planter, U.S. Congressman and military leader.

East River Trail

The East River Trail begins on the west side of the Seventeen Mile River near picnic shelter #7. The trail starts with a half-mile-long boardwalk that crosses the river to the east side of the park. As you walk along the boardwalk, keep an eye open for wading birds and river otters during the wet season and for deer and raccoon during the dry season.

The Seventeen Mile River is an ephemeral river fed by runoff water from rainfall and fresh-water springs. Rivers such as this one are also called blackwater rivers due to their dark, tea-colored hue. During dry years, ephemeral rivers may completely dry up and the river bottom will be green with moss, ferns, grasses and wildflowers. During wetter years, the water flow can be very high and the best place to observe the best chance of seeing the threatened Gopher Tortoise and the threatened Indigo Snake.

As the trail leaves the river and you return to solid ground, you are climbing the side of a small hill. The change from river to upland happens within just a few feet of speed as you rapidly climb the few feet in elevation needed to go from a wet river bottom to a dry sandhill. For a snake’s perspective, it is easy to see how just a few feet of elevation can make a dramatic difference in the types of plants and animals that thrive in the sandhill. On the best chance of seeing the threatened Gopher Tortoise and the threatened Indigo Snake.

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Heritage Farm Interpretive Walk

This half-mile walk loops around the pond located at the park’s main headquarters. This is an award-winning Heritage Farm. The best place to keep and end your walk is at the farm’s parking lot. Located along the walk are interpretive stations were you can read about the habitats, plants and animals found at General Coffee State Park. This walk is also a popular with birding enthusiasts as many species of water birds and songbirds can be spotted near the pond year-round.

West River Trail

Beginning near picnic shelter #4, the West River Trail is the oldest trail on the park. This trail travels along the western edge of the Seventeen Mile River from the picnic area to campground #2. Along the route, the trail crosses several drainage areas where wet-weather creeks feed the river. The trail bed is relatively compacted and easy to walk, but the trail can be narrow in places with exposed tree roots. As you travel along the trail you will experience two habitats: the river on one side and mostly upland forest along the other side. This occurs because this trail is situated in what is called a cove, a boundary or zone between these two distinct habitats.

The upland pine forest in this area is dominated by Longleaf Pine and Wiregrass. This is one of the two types of longleaf habitats seen at General Coffee State Park. The other is the Longleaf-Turkey Oak forest found in the sandhill areas. These upland forests are home to many types of birds and small mammals. During the spring and fall, these woods are full of native wildflowers. Like the sandhill areas, the upland pine forest needs to burn periodically, every 2-5 years, to remain a pine forest. The park actively manages these areas by conducting controlled burns that prohibit the hardwood trees from taking over the pine forest and allow the young longleaf seedlings to germinate and grow.

Looking in the river area along this trail you will see a mixture of Cypress, Black Gum and Red Maple trees. Scattered within the river are small islands that support pond pine and other species of trees and bushes. This variety of plant life leads to a variety of wildlife. As you walk along the trail you may see or hear songbirds, owls, hawks, raccoons, whitetail deer, snakes, and a variety of mammals. If you stroll along the trail during the sunset on a summer evening, you may be treated to a light show as lightning bugs rise from the riverbanks for their nightly mating flight.

Gopher Loop

Gopher Loop is a 1.5-mile loop trail that takes you into the sandhill management area of the park. You may access this trail at two points, the trailhead near the main park road (there is a small parking area) or the West River Trail as it joins into Gopher Loop behind campground #2. This is the driest area in the park, and during the summer it can be very hot, so be sure to take water and a hat. This is a great trail for observing the best chance of seeing the threatened Gopher Tortoise and the threatened Indigo Snake.

Scattered throughout the sandhill are many Gopher Tortoise colonies. Each colony usually contains 10-15 burrows and is home to 10 or more tortoises. This species is the only tortoise in the Southeast and is an important member of the sandhill community. The Gopher Tortoise is often referred to as a keystone species since upward of 300 other species of wildlife will utilize the Gopher Tortoise burrow to stay cool in the heat of the summer and to escape predators that are an important part of this ecosystem. Gopher Tortoise burrows can be over 30 feet in length and may be 6 or more feet below the surface of the ground. Located at the entrance to each burrow is an area of sand called the apron. This is the sand that the tortoise will use as an escape hatch when digging its tunnel down to the apron area that the female tortoise will lay her eggs. When walking around these burrows, be very careful not to step on the apron or near the tunnel entrance, as sometimes the beginning of the tunnel will collapse under your weight.

A restoration project began in this sandhill area in 2005. Due to many years of suppressing fires, various oak tree species began to shade out the longleaf pines, wiregrass and many plants the Gopher Tortoises depends on for food. Toboring balance back to the system and to provide food for future controlled burns, the oaks had to be thinned out and 25,000 Longleaf Pine seedlings were planted. To many this may look like a dry desolate area, but it is in fact20,000 / $1765 - December 2013

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SAFETY TIPS & ETIQUETTE

• Tell someone your itinerary and expected return time.
• Take a map, water, snacks, first aid kit, flashlight and whistle. Three short blasts on a whistle are known as a call for help.
• Do not stray from trails. If you become lost, stay in one location and wait for help. This will make it easier for rescuers to find you.
• Don’t count on cell phones to work in the wilderness, but if they do, be able to give details about your location.

Invest in good hiking socks such as those found at sporting goods stores. Avoid blisters by carrying “moisturizer” and applying it as soon as you feel hot spots on your feet. Available in the foot care section of drug stores, moleSkin is like felt that sticks to your skin.

• Be prepared for unexpected rain and wind which can lead to hypothermia. Always carry quality rain gear and turn back in bad weather. If you become very cold, it is important to get dry and warm as quickly as possible.
• Dress in layers and avoid cotton. Today’s hikers can choose from numerous fabrics that wick moisture, dry quickly, and allow for air circulation. Many experienced hikers wear a lightweight shirt that wicks moisture, while carrying a fleece pullover and rain jacket.
• Pack out all trails.
• Keep pets on a leash at all times and clean up after them.
• Do not pick flowers, disturb wildlife or take anything off the park.
• Protect the park and help prevent erosion by staying on marked trails.

CLIMATE DATA FOR NICHOLLS, GEORGIA

Month Avg. High Avg. Low Mean Avg. Precip. Record High Record Low
Jan 69ºF 41ºF 50ºF 4.83 in 83ºF (1975) -1ºF (1985)
Feb 66ºF 44ºF 55ºF 3.93 in 86ºF (1989) 31ºF (1950)
Mar 72ºF 50ºF 61ºF 3.16 in 91ºF (1963) 31ºF (1980)
Apr 79ºF 54ºF 67ºF 2.10 in 96ºF (1986) 31ºF (1980)
May 86ºF 60ºF 74ºF 7.04 in 100ºF (1975) 40ºF (1971)
Jun 90ºF 69ºF 79ºF 5.49 in 104ºF (1986) 47ºF (1946)
Jul 90ºF 78ºF 81ºF 6.07 in 107ºF (2000) 56ºF (1946)
Aug 91ºF 79ºF 81ºF 5.50 in 107ºF (1995) 57ºF (1971)
Sep 87ºF 68ºF 77ºF 3.34 in 101ºF (1900) 40ºF (1967)
Oct 85ºF 67ºF 78ºF 2.75 in 95ºF (1986) 25ºF (1985)
Nov 79ºF 60ºF 70ºF 1.05 in 89ºF (1957) 35ºF (1985)
Dec 64ºF 43ºF 54ºF 3.67 in 83ºF (1978) 7ºF (1969)