

# THE OTHER GLADES

Secrets to finding good fishing in and around Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.

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*Hidden*  
**Gems** 10,000 ISLANDS

Fakahatchee Strand, in Collier County, was one of the last pieces of land added (in 1974) to the preservation roster of Florida Everglades. Redfish, below, are among the fish species relying on the coastal mangrove habitat and seasonal pulses of fresh water.



**W**hen I told my fishing buddies where I was headed, I drew blank stares: Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. My friends spend lots of time in the Everglades and surrounding waters chasing snook and tarpon, but none had ever tried fishing in the state park that borders Everglades National Park and the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Indeed, the park's own brochure barely mentions fishing, and I could not find anything online about angling in the preserve.

In reality, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve offers a trifecta of freshwater lakes, brackish canals and ponds, and saltwater tidal creeks with a smorgasbord of fish ranging from lunker largemouth and peacock bass, to snook and tarpon, not to mention outsized oscars and hard-fighting redfish.

Lake Harmon, like two other freshwater lakes (Lake Gloria and Lake Forrest) just inside the entrance near the park headquarters, was carved out of the limestone substrate to provide rock and gravel for area highways before the park was created. The three lakes are all deep—20 to 40 feet—and feature clear water ringed by tall grass

and reeds. Fishing from the banks is possible but challenging as long sections of the shorelines are overgrown. Kayaks and canoes are the ticket to finding the best spots.

After paying the \$3 entrance fee, I launched my pedal kayak and could immediately see big schools of minnows scattering from the shallows. Just beyond the narrow limestone ledge ringing the lake, bass and Mayan cichlids were eyeing their next meal. On my third cast a big Mayan cichlid nailed the baby bass fluke I had mounted on a red 1/8-ounce jighead. Nice start. Minutes later I snagged some of the long tendrils of vegetation growing up from the bottom, or at least that's what I thought until the bottom started to move. A big bass rocketed to the surface, then dove deep as he headed toward the middle of the lake with the kayak in tow. I got him close to the boat for a picture and then enjoyed the shower of cool water he aimed my way as he departed with a big tail slap.

That was the start of a bountiful day full of willing bass and cichlids. It wouldn't be long before the lakes near the park entrance would become my go-to spots to take visitors and friends for a relaxing day of fishing with an ecotour bonus watching all the birds, alligators, and other assorted critters.

**It offers a trifecta of lakes, plus brackish canals, ponds and saltwater creeks.**