

10 Ways to Enjoy the CREW Trails This Summer

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Looking for something new or unique to do this summer? Want your kids to connect with nature? Need to get away from the chaos of everyday life? Discover CREW and experience southwest Florida in a whole new way.

CREW (which stands for Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed) is a 60,000-acre watershed with three public, free nature trails - the CREW Marsh Trail, the CREW Cypress Dome Trail, and the Bird Rookery Swamp Trail - hidden right in our midst. Owned and managed by the South Florida Water Management District in cooperation with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission and the CREW Land & Water Trust, CREW offers a unique nature experience not available anywhere else. Its primitive trails (meaning there are minimal facilities, i.e. no gift shops, staff, or buildings on site) invite you to wander and wonder at the raw beauty that is southwest Florida.

If you have never visited a CREW trail or if you've only been there during the winter months when the CREW Trust provides scheduled hikes and other programs, I encourage you to come on out and enjoy CREW in a whole new way on your own this summer.

Summer is a time for the CREW trails to rest. With fewer footprints along the paths, grass grows taller, wildlife ventures out, and of course - with the arrival of summer storms - the water levels rise. By late summer the marsh and swamps of CREW are wet and green and teeming with animal activity. Summer is truly the most amazing time of year to experience CREW.

So, put on your old sneakers and long pants, sunscreen and bug spray, and try one or more of these suggestions to enjoy CREW this summer:

1. **Go for a Treasure Hunt** - CREW is home to over 100 geocaches – hidden treasures placed out in the woods along the trails that can be located by GPS coordinates – thanks to local geocachers JunglePete and The Unusual Suspects. If you've never been geocaching, grab your GPS unit or smartphone, go to <http://geocaching.com> for info and CREW coordinates and give it a whirl this summer.
2. **Take a Run** – running the CREW trails is a lot more interesting than pounding the pavement or hitting the treadmill at the gym. Research shows that running outdoors gives you more exercise due to varied elevation and wind resistance, too. Plus, fresh air and proximity to trees heals and refreshes. Check out the Caloosa Trailheads Facebook page to connect with like-minded folks or find a running buddy, then come run a mile or two or ten at CREW.
3. **Track an Animal** – hit the trail with one purpose: to track a critter. Summer means rain and softer ground, so tracks are more easily found along the trails. Challenge yourself to locate and identify five new animal tracks this summer. Grab a track field guide or app, a tape measure and a friend, then see what you can learn about animals that come out to play at CREW during the summer.
4. **Just Sit There** – 99% of the time people come to CREW walk, run or bike the trails. Rarely do people go to one spot and sit still. Yet 100% of the time, if you sit still in one place for more than 10 minutes you will see, hear, and experience more critters than in

three hours of hiking. So, pick a trail, find a spot, and just sit there. Watch the magic happen.

5. **Spend the Night** – CREW has two primitive campsites that are free and available by Special Use License through the SFWMD at <http://goo.gl/5wUfJ>. If you've never been out at CREW at night, camping can give you a whole new perspective about the place. Practice "Leave No Trace" and enjoy the quiet serenity of CREW after dark.
6. **Engage Your Senses** – most folks walk and look when hiking the CREW Trails. Next time you go, take advantage of the summer humidity and focus attention on your sense of smell. Every animal and plant has a unique scent. Expand your sensory experience by listening and touching, too. Just be sure you can ID poison ivy first!
7. **Take the Road Less Traveled** – Do you take the same trail every time you come to CREW or have a favorite that you always share with friends and visitors. This summer, take a different trail or loop. Try the Pine Flatwoods Trail at the CREW Marsh or the White Loop/Wild Coffee Trail at the Cypress Dome Trails, or if you're really ambitious (and well-prepared with water, food, and sun protection) try to get to the north or west tram at Bird Rookery Swamp. Head a new direction and see what surprises await you.
8. **Awaken Your Sense of Wonder with a Child** – Rachel Carson proclaimed "If a child is to keep his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in." So, take a child by the hand and explore CREW, experience bugs and birds, get dirty and wet, spend unstructured time playing in nature. You may be surprised at how much it helps you connect, too.
9. **Get Your Cowboy/girl On** – Adjacent to the CREW Cypress Dome Trails (and connected via the White Loop) are the Caracara Prairie Preserve Trails, owned by Conservation Collier and the CREW Land & Water Trust. Technically not part of the CREW project but adjacent to it, these three miles of trails traverse an active cattle ranch. So, put on your cowboy hat and take a hike through oak hammock, towering pines, and some beautiful wet prairie. Be prepared to get your feet wet crossing the ditch from the Dome Trails to the Caracara Trails (Oh, and no dogs allowed - to keep the cattle safe).
10. **Catch a Sunrise/Sunset** – all the CREW Trails are open to the public from one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset, so start your day right and head out to the Marsh Overlook early one morning this summer to watch the sun rise over the 5000-acre Corkscrew Marsh. Or, if you're just not a morning person, try getting there just before dark to watch the sunset filtering through those billowing summer storm clouds. Either way, you'll enrich your life and your spirit!

Locations of the three CREW trails:

CREW Marsh Trails (4600 Corkscrew Rd. [C.R. 850], Immokalee, FL 34142): Open for: hiking, nature appreciation, geocaching, birding, camping, and picnicking.

CREW Cypress Dome Trails (3980 Corkscrew Rd. [C.R. 850], Immokalee, FL 34142): Open for: hiking, nature appreciation, geocaching, birding, picnicking, trail biking, and camping and horseback riding (with a special use permit).

CREW Bird Rookery Swamp Trails (1295 Shady Hollow Blvd, Naples, FL). Open for: hiking, nature appreciation, geocaching, birding, and trail biking.