

Paddling Route One: Grays Creek Loop

Put In and take out: Crystal Cove Marina, 133 Crystal Cove Drive, Palatka, FL <http://cc-resort.com/>

Distance: 5 miles; Option 1) 7 miles ; Option 2) 10 miles

Difficulty: Intermediate to advanced due to the time in the open waters of the St. Johns River and possible navigation challenges depending on options chosen.

Estimated Time: 3-4 hours depending on options chosen

Description: This includes an open water paddle and is best done under calm wind conditions. One or two Bartram Trail Sites (BTS) are included in this 5-mile loop which can be extended with both seven and ten-mile options.

Launch at the Crystal Cove Marina boat ramp and paddle north following the west or "Indian Shore" 1.4 miles to the mouth of Rice Creek (BTS 3A). The BTS marker is located at the mouth of the Creek on the south shoreline. Enter the Creek and continue first under the railroad bridge then the Highway 17 Bridge. Immediately west of the Highway 17 Bridge is a small island in the Creek. To complete the five-mile route, circumnavigate the island and retrace the outbound route back to the launch site.

To complete the seven-mile route (Option 1) after returning to the mouth of Rice Creek, continue east for one mile crossing the St. Johns River to the nearest landfall at Forrester Point. Look for the BTS 2 marker which is barely visible from the west side of the River but becomes easier to identify during the crossing. After reaching the BTS 2 marker, re-cross the River and paddle south along the shoreline back to the launch site. This route is not recommended and should only be followed, weather-permitting, by experienced open-water paddlers properly equipped and possessing the necessary navigation skills.

Those choosing Option 2 (ten miles), continue paddling west up Rice Creek past the small island, following the path of the Bartrams as they explored Grays Creek. The recommended route however, departs from Bartram's route in Rice Creek and instead follows Etonia Creek where the two creeks converge one mile upstream of the US 17 bridge. Etonia Creek continues due west at its confluence with Rice Creek which follows a southerly course (to the left) before continuing west past the Georgia-Pacific Paper Mill. Proceeding up Rice Creek to BTS 3B is not recommended. Once past the GP Plant, Rice Creek narrows considerably and soon downed trees and snags make progress dangerous if not impossible. Continue paddling up Etonia Creek. Though there are several small watercourses that enter Etonia Creek from either shoreline, its course is quite obvious being the largest of any of the other navigational choices. An added benefit of this option is the presence of an established landing approximately 1.25 miles up Etonia Creek. The landing is quite obvious as it affords the first open high ground along either side of Etonia Creek. This is a good place to go ashore and stretch ones legs before returning to the launch site; unfortunately, there are no facilities at the landing. Depart from the landing and return to the launch site by retracing the outbound route.

Coordinates:

Crystal Cove Marina: 29° 40.659'N 81° 39.123'W

BTS-3 Marker: 29° 41.765'N 81° 39.027'W

BTS-2 Marker: 29° 41.594'N 81° 37.927'W

Small Island in Rice Creek: 29° 41.955'N 81° 39.935'W

Confluence of Rice and Etonia creeks: 29° 41.514'N 81° 40.860'W

Etonia Creek Landing: 29° 42.044'N 81° 41.529'W