

## Wakulla Springs, Home To Champion Trees

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Wakulla Springs State Park is home to some of the Big Bends most mature, intact biological communities. Approximately 3,000 of the parks 6,000 acres have been protected for 70+ years, dating back to purchase by Ed Ball. This land came under state park management in 1985. Since acquisition, it has received very active resource management to improve the parks natural resources and associated communities.

The land management philosophy of the Florida Park Service is one of non-consumptive natural systems management. This practice, in the long run, favors the development of large trees and diversity of species. The primary management tools utilized at Wakulla Springs to maintain natural systems include the removal of invasive non-native plants and animals and prescribed fire in fire adapted communities. These practices are important in eliminating competition from non-natives for space, food and sunlight. Wakulla Springs has good examples of several biological communities including pine flatwoods, sandhill, mixed hardwood swamp, bottomland forest and upland hardwood forest. These last three communities contain some of the park's most impressive trees.

Very large bald cypress can be seen along the river cruise route. Some of these trees are estimated to be 5 to 6 hundred years old. The river margin also contains very large black gums, red maples, and green ash. Species of the adjacent and slightly higher bottomland forests include swamp laurel oak, persimmon, sweetbay magnolia and Florida elm.

Still farther from the river and slightly higher again, the most spectacular of the parks communities is the upland hardwood forest. Imagine a forest consisting primarily of very big trees forming a high dense canopy. American beech, southern magnolia, Carolina basswood, sweetgum, swamp chestnut oak, white oak, hackberry, shumard oak, red bay and pignut hickory are the most common of the large trees found here. Two other species of note include sassafras and bitternut hickory. Many of these trees attain heights of over 100 feet and trunk circumferences of 80 to 120 inches. At the higher elevations, large American beech and southern magnolias dominate the landscape. This make up is considered to represent the most mature and stable of North Florida's hardwood forests.

With two thirds of the hardwood communities of the original acquisition surveyed, Wakulla Springs currently has sixteen trees which are either state champions or close contenders. They are American beech, sassafras, spruce pine, shumard oak, swamp chestnut oak, swamp laurel oak, bluff oak, black cherry, black gum rusty lyonia, bitternut hickory, green ash, sweetbay magnolia, redbud, coastal plain willow and sour gum.

The point system for determining champion trees is 1 point for each foot in height, 1 point for each inch in circumference at 4.5 feet above average ground level, and 1 point for each 4 feet of average crown spread (determined by measuring maximum diameter of spread and minimum diameter. Add the two together and divide by 2, then divide this average by 4).

Come take a hike at Wakulla Springs State Park. You never know what is around the next bend. But, you can bet there will be another giant tree.