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National 'Take a Hike' Day: 8 great local hiking trails on the Treasure Coast to explore

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National “Take a Hike” Day — or National Hiking Day — is Wednesday, so check out these eight great Treasure Coast locales for taking a stroll in the great outdoors.

Hiking has many health benefits, from physical exercise to the mental and emotional relief that comes from being in nature.

The physical benefits include: building stronger bones and muscles; improving balance, heart health and sensory perception; and decreasing stress, anxiety and the risk of depression and certain respiratory problems.

Florida state parks: 10 unique, lesser-known ones to visit

Food trucks: Try local, mobile restaurants

Thanksgiving: Restaurants offer holiday dinners

Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge

Pelican Island, our nation’s first wildlife refuge, is in our backyard. Its public areas are along the Historic Jungle Trail off A1A, 3.7 miles north of the Wabasso Beach Road, or 3.3 miles south of Sebastian Inlet.

The Centennial Trail is the shortest of the three hiking trails and the only one with a view of 3-acre Pelican Island. There also are two 3-mile loop trails into salt marsh habitat throughout the more than 5,400 acres of protected land.

Walk the less-than-a-mile paved trail to an observation tower and use a spotting scope to see the island out in the Indian River Lagoon.

Along the way, signs and brochures tell you about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to save the island and the more than 30 different species of wading and shore birds that depend on it.

In the late 1800s, entire flocks of birds in Florida were killed for their eggs and feathers, the latter being all the rage for women's hats.

In 1903, at the urging of the Florida Audubon Society, President Theodore Roosevelt established Pelican Island, creating the entire National Wildlife Refuge System. This was the first time the federal government set aside land specifically for wildlife conservation.

Engraved planks on the Centennial Trail list over 560 national wildlife refuges, in order from the newest to the oldest established.

Address: 4055 Wildlife Way, Vero Beach

Hours: 7:30 a.m. to sunset daily

Website: fws.gov/refuge/pelican_island

Round Island Riverside Park

Round Island, on A1A near the Indian River-St. Lucie county line, has a boat ramp, a kayak launch, walking trails and vantage points to see birds, manatees and dolphins.

There's a boardwalk and a bridge over the lagoon to the island. On the short trail, leaning branches form a tunnel in some spots, and sunlight filters through the canopy.

To the right is a deck and to the left is an observation tower. Climb to the top of the tower and look out across the maze of mangrove islands.

There's a much longer hike-bike trail to the left of the boat ramp, but it doesn't loop, and it crosses some private property.

Address: 2200 S.R. A1A, Vero Beach

Hours: 7 a.m. to sunset daily

Website: ircgov.com

Lagoon Greenway

The 187-acre Lagoon Greenway in Vero Beach is run by the Indian River Land Trust.

People can walk, run, bicycle and even bring their dogs to explore over 2 miles of hiking trails throughout the property. Just watch out for alligators!

The trails travel through different kinds of habitat: an oak and palm tree hammock with Spanish moss hanging from limbs, a high salt marsh wetland and a mangrove forest. Native plants and flowers have regrown where invasive Australian pines were removed.

The Main Trail is a half-mile to the lagoon, where there's a boardwalk and small bench. It also leads to the Loop Trail, which is a flat and hard-packed 2-mile loop.

The best part is the Mini Adventure Trail off the Main Trail. It's less than a quarter-mile, but it's more interesting, as you step over roots and duck below branches.

Address: 8th Street and Indian River Boulevard, Vero Beach

Hours: 7:30 a.m. to sunset daily

Website: irlt.org

Indrio Scrub Preserve

Hike a short, interpretive trail at Indrio Scrub Preserve north of Fort Pierce. Park in the small lot near the railroad tracks and make your way across the road to the trailhead.

The sandy, half-mile trail is so white, you can drop down and make a “sand angel,” the Florida-version of a snow angel.

The 13-acre site preserves native scrub habitat. A brochure at the trailhead identifies what you'll see. Some colorful flowers bloom during the winter.

Scrub, which contains sand live oak, myrtle oak, cabbage palm and saw palmetto, most likely is the oldest type of plant community in the state. These desert-like islands were the only parts of Florida not submerged under water thousands of years ago.

Plants and animals on these islands were isolated, making much of them endemic to the area. Animals include the Florida scrub jay, scrub lizard and sand skink.

Address: 5187 Old Dixie Highway, Fort Pierce

Hours: Sunrise to sunset daily

Website: stlucieco.gov

D.J. Wilcox Preserve

Just a half-mile south of the Indrio Scrub Preserve on Old Dixie Highway is D.J. Wilcox Preserve, north of Fort Pierce near St. Lucie Village.

A long boardwalk around Gator Lake leads to a 1-mile interpretive trail. It's a great spot for taking photographs, watching alligators and sitting under the two small pavilions.

This 105-acre preserve borders the Indian River Lagoon. The habitat is a combination of pine flatwoods, mangrove swamp, hammock and bay-gall swamp and includes a lot of hauntingly beautiful slash pine.

The preserve's history is just as interesting. It's named after Dewey J. Wilcox, a 16-year St. Lucie County commissioner in the 1930s and '40s who owned the property.

He was a foreman for the East Coast Development Co., which was partly owned by Edwin Binney of Crayola and aimed to create a new town called "Indrio" during the late 1920s land boom. The Great Depression stopped the town from being built.

Address: 300 Michigan St., Fort Pierce

Hours: Sunrise to sunset daily

Website: stlucieco.gov

Spruce Bluff Preserve

Spruce Bluff Preserve is 97 acres of marsh and scrub sandwiched between houses off Southbend Boulevard along the North Fork of the St. Lucie River in Port St. Lucie.

Two self-guided, interpretive trails tell how the land was occupied by the Ais tribe, then a pioneer settlement. Highlights of the hikes, which take less than three hours to explore, include a Native American mound and a monument at the old pioneer cemetery.

The trailhead south of the preserve's parking area on Dar Lane takes you to a 1-mile trail that describes the Native Americans' uses of native plants found along the trail. It leads to an ancient mound that measures 20 feet high and 180 feet in diameter.

The trailhead north of the parking area leads to a half-mile trail that describes the site of the 1891 pioneer settlement called Spruce Bluff. Founder John Enos Fultz Jr., of South Carolina, moved to the sandy spot to try pineapple farming.

As more people moved to Spruce Bluff, it grew large enough to have a school, sawmill and post office. But winter freezes in 1894 and 1895 killed most of the pineapple crops, which was the end of Spruce Bluff. All the families left over the next 10 years.

A marble monument on the pioneer trail honors the town and those buried there.

Address: 611 S.E. Dar Lane, Port St. Lucie

Hours: Sunrise to sunset daily

Website: stlucieco.gov

Blowing Rocks Preserve

Of The Nature Conservancy's four preserves in the state, Blowing Rocks Preserve is the oldest; the smallest, at 73 acres; and the busiest, with about 55,000 visitors annually.

In 1969, Jupiter Island residents donated the land, recognizing it was such a unique place. It features the largest stretch of exposed Anastasia limestone, or coquina rock, along the Atlantic coast. Its backdrop is teal ocean water carried here from the Caribbean thanks to the Gulf Stream.

The rocks, dated to about 150,000 years ago, were built by sand, shells and different material being compressed over time.

The preserve got its name from the way water bursts upward through holes in the rocks during a combination of rough surf, strong wind and high tide. On extreme days, plumes can shoot 50 feet in the air.

The best way to predict a good show is if there's a small craft advisory, which aren't the best beach days. Visitors also can check a webcam at the nearby Jupiter Inlet.

The beach offers a totally different experience at low tide. Poke around the nooks and crannies to look for fossilized shells and organisms that feed on the algae there.

Address: 575 S. Beach Road, Hobe Sound

Hours: 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday (closed Monday-Tuesday, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day)

Website: nature.org

St. Lucie Inlet Preserve State Park

St. Lucie Inlet Preserve State Park offers hiking, but it's accessible only by kayaking or paddleboarding.

After you paddle the kayaking trail, look for a small launch area to dock your kayaks. Then listen for the sound of waves crashing on the shore on the other side of the mangroves. Walk through a tunnel of sea grapes that opens to about 3 miles of undeveloped beach and clear ocean water.

Dig your toes into the shell-covered sand and look around. Notice there aren't too many people there? It feels like a private beach.

Back at the dock, there's a spot to pull up kayaks next to the ranger station building. Walk the 3,330-foot boardwalk's self-guided nature trail that ends farther north on the same beach, near a pavilion, grills, picnic tables, restrooms and outside shower.

Address: Cove Road Park (drive east on Cove Road to where it ends at the Intracoastal Waterway)

Hours: 8 a.m. to sunset daily

Website: floridastateparks.org

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