

Birds of Lower Tampa Bay

American Oystercatcher

One of our rarest birds, American Oystercatchers number only about 400 pairs in Florida. They eat oys- ters and other invertebrates, open- ing shells with stout orange beaks. Oystercatchers nest along beach shorelines, placing the eggs in shal- low depressions called “scrapes.” If disturbed, the flamboyantly colored adults walk away from their nests, depending on the camouflage of the eggs or chicks to protect them. Without the parent providing shade, the eggs, sitting on hot summer sands, can overheat quickly, killing the delicate embryos inside. **Please give nesting oystercatchers a wide berth if encountered between April and late July.**

Laughing Gull

Large colonies of Laughing Gulls nest on grassy islands in Tampa Bay, including Egmont Key NWR. Omnivo- rous, they are opportunistic foragers, and eat a wide variety of prey and food items, and fish for themselves or steal from other birds.



Black Skimmer

Sleek, swift flyers, Black Skimmers use their longer lower jaw to snatch fish from the water’s surface. They nest in col- onies on beaches and are state-listed as a “threatened” species.

Black Skimmers by Jim Gray.

Brown Pelican

Among our best-known birds, Brown Pelicans are expert divers, plunging head-first into bait fish schools to trap fish in their expandable pouched bills. Pelicans nest in colony groups on mangrove islands in Terra Ceia Bay, where they make large stick nests for their three eggs. Gray-skinned, naked chicks quickly grow white downy feath- ers. Carefully fed by both attentive parents, they fledge as flight-capable and independent birds 11 weeks after hatching.



Broun Pelicans by Carol Cassels.

Northern Gannet

One of the Atlantic’s largest seabirds, Northern Gannets are plunge-fisher- men and swim underwater to chase fish prey. Gannets nest on North Cana- dian island cliffs and fly south in the winter. These large white birds are often seen at the mouth of Tampa Bay, especially after storms.



Least Tern with chick by Doug Clark.

Common Loon

Common Loons often spend the winter in the open waters of Tampa Bay, having migrated from nesting ponds in Canada and the northern United States. Large, low-slung divers, they swim underwater to capture their small fish, crab, or mollusk prey.



Common Loon by Lauren Cox.



Reddish Egret

The rarest heron in North America and one of Florida’s rarest species with less than 300 pairs nesting in the state, Reddish Egrets are exclusively birds of the estuary. They forage on open mud and sandflats for small fish, actively giving chase with open wings and erratic dashes.

Two Reddish Egrets, dark and white morphs by Scott Patterson.

Other Egrets & Herons

Snowy Egrets, Little Blue Herons, and Tricolored Herons all rely on freshwater wetlands to feed their developing young. The Snowy Egret’s yellow feet attract fish and amphibian prey nearer its sharp black bill.

Snowy Egret, right; Great Egret, far right by Tom Bell. ➤



What to do if you catch a bird

All fishermen will probably one day accidentally catch a bird. Follow these safety tips to release it:

- 1. Put on sunglasses or other eye protection.
- 2. Get a partner to help with controlling the bird.
- 3. Grasp the bird’s head firmly and then cover the eyes with a towel, shirt, or even a hat to calm it.
- 4. Fold the wings up and secure the feet, holding firmly.
- 5. Cut off the hook’s barb and back the hook out. This removes the hook without causing more damage to the bird.
- 6. Check the bird for other hooks or line and remove them too. Often a bird has been hooked before.
- 7. Put the bird on the dock, facing the water and step back. A feisty bird is likely to survive.
- 8. If the bird is seriously injured, has swallowed the hook, or doesn’t fly, it should be taken to a veterinarian or wildlife rehabilitator. Call the Wildlife Commission 1-888-404-3922 for one near you.

Tips to avoid catching a bird

- Don’t cast near a watching bird. Birds focus on the injured fish in a school; that would be your hooked bait.
- If fish-eating birds are near where you are fish- ing, move to another spot.
- Don’t feed birds your extra bait or the remains of your filleted boney fish carcasses. Feeding birds attracts them to fishing areas, where they are more likely to get hooked.
- Pelicans and other fish-eaters that swallow fish whole can digest the bones of small fish, but the sharp bones of big fish puncture pouches, throats, stomachs, and intestines. This leads to infection and a slow, painful death.
- Attend your baited fishing pole at all times to prevent a bird from taking your bait, including your hook, line, and rod.



Cover bait buckets to prevent birds from “fish- ing” in them. Photo by Mac Stone.



Roseate Spoonbill

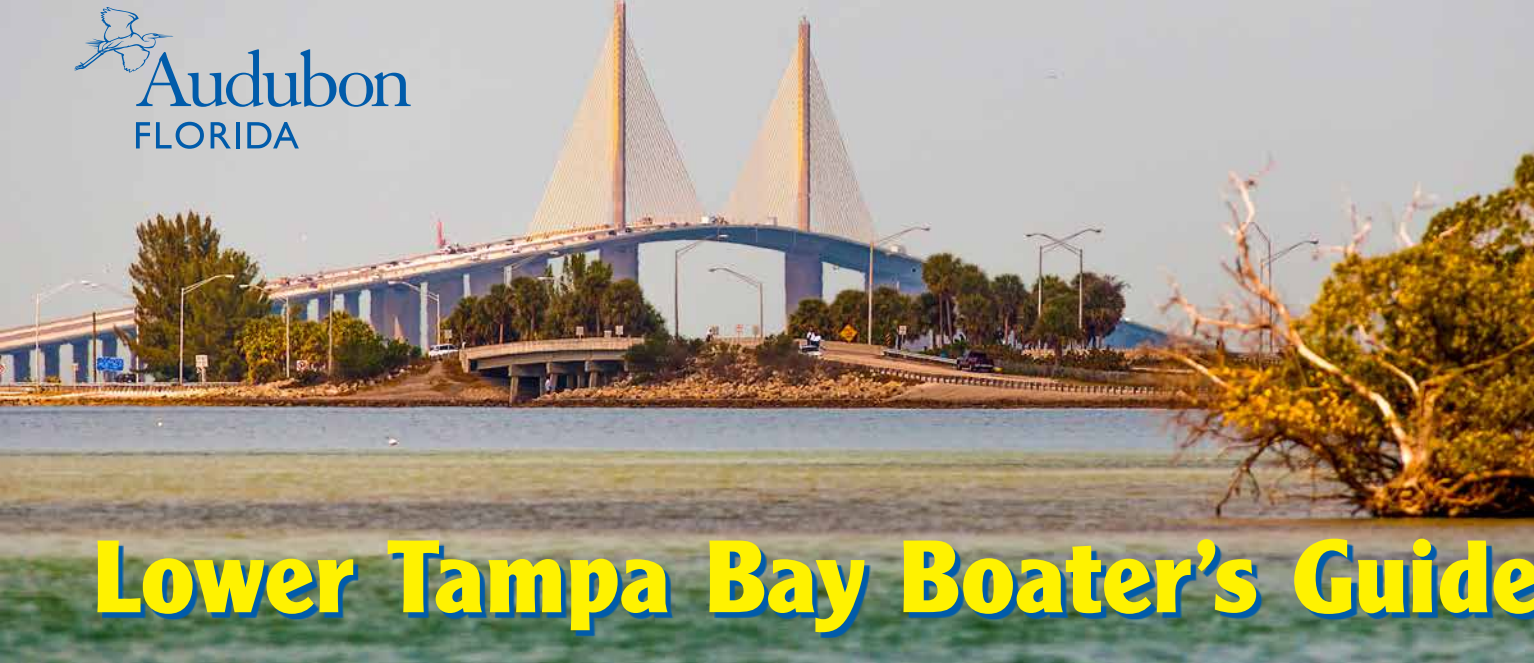
The Tampa Bay area is home to about 300 of the 1,200 pairs of Roseate Spoonbills that nest in Florida. State-listed as “threatened,” spoonbills nest in mangroves on estuary islands. Tactile feed- ers, they sweep their sensitive bills side to side to catch fish and other freshwater prey items.



Two Magnificent Frigatebirds. The male (right) has a striking red gular sac that it inflates to impress a female. Photo by Tom Bell.

Magnificent Frigatebird

After nesting in the Dry Tortugas, Magnificent Frigatebirds visit south Tampa Bay where they steal fish from terns or dip bait fish flushed to the top of the water by fishing dolphins or tarpon.



Lower Tampa Bay Boater’s Guide

Sunshine Skyway bridge. Photo by Jim Gray.

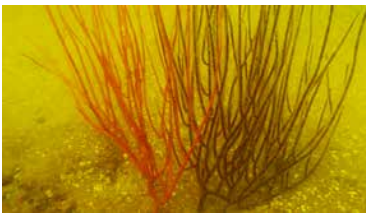
**Welcome to Lower Tampa Bay!** South Tampa Bay offers recreational opportunities, spectacular vistas, and multiple environmental resources, making it a unique and special region. As you are fishing, boating, sailing, or just plain enjoying the bay, we hope that this guide, produced by Audubon Florida, will increase your awareness and appreciation of the bay waters, islands, shorelines, birds and other wildlife, and the special places of the bay.

Special Places

**The Bob Graham Sunshine Skyway Bridge** spans lower Tampa Bay with a cable-stayed main span and a total length of 4.1 miles as Interstate Highway 275 (SR 93), US Highway 19, and State Road 55. It con- nects St. Petersburg in Pinellas County and Terra Ceia in Manatee County, passing through Hillsborough County waters. The bridge construction started in 1982 and was opened to traffic in 1987 at a cost of \$244 million. It replaced an older bridge that was partly destroyed in 1980 when a freighter struck a major support. Steel cables clad in 84 9-inch steel tubes (42 per pylon) along the center line of the bridge support the main span.

**The Skyway Fishing Pier State Park**, comprised of the approaches to the old Interstate 275 Bridge, is the longest fishing pier in the world. Illuminated at night, the pier is open 24 hours a day, every day, for sightseers, bird-watchers, and fishermen. Anglers commonly catch snook, tarpon, grouper, black sea bass, Spanish mackerel, king mackerel, cobia, sheepshead, red snapper, and pompano. A pier store offers snacks, drinks, bait, and fishing supplies. Check the park’s website, [www.floridastateparks.org/park/Skyway](http://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Skyway), for more information and fees. Skyway Bridge access roads also offer shoreline fishing and recreational opportunities.

**The Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve** encompasses state-owned submerged areas and wetlands totaling 21,736 acres in the open waters of south Tampa Bay, Terra Ceia Bay, Miguel Bay, Joe Bay, Bishop Harbor, and the tidal waters of all the local tributar- ies, including Frog Creek/Terra Ceia River and McMullen Creek. The Aquatic Preserve, state-designated as an Out- standing Florida Water, has significant seagrass and hardbottom (hard and soft corals, sponges, sea squirts, tube worms, sand dollars, with shrimps, crabs, conchs and other mollusks) habitats and a diverse variety of natural communities, including salt marsh, tidal flats, oyster bars and clam beds. For canoeists and kayakers, the 3-mile Bishop Harbor Blueway Trail circles Bishop Harbor and provides access to the Manatee County Terra Ceia Paddling Trail.



Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve is home to soft corals like these colorful sea whips. Photo by Randy Runnels.

**The Terra Ceia Preserve State Park**, bordered by the City of Palmetto and the Palmetto Point subdivision, includes 1,932 acres of uplands adjacent to the Preserve.

**Audubon’s Nina Griffith Washburn Bird Sanctuary** and **Terra Ceia Little Bird Key** (the Ann and Rich Paul Bird Sanc- tuary) are natural mangrove islands in Terra Ceia Bay that provide nesting habitat for thousands of birds in some years, including pelicans, anhingas, cormorants, herons, egrets, ibis, and spoonbills. The sanctuaries are posted **“No Trespassing”** to protect nesting birds from disturbance. The surround- ing seagrass beds and the islands are owned by the Audubon Society and managed by Audubon’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries (813/623-6826).

**Miguel Bay Bird Island** is a small mangrove island that is a roost and nesting site for many waterbirds, including pelicans, cormorants, and herons. In some years, spoonbills also nest here. The island is posted **“No Trespassing”** to protect the nesting and roosting birds from disturbance. Many birds are found entangled in fishing gear on the island. The island is owned by the State of Florida and managed as part of the Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve and Audubon’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries (813/623-6826).

**Emerson Point Preserve**, a 365-acre Manatee County preserve located at the west end of Snead Island and the mouth of Terra Ceia Bay and the Manatee River, is a designated State Archeological Site and is on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The preserve offers passive recre- ation opportunities and protection for six pre-Columbian Native American mounds and middens dating back 2,000 years, an 1800s-era plantation, hardwood tropical hammocks and mangrove and saltmarsh regions. Madira Bickel donated the mound to the state in 1948. The Portavant Mound (or Snead Island Temple Mound) is one of fifteen or more “temple mounds” produced by the Safety Harbor culture (900-1725 AD) around Tampa Bay.

**Port Manatee**, one of Florida’s largest deepwater seaports, is located in northern Manatee County. The port channel is 2.9 miles long, 400 feet wide, and 40+ feet deep. Port Manatee handles approximately 8 million tons of containerized, breakbulk, bulk and other cargo each year including fresh produce, forestry products, petroleum products, citrus juice products, fertil- izer, steel, aluminum, automobiles, cement, aggregate and more. In 2008, the U.S. Coast Guard and the Manatee County Port Authority established a community-based watch program to assist a security zone around the dredge spoil island near Port Manatee known as Manbirtee Key. For more informa- tion, call 941/722-6621.

**Manbirtee Key** is a 60-acre man-made island created during Port Manatee’s original dredging project in the 1960s. In 2003, the port partnered with Gulfstream Natural Gas System and the National Audubon Society in a multi-million-dollar project to create natural communities to provide habi- tat for birds. The island, surrounded by a shallow water seagrass meadow, is managed by the Port and Audubon’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries. The island’s upland plateau is scraped each winter to promote nesting by Least Terns, Wilson’s Plovers, and Killdeer. Herons and egrets nest in the man- grove thickets. The south sandbar is a roost site for pelicans, terns, gulls, and shorebirds. Migrating songbirds use the upland coastal hammock habitats.

**The Manatee River** stretches 36 miles (58 km) from its origin in the northeastern corner of Manatee County to its wide mouth where it flows into the southeastern corner of Tampa Bay. The river drains a 360-square-mile watershed. Its main tributary is the 21-mile-long Braden River. Two drink- ing-water supply reservoirs within the watershed are 2,400-acre Ward Lake (also called the Bill Evers Reservoir) on the Braden River and the 2,000-acre Lake Manatee Reservoir on the Manatee River.

**The Dot-Dash-Dit Bird Islands Sanctuary** is located in the Braden River north of the State Highway 64 Bridge in Bradenton. Owned by the State and managed by Audubon’s FCIS, the tiny mangrove islands provide nesting for Wood Storks, herons and egrets, cormorants, Anhingas, and Roseate Spoonbills.

Fish

Tarpon

Highly-prized sportfish, tarpon grow to 8 feet, weighing nearly 300 pounds. Adults spawn millions of eggs off-shore in the Gulf of Mexico. Larva quickly move into estu- aries where they develop in protected bay habitats. Juvenile tarpon depend upon the vegetation along shallow, semi-salty backwater creeks that provide protection from predators. Females are sexually mature at 10 years; most tarpon caught by sports fishermen are 15–30 years old. Tarpon fishing today is catch-and-release only, to protect the population of these extraordinary “silver kings.”



Tarpon by Jim Gray.

Redfish

Also called red drum, redfish are highly-sought by Florida fishermen. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission studies indicate that redfish return to regular aggregation sites, and individuals can move up to 10 miles in a day. Redfish spawn in nearshore Gulf waters between mid-September and November. Larval and juvenile redfish seek calm, dead-end estuary creeks. During cold weather, adult redfish congregate in warm spring-outflow waters.

Lionfish

Introduced into the south- east Atlantic by the U.S. aquar- ium trade in the 1980s, the Indo-Pacific Red Lionfish is firmly estab- lished from North Caro- lina to South



Lionfish by Michael Gäbler.

America, including the Gulf of Mexico. Aggressive predators of small fish and invertebrates, this non- native invasive species causes severe declines in local native fish populations, threatening the food web. Lionfish rely on camouflage and lightning- fast reflexes to capture prey. With no natural predators, lionfish have rapidly expanded their range and population size. Females release up to 30,000 eggs during each spawning and can spawn every four days. Lionfish can be caught with nets or spears and are considered delicious to eat, as the flesh is not poisonous. The lionfish venom, delivered from 18 needle-like dorsal fins, is purely defensive. A sting from a lionfish is extremely painful to humans. Treat puncture wounds with hot (not scalding) water for 30–90 minutes and seek medical attention. For more information go to [www.myfwc.com](http://www.myfwc.com) or [www.reef.org](http://www.reef.org) and search for “lionfish.”

Manatees

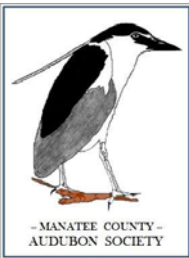
Sometimes called “sea cows,” manatees are large, cylindrically-shaped grayish marine mammals with flat rounded tails and small fore flippers. Vegetarians, they use large prehensile lips to gather grasses and water plants, mostly in shallow waters at depths of 3–7 feet. Adult manatees can measure as long as 13 feet, weigh 1,300 pounds, and live to 60 years old. They are distantly related to elephants and hyraxes. Mostly they swim at 3 to 5 mph but can move for short distances as fast as 20 mph. Females give birth to a single calf once every two years after a 12-month gestation. They nurse the young for 12 to 18 months. Manatees have good long-term memory and demonstrate discrimination and task-learning abilities similar to dolphins and seals. About 5,000 manatees live in Florida. Mor- tality is caused by cold weather exposure, poison- ing by red tide, fishing gear entanglement, and violent collisions with propeller-driven boats and ships. A large proportion of manatees have spiral cut propeller scars on their backs. Manatees occasionally ingest fishing gear (hooks, metal weights, etc.) while feeding.



Manatee by Kimball Love.

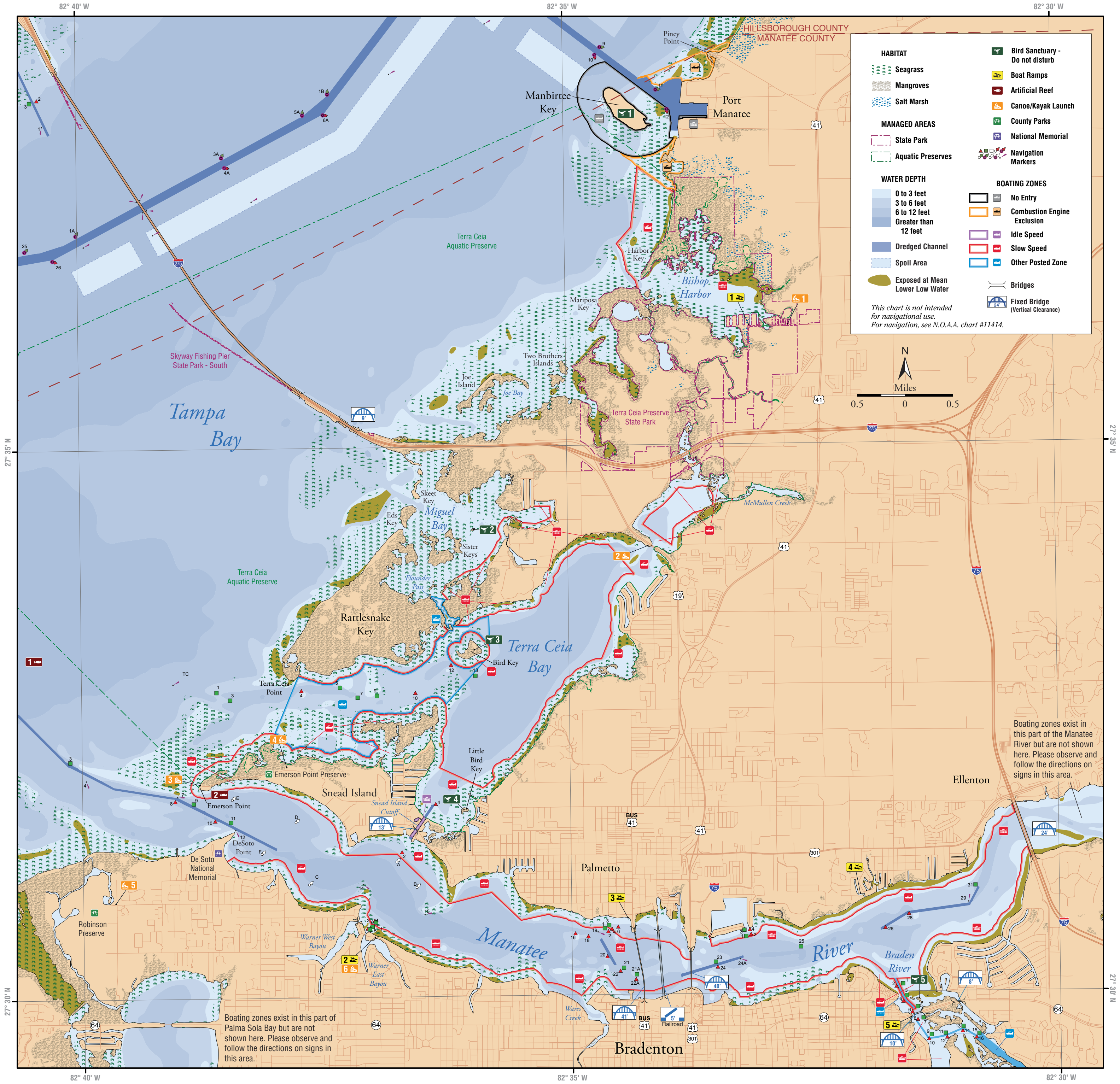


This guide is produced by Audubon Florida. For copies, contact Manatee County Audubon Society or Audubon’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries.



Graphic design: InSightGraphicDesign.net





## Public Access Boat Ramps

No	FACILITY	ADDRESS	CITY	Ramps/Lanes	Paved Ramp	Ramp Fee	Restroom
1	Bishop Harbor	NW end of Bishop Harbor Rd.	Palmetto	1/1	N	N	N
2	Warner Bayou	5800 Riverview Blvd.	Bradenton	1/3	Y	N	Y
3	Riverside Park	801 Riverside Dr.	Palmetto	1/2	Y	N	Y
4	Highland Shores Boat Ramp	351 Shore Dr.	Ellenton	1/1	Y	N	N
5	State Road 64	3020 Manatee Ave.	Bradenton	1/2	Y	N	Y

**NOAA Weather Service Broadcast**  
24-hour weather and marine forecast: 813/645-2506. [www.srh.noaa.gov/tbw](http://www.srh.noaa.gov/tbw). Radio: 162.450 Kz/VHF.

**U.S. Coast Guard**  
[www.uscg.mil](http://www.uscg.mil). Pinellas/St. Petersburg: 727/824-7506. Cortez Station: 941/794-1607. National Pollution Response Center: 800/424-8802. U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary: 877/875-6296, offers boater training, education, safety classes.

The Coast Guard Marine Safety and Security Task Force asks boaters to stay well away from all commercial vessels and facilities, including power plants, to increase public safety and reduce the threat of terrorist attacks. To report suspicious activities, call 911 or VHF Channel 16. Information: 727/824-7531.

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**  
[www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov). National Manatee and Sea Turtle Coordinator: 904/731-3328.

**National Marine Fisheries Service**  
[www.nmfs.noaa.gov](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov). Hot line: 800/853-1964. Whales, dolphins, sea turtles injury, harassment, or abandonment, regulations for protection. Local Protected Resources line: 727/824-5312 or 727/824-5301.

**Fla. Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission**  
[www.myfwc.com](http://www.myfwc.com). To report oil spills, marine violations, boating accidents, and manatee or dolphin injuries or strandings: 888/404-3922. For fish and wildlife questions, general information, hunting and fishing licenses: 863/648-3200 or 888/347-4356.

**Fish & Wildlife Research Institute**  
[www.myfwc.com/research](http://www.myfwc.com/research). Fisheries monitoring & biology, stock assessment, coral reefs, marine habitats restoration, algae/red tide blooms, marine mammals, marine turtles, technical support for marine catastrophes: 727/896-8626. To report fish kills: 800/636-0511.

**Dept. of Environmental Protection**  
[www.dep.state.fl.us](http://www.dep.state.fl.us). Oil spills, environmental regulation questions: 813/744-6100.

**State Watch Office, Division of Emergency Management**  
[www.floridadisaster.org/Response/Operations/swp.htm](http://www.floridadisaster.org/Response/Operations/swp.htm). Oil spills, major environmental emergencies: 800/320-0519.

**De Soto National Memorial**  
[www.nps.gov/deso/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/deso/index.htm). De Soto National Memorial includes about 26 acres on the south bank of the Manatee River: 941/792-0458.

**Tampa Bay Aquatic Preserves**  
[www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/programs/aquatic.htm](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/programs/aquatic.htm). Manages the Cockroach Bay and Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserves including the aquatic resources in Hillsborough and Manatee Counties and the State of Florida-owned islands: 239/530-1011.

**Florida State Parks**  
[www.floridastateparks.org](http://www.floridastateparks.org). Cockroach Bay Preserve State Park: 941/723-4536. Terra Ceia Preserve State Park: 941/723-4536 or 941/721-2068. Skyway Fishing Pier State Park: 727/865-0668.

**Southwest Florida Water Management District**  
[www.swfwmd.state.fl.us](http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us). Surface Water Improvement and Management Program: habitat restoration and water quality improvement projects: 800/836-0797 or 813/985-7481.

**Manatee County**  
[www.mymanatee.org](http://www.mymanatee.org). Planning & Zoning: 941/749-3070. Parks & Natural Resources: 941/742-5923. Environmental Protection Division: 941/742-5980. Environmental issues, complaints, habitat restoration and preservation. Emerson Point Preserve: 941/721-6885. Marine Resources, navigational markers: 941/742-5923 ext. 6008.

## Canoe/Kayak Launches

No	FACILITY	ADDRESS	CITY
1	Terra Ceia Bay Aquatic Preserve	130 Terra Ceia Rd.	Terra Ceia
2	Terra Ceia Bay Access	US-19 at Terra Ceia Bay	Terra Ceia
3	Emerson Point Park - Beach	End of 17th St. W	Palmetto
4	Emerson Point Park - Bayou	5801 17th St. W	Palmetto
5	Robinson Preserve	1704 99th St. NW	Bradenton
6	Warner Bayou	5800 Riverview Blvd.	Bradenton

Many public boat ramps shown can also be used as a canoe or kayak launch.

## Bird Sanctuaries

No	NAME	WATER BODY
1	Manbirtee Key	Terra Ceia
2	Miguel Bay Bird Key	Miguel Bay
3	Nina Griffith Washburn Audubon Sanctuary	Terra Ceia Bay
4	Terra Ceia Little Bird Key	Terra Ceia Bay
5	Dot-Dash-Dit Bird Colony Sanctuary	Bradenton River

Manatee County Sheriff's Office: Emergency 911 or Non-emergency: 941/747-3011. Marine Unit: 941/721-6607.

**Port Manatee**  
[www.portmanatee.com](http://www.portmanatee.com). Manages Port facilities in Manatee County: 941/722-6621.

**Port Manatee Zone Watch**  
[www.portmanatee.com/Security/Zone-Watch](http://www.portmanatee.com/Security/Zone-Watch). The U.S. Coast Guard and the Manatee County Port Authority have entered into a cooperative agreement to establish a community-based watch program to assist in the enforcement and implementation of a security zone on and around a dredge spoil island near Port Manatee known as Manbirtee Key. The Manbirtee Key Security Zone became effective Jan. 1, 2008. Under federal regulations, commercial and recreational boaters desiring to enter the zone must first gain permission from the U.S. Coast Guard Captain of the Port: 727/824-7534.

**Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council, Agency on Bay Management**  
[www.tbipc.org/abm](http://www.tbipc.org/abm). Regional agencies coordinate development & bay protection activities: 727/570-5151 ext. 40.

**Audubon Society, Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuaries**  
[www.fl.audubon.org](http://www.fl.audubon.org). National conservation association, bird colony management: 813/623-6826.

**Tampa Bay Watch**  
[www.tampabaywatch.org](http://www.tampabaywatch.org). Stewardship program for Tampa Bay area restoration projects, volunteer coordination: 727/867-8166.

**Reef Environmental Education Foundation**  
[www.reef.org](http://www.reef.org). Science-based marine ecosystem conservation organization: 305/852-0030.

**Power Squadron**  
[www.usps.org](http://www.usps.org). Safe boating classes, boat inspections and boating safety

education. Manatee Sail and PS: 941/747-9832. Anna Maria Island PS: 941/792-0394.

**Save All Birds**  
[www.facebook.com/SaveAllBirds](http://www.facebook.com/SaveAllBirds). Assistance with injured seabirds, wildlife: 401/529-1048.

**Save Our Seabirds**  
[www.saveourseabirds.org](http://www.saveourseabirds.org). Assistance with injured seabirds, wildlife: 941/388-3010.

**Wildlife Inc.**  
[www.wildlifeinc.org](http://www.wildlifeinc.org). Assistance with injured seabirds, wildlife: 941/778-6324.

**Wildlife Rescue Service of Florida**  
Assistance with injured seabirds, wildlife: 941/720-9453.

**Mote Marine Laboratory**  
[www.mote.org](http://www.mote.org). Assistance with injured marine mammals or sea turtles: 941/388-4441.

**Tampa Bay Estuary Program**  
[www.tbep.org](http://www.tbep.org). Government

partnership developing long-term master plan for bay restoration and management: 727/893-2765.

**Sarasota Bay Estuary Program**  
[www.sarasotabay.org](http://www.sarasotabay.org). Government partnership developing long-term master plan for bay restoration and management: 941/955-8085.

**Manatee County Audubon Society**  
[www.manateeaudubon.org](http://www.manateeaudubon.org). Local National Audubon Society chapter, conservation issues, bird-watching, Colony Watch volunteer opportunities: 941/729-2222.

**Manatee County Extension, Florida Sea Grant**  
[www.manatee.ifas.ufl.edu/seagrant/index.shtml](http://www.manatee.ifas.ufl.edu/seagrant/index.shtml). Florida Sea Grant uses academic research, education and extension to create a sustainable coastal economy and environment: 941/722-4524.

**Emergency: 911**

## Artificial Reefs

No	REEFNAME	DESCRIPTION	DEPTH (ft)	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE
1	Southeast Tampa	Concrete Reefballs	14	27° 32.917' N	82° 40.291' W
2	Manatee River - Emerson Point	Concrete Reefballs	10	27° 31.826' N	82° 38.767' W

NOTE: There are many more artificial reefs in Tampa Bay and the offshore waters of Pinellas and Manatee counties that are not shown on this map. For a complete listing of artificial reefs in Florida, visit [www.MyFWC.com/conservation/saltwater/artificial-reefs](http://www.MyFWC.com/conservation/saltwater/artificial-reefs)