



THE FLORIDA TRAIL YELLOW RIVER FOOTBRIDGE

Most of you have heard of the Appalachian Trail (known as the AT), and some of you may have hiked some part of it. The Appalachian Trail is a hiking trail in the Eastern United States, extending almost 2,200 miles between Springer Mountain in Georgia and Mount Katahdin in Maine. The AT passes through 14 states.

Have you heard of the Florida National Scenic Trail? It is one of the congressionally designated National Scenic Trails. The Florida National Scenic Trail is a 1,500 mile federally designated trail beginning at Big Cypress National Preserve and ending at Gulf Islands National Seashore. In 2023, 405,000 individuals hiked some part of the trail.

The northern terminus of the Florida National Scenic Trail is at the Fort Pickens parking lot of the Gulf Islands National Seashore just south of Pensacola. The southern terminus is on Loop Road (SR 94). Access to Loop Road is available from Tamiami Trail (US 41), 55 miles west of Miami Courthouse, 42 miles west of the Florida Turnpike, and 52 miles east of Naples. There are numerous trailheads along the length of the trail which are specified on each map.

For this article, let's look at the trail along the Florida Panhandle. It offers beautiful hiking through the northern panhandle forests or hiking along the sparkling waters and sugar white sands of the Gulf of Mexico. The northern woods have beautiful pine trees that whisper in the wind and an assortment of wild flowers and birds that include many species of woodpeckers.

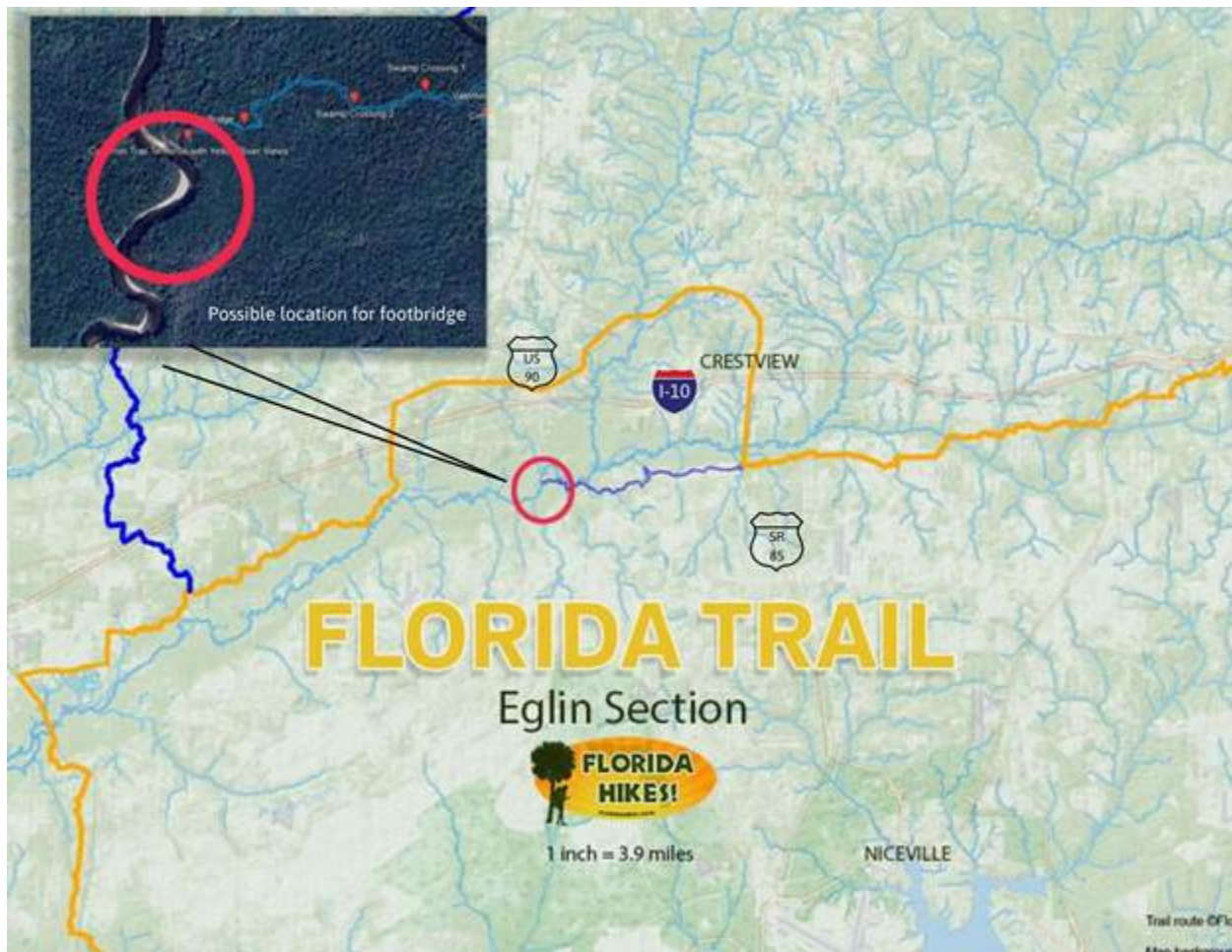
In January 2024, the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners voted to commit \$1 million dollars of Tourism Development Dollars (Bed Tax money collected from those who stay in our local hotels and lodging) towards planning and design of a bridge to close a gap in the footpath across the Yellow River. Currently, the trail is separated by a 21-mile highway, leading hikers through Crestview and along the shoulders of US 90 and State Road 85. The solution is to build a footbridge across the Yellow River. This will link the existing trail on Eglin Air Force Base across the Yellow River to a more direct route to a new segment of the trail, which has not been constructed on the western banks. This addition of a new bridge corresponds with the expansion the Tourism Development District to the northern reaches of Okaloosa County.

Recently, I went up the Yellow River by boat with three other county staff. The Yellow River is so named for the color of the river. It has many switchbacks along its winding banks. The idea of hiking about 10 miles in and then returning the same way made the idea of a boat trip up the Yellow River a good solution. When we arrived at the site of the proposed bridge we began to discuss the challenges and the type of bridge that would be needed to cross the river. Click the link below to view a video of our adventure.

<https://bit.ly/FloridaTrailOkaloosa>

As we considered the project we had numerous questions:

What kind of bridge? How will we transport materials for the building of the bridge? How wide should the bridge be? Perhaps wide enough to accommodate an ATV in case of an emergency evacuation. As you can see, lots of engineering decisions will need to be addressed.

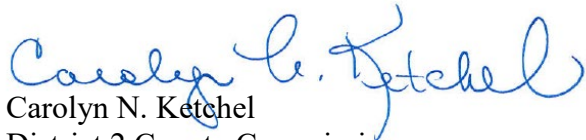


The Florida Trail Association is a group of volunteers who spend countless hours maintaining this trail. They should be thanked for advocating for this bridge and the difference it will make to those who hike it.

This project will take some time to design, permit and engineer. It is a worthy project to make the Florida National Scenic Trail a lot more passable. Funding provided by our county's Tourism Development Tax as well as state and federal dollars will make this project a reality. We can look forward to this much needed addition in the years ahead.

It is an honor and privilege to serve as your commissioner.

My Sincere Thanks,



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