

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Ecotourism provides unique ways to explore an unspoiled island sanctuary and to recharge at The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

LEE COUNTY, FL – Visitors looking for a vacation that offers ways to de-stress and unplug from the rest of the world find The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel a welcome refuge and a chance to recharge in Florida’s unspoiled island sanctuary.

Here, much is right with the world. It is more than just a soothing alternative to themed amusement parks and man-made attractions while on vacation. On the Gulf coast of Florida, The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel offers visitors a rare gift: the natural Florida at its best and far away from crowds.

Leaving the material world behind and connecting with nature comes naturally to the Sunshine State and southwest Florida’s Fort Myers/Sanibel Island area, where more than a million acres of unspoiled beaches, award-winning state parks and wildlife preserves have always received top billing. For those who want to watch rare birds and other wildlife, collect shells, swim in the Gulf of Mexico or navigate the mangroves by boat, The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel is the perfect place for environmental pursuits. It has also been named the top bird watching destination in the North America by USA Today.

The area includes the islands of Sanibel and Captiva, as well as Fort Myers, Cape Coral, Estero Island/Fort Myers Beach, Bonita Springs and more than 100 coastal islands off the mainland. Collectively, they offer a wide spectrum of recreational opportunities to anyone who loves the great outdoors and appreciates its value.

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What's new?

Sanibel Island's Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (C.R.O.W.) opened its **Healing Winds Visitor Education Center** this past year. Offering a rare opportunity for visitors to learn how one of the nation's leading rehabilitation hospitals rescues and cares for injured wildlife, the 4,800-square-foot education center is part of a \$2.8 million renovation project. Designed to inspire and educate with interactive wildlife experiences, this special center teaches how injured animals are admitted, diagnosed (by western or eastern methods), how they are cared for and how they are released. Visitors also get to play the "vet" as they follow the cases of four animals from admission to release. C.R.O.W. veterinarians and staff have treated more than 200 animal species with 4,000 patients each year receiving treatment at the facility. Admission: \$5 for adults; \$3 for teens; free for 12 and under. Entire family admission is \$15. Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. Information: 239-472-3644 or www.crowclinic.org.

At the new **Butterfly Estates** in the river district of downtown **Fort Myers**, visitors surround themselves with thousands of butterflies at this new eco-attraction. The venue includes a botanical garden and butterfly habitat with cascading waterfalls, lush tropical nectar plants and butterflies that delight guests with their astounding beauty. Admission: \$15 for adults 17 and older; \$9 for children three to 16. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Information: 239-690-2359 or www.thebutterflyestates.com.

Three area wildlife refuges celebrate as they each turn 100 years old. As a result of the environmental vision of President Theodore Roosevelt, the three refuges that were authorized in 1908 provide important opportunities for wildlife viewing and recreation on some of the most pristine waterways in Lee County. Administered by the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, they include:

- **Pine Island National Refuge**, with 548 acres, includes 17 islands of densely forested red and black mangroves. Location: north of Sanibel Island. Information: www.fws.gov/southeast/PineIsland/

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- **Matlacha Pass National Wildlife Refuge**, with 512 acres and 23 islands of primarily wetlands with low sand and shell ridges. Location: Within Matlacha Pass estuaries.
www.fws.gov/southeast/MatlachaPass/
- **Island Bay National Wildlife Refuge**, with 20 acres, includes six undeveloped tracts of land that occupy the higher portions of several islands and mangrove shoreline.
Location: Southwest of Punta Gorda in the Cape Haze area of Charlotte Harbor.
Information: www.fws.gov/southeast/IslandBay/

National Geographic Adventure recognizes top kayaking spots in its February issue: J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge, Cayo Costa State Park and the Great Calusa Blueway are cited as excellent places for exploring in a kayak or canoe.

The new **Ethnobotany Trail** at **Manatee Park** in **Fort Myers** follows the new trend of studying how cultures have used native plants historically through present day. Scheduled free interpretative programs delve further into the fascinating blend of history and science.
Information: 239-690-5030 or www.leeparks.org.

Birding, paddling and heritage trails

The **Great Florida Birding Trail** identifies top birding sites in South Florida. With the gateway to the new loop located at Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, the trail includes prime bird watching sites in southwest Florida. Information: www.floridabirdingtrail.com .

The **Great Calusa Blueway**, with nearly 190 miles of clearly marked waterways and trails, provides a chance to explore the area's back bays and estuaries. Here, visitors experience wildlife viewing at its best. Guided tours are available or paddlers may explore on their own as they go through aquatic reserves, wildlife refuges, creeks, bayous, rivers and mangrove forests. Many of the trails follow the course charted some 2,000 years ago by the area's earliest residents, the Calusa Indians. Recognized as among the best U.S. kayaking destinations by both Paddler and Canoe & Kayak magazines, the waterway provides outings that last a few hours to week-long adventures. Information: www.calusablueway.com.

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The **Calusa Heritage Trail** at the Randell Research Center (RRC) on Pine Island includes a 3,700-foot interpretive pathway that takes visitors around and over mounds, remnants of an ancient canal and other features of this important archaeological find. The site was a Calusa Indian village for more than 1,500 years, and huge shell mounds still overlook the sparkling waters of Pine Island Sound. The Calusa were once the most powerful people in all of south Florida. For many centuries they built huge shell mounds, engineered canals, and sustained tens of thousands of people from the fish and shellfish found in the rich estuaries west and south of Fort Myers. All that is left of their culture today is a dwindling number of shell mound sites dotting the estuarine landscape between Charlotte Harbor and the Ten Thousand Islands region of the Everglades.

This permanent facility is dedicated to learning and teaching the archaeology, history, and ecology of southwest Florida. Situated in the scenic community of Pineland on the western shore of historic Pine Island, the site encompasses more than 50 acres at the heart of the Pineland archaeological site, a massive shell mound site extending across more than 200 acres from the mangrove coastline. On the trail, visitors can tour this internationally significant site from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Volunteers and students are able to participate in the ongoing research programs. Guided tours are offered to the public from January through April on Wednesdays and Saturdays at 10 a.m. Admission: \$7 for adults; \$5 for seniors; \$4 for children. Information: 239-283-2157 or www.flmnh.ufl.edu/rrc.

Beaches and shelling

Approximately 400 species of seashells can be found on the barrier islands of The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, where 50-plus miles of sandy beaches make it a shelling paradise. Thanks to its location and geography, Sanibel Island is a favorite among shell collectors. It is possible to find dozens of different species washed ashore, ranging from common scallops and clams to exotic tulips, olives, whelks and the rare brown speckled junonia. The less-populated islands of North Captiva and Cayo Costa are famous for treasures that typically

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lie just under the sand's surface such as starfish, conchs and sand dollars. Note: It is illegal to remove live shells in Lee County. It is the first ordinance of its kind in Florida, further underscoring the area's reputation as a leader in environmental protection. Shelling cruises are available to take visitors to the area's barrier islands for snorkeling and shelling on some of the world's most beautiful beaches.

A visit to the **Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum** on **Sanibel Island** features shells from around the world, as well as numerous shell exhibits and a children's learning lab. With ties to the Smithsonian Institution and the local Sanibel-Captiva Shell Club, this shell haven contains showcase shells from southwest Florida as well as rare and huge specimens from all over the world. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Admission: \$7 for adults; \$4 for children ages 5 to 16; free for four and younger. Information: 239-395-2233 or www.shellmuseum.org.

Area parks and nature-oriented attractions

Visitors to the Fort Myers/Sanibel area will find an interesting mix of history and ecology offered by the area's many parks. Depending on the location, attractions and ecotourism, adventures typically range from canoeing, kayaking, snorkeling, shelling and fishing to bicycling, hiking, horseback riding and birdwatching.

Sanibel & Captiva islands

- Named for Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist and pioneer environmentalist Jay Norwood Darling, the 6,000-acre J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge is home to native birds, raccoons, otters, alligators and other wildlife. The refuge features wonderful bird watching spots, delightful footpaths, winding canoe trails and a 4-mile scenic drive, all of which are lush with seagrass, wax and salt myrtles, red mangrove, cabbage or sabal palms, and other native plants. Many locations allow viewing of the region's most exotic and endangered species. The welcome center is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily and is free. The refuge is open Saturday through Thursday from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission: \$5 per car; \$1 for hikers and bikers. For information on guided kayak/canoe and tram tours: 239-472-1100 or www.fws.gov/dingdarling.

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- **The Sanibel/Captiva Conservation Foundation** owns and manages more than 1,800 acres of wetlands, which include a four-mile tract of walking trails. Visitors see island research projects in progress, a butterfly house, a marine touch tank, and various environmental and nature displays in the nature center. Guided beach and trail walks are offered. Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily. Admission: \$3 for adults; children free. Information: 239- 472-2329 or www.sccf.org.
- **The Sanibel Lighthouse Boardwalk** that leads visitors to the island's historic lighthouse and surrounding cottages is a prime wildlife viewing spot during fall migration in October. A landmark since 1884 on the island's southern tip, the lighthouse has been a wildlife refuge since 1950. Information: 239-472-6397 or www.ci.sanibel.fl.us.

Fort Myers Beach

- **The Matanzas Pass Wilderness Preserve** contains more than 56 acres of unspoiled mangrove swamps on Estero Bay, providing a habitat to diverse plant and wildlife species. The Historic Cottage and Nature Center chronicles the history of Fort Myers Beach. Information: 239-765-4222 or www.fmbeach.org/parks/matanzas_pass.htm.
- At the north end of Estero Island, **Bowditch Point Regional Park** encompasses 17 acres fronting both Estero Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. This peaceful, uncrowded park mixes wild, natural beauty with modern amenities. Information: 239-463-1116 or www.leeparks.org.
- **Mound Key Archaeological State Park** is located just east of Lovers Key in Estero Bay. Home of one of the state's premier archaeological sites, this tiny but beautiful, undeveloped island was created mainly from shells deposited by the Calusa Indians, the island's first inhabitants, more than 1,000 years ago. The site is accessible only by boat, and is a favorite with history buffs and picnickers. Seasonal tours are conducted by historians. Information: 239-992-0311 or www.floridastateparks.org.

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Greater Fort Myers/Cape Coral

- One of the most popular ecological areas may be found inland at the Babcock Ranch in North Fort Myers where **Babcock Wilderness Adventures** offers guided tours of some of the spectacular woods and wetlands found within the property's 74,000 acres. Guests take a 90-minute swamp buggy eco tour to see most of the ranch's highlights, including the 10,000-acre Telegraph Cypress Swamp, four ecosystems, deer, turkey, alligators, panthers and birdlife. For information, hours and reservations: 800-500-5583 or visit www.babcockwilderness.com.
- The **Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve** is another fascinating ecosystem with a 2,200-acre wetland that acts as a corridor for wildlife traveling through the area. Manmade conveniences include a 1.2-mile boardwalk, seating enclaves, shelters and observation decks. Free guided walks led by naturalists are available most of the year. Information: 239-533-7550 or www.leeparks.org/sixmile.
- Additional flora and fauna can be seen at **Lakes Regional Park**, where paved trails and picnic facilities blend harmoniously with the park's resident wildlife. Highlights of the 279-acre park include a freshwater lake, bird rookery, bike and walking paths and fragrance garden. Miniature train, bike/boat rentals. Information: 239-432-2000 or www.leeparks.org.
- In Cape Coral, pristine canoe trails draw nature lovers to **Four Mile Cove Ecological Park**. The 365-acre saltwater preserve with a 4,500-foot nature trail is just north of the Midpoint Memorial Bridge on the Caloosahatchee River. In addition to canoe trails, there are wooded paths for walking through the preserve, a waterfront observation pier, a visitor center, picnic areas and an Iwo Jima Memorial. Information: 239-574-0833 or www.capecoral.net.
- Owned and operated by the National Audubon Society, Audubon **Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary**, is located east of Bonita Springs. Within the sanctuary's sprawling, pristine wilderness is a 2.25-mile boardwalk, a river and hundreds of species of reptiles and birds,

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including the largest colony of nesting wood storks in the U.S. In addition to a thriving alligator population, it is home to otters, Florida black bear, white-tailed deer and red-bellied turtles, as well as orchids, ferns and wildflowers and the largest forest of ancient, towering bald cypress trees in North America. Information: 239-348-9151 or www.corkscrewaudobon.org.

Florida State parks

Florida State Parks have twice been awarded the National Recreation and Parks Association's Gold Medal Award, honoring Florida as the "Nation's Best State Park Service." The Gold Medal, demonstrates the state's commitment to preserving natural Florida lands as recreational and educational opportunities for more than 17.3 million visitors each year. While each of the four state parks in the Fort Myers/Sanibel area features picturesque backdrops for picnicking and outlets for leisure activities, each offers something special.

- **Gasparilla Island State Recreation Area** (Boca Grande). Separated from the mainland by Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island Sound, this island is part of a chain of Gulf coast barrier islands. The centerpiece of Gasparilla is the restored Boca Grande Lighthouse built in 1890 and today is a popular attraction as a museum open to visitors. The park offers beautiful beaches with Gulf access, excellent shelling and fishing opportunities and abundant wildlife. Information: 941-964-0375 or go to www.floridastateparks.org.
- **Cayo Costa State Park** (a barrier island north of Captiva Island) the natural features of this unspoiled island are stunning. Miles of uncongested beaches, acres of pine forests, oak palm hammocks, mangrove swamps and a spectacular display of bird life make this a subtropical paradise. Accommodations on this boat-access-only island include rental cabins and campsites with restrooms. Accessible only by boat. A state-contracted passenger ferry is available through Tropic Star of Pine Island by calling 239- 283-0015. Park information: 941-964-0375 or www.floridastateparks.org.

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- **Koreshan State Historic Site** (Estero). A dream come true for nature-lovers and history buffs on the banks of the Estero River. The site features the preserved remains of the Koreshan religious community. Special programs offered seasonally. The adjoining state park includes nature trails, boat ramp, canoeing, camping, and fresh and salt-water fishing. Information: 239-992-0311 or www.floridastateparks.org.
- **Lovers Key State Park** (south of Fort Myers Beach). Wildlife abounds in and around the 1,907-acre park, which is ideal for shelling and hiking on the 2.5 miles of beach along the Gulf of Mexico. The remnant maritime hammock on Black Island is home to several species of woodpeckers, hawks, owls, warblers and osprey, as well as various shore and wading birds such as roseate spoonbills and reddish egrets. Bottlenose dolphin and the endangered West Indian manatee also inhabit the near-shore waters, filled with trout, redfish, snook and tarpon. Ride the tram or walk the boardwalks over tidal lagoons. Bike/kayak rentals available. Information: 239-463-4588 or www.floridastateparks.org.

Other attractions

- **Manatee Park**, on the Orange River just east of Fort Myers, enables visitors to observe this gentle mammal in its non-captive habitat during the winter months. From November through March, visitors may view the endangered West Indian manatee. Information: 239-694-3537 or www.leeparks.org.
- Another unique aquatic adventure is the **Dolphin Watch and Wildlife Adventure Cruise** offered through the Sanibel and Captiva Conservation Foundation by Captiva Cruises. Visitors explore the wildlife in and around picturesque Pine Island Sound. Birds, dolphin, manatee and more typically are seen during the tour, which is narrated by volunteers from the conservation foundation. Cruise is offered daily from 4 to 5:30 p.m. Information and reservations: 239-472-5100 or www.captivacruises.com.

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Tours and excursions

Many hotels and resorts offer eco tours as well as educational seminars and activities including wildlife photo safaris, shelling excursions, bicycling and boating trips, and guided beach walks.

The Sanibel Sea School on Sanibel Island is dedicated to teaching children and adults about marine ecosystems using the setting of the barrier island habitats of Sanibel and Captiva. The program includes the elements of a marine ecosystem: animals, people, plants, land, ocean and weather. Through their experience, students gain an intimate perspective of the ocean, its inhabitants and the tightly woven fabric of our global environment. The program includes all the elements of a marine ecosystem: animals, people, plants, land, ocean and weather. Contact the school for information and schedules for adult and children's programs. Information: 239-472-8585 or www.sanibelseaschool.org.

A list of guides who provide shelling trips to barrier islands, kayaking the mangroves, wildlife cruises and more that allow visitors to experience the area from the waterways is available on The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel Web site at www.FortMyersSanibel.com.

Special eco events

73rd Annual Sanibel Shell Fair & Show, Sanibel Island

March 4-6, 2010

Sanibel Community House, 2173 Periwinkle Way

239-472-2155

www.sanibelcommunityhouse.net

Sanibel Island, named the best shelling beach in the U.S. and one of the best in the world, hosts shelling enthusiasts who gather each year for the shell fair that draws visitors from all over the world. One of the most unique events in the country, it began on a porch with just a few islanders and has evolved into today's event that includes demonstrations, shell displays, crafts, prizes, food and entertainment. Serious shellers compete for prizes while visitors shop and enjoy these treasures that include award-winning Sailor's Valentines...popular in the 1800s when sailors brought them home to their sweethearts. In celebration of this world-renowned shelling island, the Shell Fair features shell displays and crafts, food and entertainment. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. Admission: \$3 donation is requested to indoor shell show. Fair is free.

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Annual events at The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel/Page 11

Fifth annual Calusa Heritage Day, Pine Island

March 13, 2010

www.flmnh.ufl.edu/rrc

This annual event focuses on regional archaeology, history, and ecology as well as art, music, and other methods of learning about Pineland's heritage. Activities for children and adults as well as food and beverages will be available. Admission: \$5 per person; children under 12 are admitted free. All proceeds benefit the education and research programs of the Calusa Heritage Trail, Randell Research Center. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For information call 239-283-2157.

5th Annual Calusa Blueway Paddling Festival, county-wide

Oct. 29-Nov. 7, 2010

www.CalusaBluewayPaddlingFestival.com

Along the Great Calusa Blueway paddling trail on waterfront communities in southwest Florida, events include activities that will help attendants achieve a "carbon neutral" vacation experience with tips to bring home. The festival includes free clinics and demonstrations, a speaker series, waterfront hospitality events and chances to win a kayak and other prizes. Also: moderately priced nature and cultural tours, waterway cleanups, canoe and kayak races, and a catch-and-release kayak fishing tournament. A nature photography contest and family-oriented outdoors eco-fests round out the offerings. Complete details with contact information and regular updates may be found at www.calusabluewaypaddlingfestival.com.

21st annual J.N. "Ding" Darling Days, Sanibel Island

October 17-23, 2010

"Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge

239-472-1100

www.dingdarlingdays.com

"Ding" Darling Days include a week of eco-activities with free refuge tram tours, live wildlife presentations, kids activities, Federal Duck Stamp artist presentation, art day, family day and more. Birding and kayaking tours, environmental speakers, a nature photography contest, and Junior Duck Stamp Awards will fill the week with environmental activities for all ages. The festival celebrates the birthday of the refuge's namesake, conservationist and Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist Jay N. "Ding" Darling. For detailed schedule, visit website.

For information on planning a vacation to The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel and special value-added packages, visit www.FortMyersSanibel.com.

Editor's Note: Extensive images are available upon request.