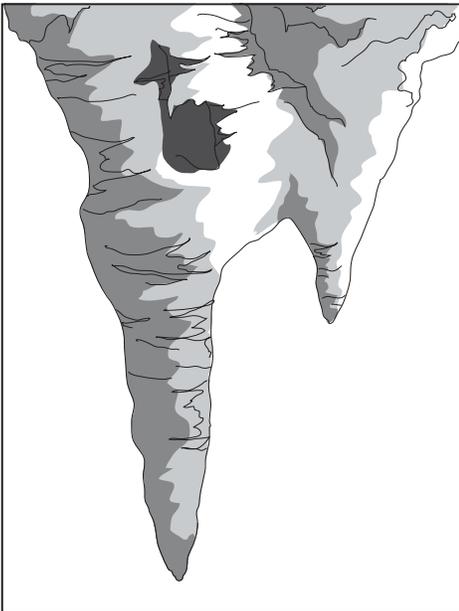


Florida Caverns State Park

Did you know that Florida has caves as beautiful as the famous Mammoth Cave and Carlsbad Caverns? Florida Caverns State Park is near Marianna in northwest Florida. The beautiful Florida Cavern that is available for tours is a series of connected rooms. The rooms contain dazzling formations of stalactites, stalagmites, columns, and other fascinating features.

These features were created when surface water seeped through the limestone rock, dissolving the calcium. As the water containing dissolved calcium dripped from cracks in the ceiling, the process formed stalactites. Stalactites grew down from the ceiling. The water containing calcium that dripped from stalactites formed stalagmites below. They grew up from the cavern floor. Columns eventually formed when some stalactites and stalagmites met. The creation of these formations took tens of thousands of years.



Stalactites hang from the ceiling of the Florida Caverns.

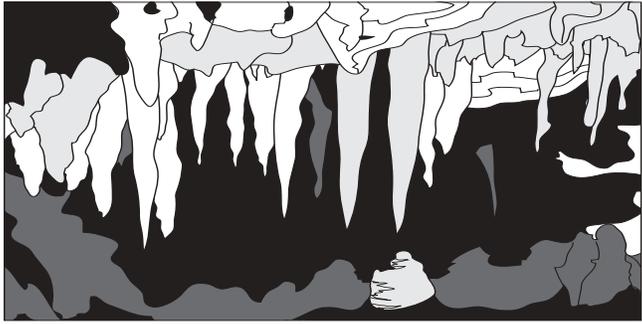
In addition to stalactites, stalagmites, and columns, there are features that resemble soda straws, ribbons, and draperies. There are fossils, pools of water, and terraces. Many of these formations have been given names, such as the bacon rock, the South America pool, and the wedding cake.

Altogether, there are 10 acres of caves. During the Seminole Wars many Native Americans hid in the caves. The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) developed the cave for visitors in the 1930s. The CCC removed mud, widened passages, and excavated where necessary to provide headroom.

The tour cave, covering an area of nearly 2 acres and the park, has been open for public enjoyment since 1942. Park rangers offer guided tours several times each day. The cave tour takes about 35-40 minutes. It begins about 60 feet below the surface. The temperature in the cave remains at 65 degrees all year. Visitors wind and loop their way through limestone, eventually emerging at the surface a couple of hundred yards from the entrance.

Other caves are available to visit only by Florida Park Service permits. The caverns are fragile. The slightest disturbance by humans can destroy these delicate natural wonders. Some of the caves are available only for scientific research.

The caverns are home to blind salamanders and crayfish, as well as the endangered gray bat. The easily disturbed bats are not found in the tour cave, but live in the numerous smaller caves found in the park. Caves inhabited by gray bats are protected under an Endangered Species Act.



The park contains a wide variety of wildlife and plants. Many are quite rare. Woodpeckers, barred owls, beavers, alligators, rare Barbour's map turtles, and alligator snapping turtles can be seen. American beech, southern magnolia, white oak, and dogwood trees are prominent throughout the park. Because this has been a state park since the 1930s, many of the trees have reached an impressive size. Wildflowers appear at different times of the year.

The park's nature trail goes along the edge of a bluff next to the river floodplain. In some places the bluff is 30 feet high. It overlooks a forest. At the end of the trail is the Tunnel Cave, a hundred-foot passage through a section of the bluff. This passage is very popular with visitors.

The Chipola River flows underground in the park at a river sink. It reappears several hundred feet downstream, forming a natural bridge. In the early 1900s, loggers cut a ditch across this natural bridge to float logs downstream.

Visitors can take a guided tour through the large cavern. They can camp out and swim in the Blue Hole Spring. They can hike on trails and canoe on the Chipola River. Visiting Florida Caverns State Park is one of the outstanding experiences available in Florida.

How Florida was Formed

Throughout most of its history Florida has been under water. In earliest times, Florida was part of Gondwanaland, the super continent that later divided into Africa and South America. There is evidence that Florida separated from Gondwanaland about 300 million years ago.

Florida eventually found itself wedged between Gondwanaland and North America when they combined to form the super continent Pangea. When Pangea began to break up, Florida remained behind with North America.

Florida slipped slowly beneath the waves to become part of North America's continental shelf. Coral, shellfish, and fish skeletons piled up. This created a layer of limestone hundreds (in some places thousands) of feet thick.

As the Appalachian Mountains eroded, sand and clay were deposited over Florida's limestone layer. When the sea level fell, Florida finally emerged from the seas as part of the North American mainland.

Because limestone is porous, water gradually dissolves the rock and forms cracks and passages. The limestone layer of the state is honeycombed with underground rivers. Where the rivers break through to the surface, springs and sinkholes are found.

In the center of the Florida panhandle, the rock has been pushed up and there are some sizable hills. This area includes numerous caves. One of the best of these cave systems has been developed for touring in Florida Caverns State Park.