

Florida Wildlife Corridor

Legislation

Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida Legislature created the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act in 2021. This law directs the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to encourage and promote investments in areas that protect and enhance the Florida Wildlife Corridor. It specifies that the Florida Wildlife Corridor is an existing physical, geographically defined area comprised of over 18 million acres, of which 10 million acres are protected conservation lands.

The Florida Leads budget dedicated \$300 million specifically to support these efforts, in addition to the \$100 million allocated to the Florida Forever program, the state's premier land conservation program. This funding can be used for the acquisition of Florida Wildlife Corridor lands, in fee simple or conservation easements.

The Science behind the Florida Wildlife Corridor

The ability to migrate plays an important role in supporting biodiversity by enabling animals to safely travel to find mates, food and shelter. This increase in migration results in increased genetic diversity within the species population and ensures a species' resistance to issues such as disease, genetic mutations due to inbreeding and potential extinction.

Due to human development, many habitats have become fragmented, creating blockades like residential areas, industrial parks and roads. Wildlife corridors are sections of land that connect two or more wildlife habitats and allow animals to avoid roads and other developments.

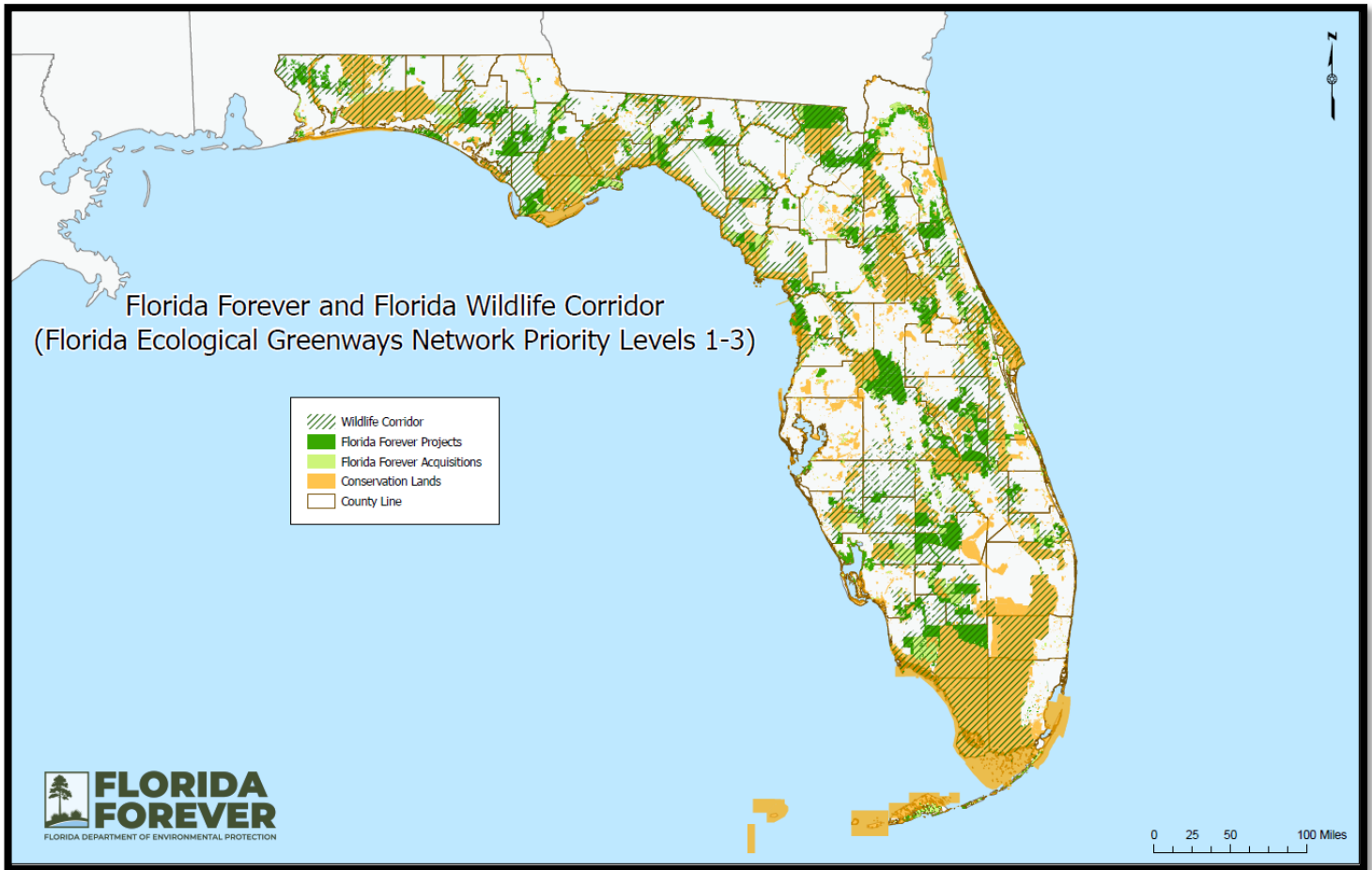
The Florida Wildlife Corridor refers to the conserved lands and opportunity areas defined as Priority 1, 2 and 3 of the [Florida Ecological Greenways Network \(FEGN\)](#). The FEGN is a statewide database that identifies and prioritizes a functionally connected statewide ecological network of public and private conservation lands. It is the primary data layer used to inform the Florida Forever, Rural and Family Lands Protection Program and other state, federal, and regional land acquisition programs regarding the most important ecological corridors and intact landscapes across the state for protection of Florida's native wildlife, ecosystem services, and ecological resiliency: ([Florida Ecological Greenways Network Florida Forever Projects](#)) It identifies "opportunity areas," which are lands and waters within the wildlife corridor that are not conserved lands, and green spaces within the corridor which lack conservation status and/or are contiguous or between conserved lands.

Vision for the Wildlife Corridor

There are 1.46 million acres within the Florida Wildlife Corridor opportunity area that are a high priority for conservation through the state's Florida Forever program. Utilizing the most current scientific analysis of Florida's natural resources, DEP's Division of State Lands triages properties in the same manner as Florida Forever potential acquisitions. Priority is given to lands that preserve, protect or enhance wildlife habitats and corridors and linkages to agricultural and rural lands.

The Florida Wildlife Corridor is envisioned as an added layer to enhance the Florida Forever program. Its purpose is to build upon the network of public and private lands for safe passage and dispersal routes to maintain healthy populations of plants and animals.

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Florida Forever – Florida Wildlife Corridor Acquisition Successes as of July 2022

Etoniah Creek Cross Florida Greenway – Located on the west side of Ocala National Forest and the Cross Florida Greenway, this series of 25 parcels totaling 1,900 acres is strategic to buffering the Ocklawaha River.

Wolfe Creek Forest – This 1,786-acre strategic phased acquisition between Blackwater River State Forest and Naval Air Station Whiting Field marks a mighty partnership with Trust for Public Land, U.S. Department of Defense and Santa Rosa County. In ongoing complementary efforts to buffer Whiting Field, this acquisition will also protect the military mission of the installation and further natural resource conservation efforts.

Upper St. Marks – Located east of Tallahassee, this 729-acre parcel widens a very narrow constriction between two managed areas (Aucilla Wildlife Management Area and Plank Road State Forest).

Devil's Garden – 1,622 acres located within the western Everglades headwaters, this acquisition is a continued phased purchase of a very large project with significant water and wildlife benefits, including supporting habitat for the Florida panther.

Coastal Headwaters – This strategic acquisition of 2,122 acres connects two blocks of Blackwater River State Forest. The project, which is largely funded by the federal Forest Legacy Program and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Acres for America program, leaves the state's funding contribution to the project at a minimal 12%. In addition to having important water resource considerations, the project is

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also under the flight path of Naval Air Station Whiting Field's north runway and helps provide military buffering.

Corrigan Ranch – This 4,386-acre acquisition is a nice expansion of the existing Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park and was coordinated in conjunction with a neighboring acquisition by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This project is critical in protecting the imperiled Florida Grasshopper Sparrow.

Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector – This 6,665-acre conservation easement lies adjacent to the Florida turnpike and connects to the east to the Fort Drum Conservation Area and to other protected lands to the north and the west.

Hardee Flatwoods – This 1,661-acre conservation easement shares its eastern boundary Highlands County Sun 'n Lake Preserve and includes most of the headwaters of Bee Branch, a tributary of Charlie Creek, a principal headwater of the Peace River.

Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem – The purchase of adjoining conservation easements bordering Highlands Hammock State Park to the south protects an additional 354 acres from active development in the area.

Wolfe Creek Forest – Another completed phase to this strategic acquisition area in partnership with Trust for Public Land, the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy program and the Knobloch Family Foundation. This purchase protects and adds 3,610 acres to the Blackwater River State Forest and complements further base buffering for neighboring Naval Air Station Whiting Field.

Florida Forever – Florida Wildlife Corridor Pending Opportunities

Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector – The acquisition of a 3,634-acre conservation easement will further protect the conservation area surrounding Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park and Avon Park Air Force Range.

Horse Creek Ranch – The acquisition of an 11,958-acre conservation easement in DeSoto and Hardee counties in partnership with an adjoining purchase of 4,358 acres by the Southwest Florida Water Management District will forever protect this large working landscape from development and mining in the area.

Fisheating Creek Ecosystem – This 6,864-acre conservation easement will protect a unique 11-mile-long corridor of property that is part of the primary dispersal/expansion area essential to the federally listed endangered Florida Panther.

Red Hills Conservation Area – Located in Leon and Jefferson counties, this 4,132-acre conservation easement will increase protection of biodiversity and maintain natural functions of land, water and wetland systems of the Red Hills Region covering over three miles of the northeastern shoreline of Lake Miccosukee.

Wakulla Springs Protection Zone – The acquisition of several ownerships comprising almost 400 acres in Wakulla County will support the further connection of the Wakulla State Forest from the Leon County line south to the existing footprint in Wakulla County.