

Only In Florida

Florida is host to a variety of plants and wildlife. Most of which is native to our state as well as a few others. We are, however, lucky enough to have a few of our own which we do not share with anyone else. Unfortunately for some, we are destroying or have destroyed their natural habitat.

The Dusky seaside sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus nigrescens*) made its home in the grassy marshes near Titusville. Between 1987 and 1990, it became extinct. The Cape Sable seaside sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus mirabilis*) is the only seaside sparrow in southern Florida. It has the most restrictive range of any bird in North America. Close to extinction, it now resides only in the Everglades National Park and the Big Cypress Preserve. Listed as a species of special concern, the Florida bog frog (*Rana okaloosae*) is found only in boggy areas of Okaloosa County in the Florida panhandle. Another endangered species residing only in our state is the Lower Keys rabbit (*Sylvilagus palustris hefneri*). A subspecies of the Marsh rabbit, it is found only on a few islands in the lower Florida Keys. It is the only rabbit on the federally endangered species list.



The Florida mouse (*Podomys floridanus*) lives only in Florida although its closest relatives reside in central Mexico. It is the largest mouse native to Florida weighing in at 40 grams, possibly more. They have big black eyes, huge ears and large hind feet. Most often they live in gopher tortoise burrows in scrubs and woodlands only in the peninsula as far south as Highlands County. Due to its small geographic range and human destruction of its habitat it is a threatened species.

Florida is home to a variety of grapes. One in particular, the Calusa grape (*Vitis shuttleworthii*), grows nowhere else. It is found in mixed woods, hammocks, low woods and pinelands in the central and southern Florida. The alternate leaves are generally heart shaped, brownish green on top and have dense white or rust colored hairs on the undersides. The edges can be either smooth or bluntly toothed. Clusters of small flowers appear in spring. Summertime brings dark red to purplish black grapes.

We even have wildflowers, herbs and pawpaws we can call our own. Florida dandelion (*Berlandiera subacaulis*) is a perennial herb about 20 inches tall. The leaves are alternate, lobed and appear at the base of the hairy stem flush with the ground. At the top of the stem, are daisy-like yellow flowers with yellowish green centers. They are found throughout the state in sandhills, pinelands and dry disturbed sites.

Goldenaster (*Chrysopsis linearifolia*) is a biennial herb up to three feet tall. Leaves found along the stem are alternate and narrow. The leaves at the base of the plant appear in a circular cluster around the stem. The leaves are usually absent when the yellow daisy-like flowers appear from September through November. It is found mainly in central Florida in scrubs, sandhills and other dry sites.

Goldenaster (*Chrysopsis subulata*) is a perennial wildflower that is about three feet tall. Leaves found at the base of the plant (as well as along the stem) are spoon shaped and often have long white hairs. The daisy-like yellow flowers appear from June until August. It is found in the central part of the state in pine flatwoods and disturbed sites.

Pennyroyal (*Piloblephis rigida*) is an aromatic evergreen shrub about 2 feet tall. The leaves are opposite and needlelike. Appearing year round are dense heads of pale purple flowers. It is found in sandhills, oak scrub, pinelands and other dry, sandy sites in central and south Florida.

Sandhill wireweed (*Polygonella robusta*) is a brittle, woody shrub up to three feet tall. The leaves are alternate and clustered. White to pinkish spikelike flower clusters appear from March until November. They are found throughout the state in sandhills and sand pine scrub.

Reticulate pawpaw or Dog banana (*Asimina reticulata*) is a deciduous shrub about four and one half feet tall. It is densely branched and has oblong leaves that are alternate, leathery and have rounded tips. The top of the leaf is pale green and the underside is grayish with reddish brown veins. Fragrant flowers (singular or clustered) hang down from the upper leaf axils. They appear mid-spring before or with the leaves and have six creamy white petals. The three inner petals have purplish markings. The edible fruit is oblong and yellowish green. This pawpaw occurs in pine flatwoods, coastal scrubs and sandhills in the central and southern part of the state.

Flag pawpaw (*Asimina obovata*) is a deciduous shrub reaching a height of nine feet. It has oblong leaves that are alternate and have toothless edges. The flowers appear in mid-spring after the leaves. The drooping flowers are fragrant, creamy white and have six petals. Usually found in clusters of two are yellowish green, oblong fruit. It occurs in sand pine scrub, pine flatwoods and coastal hammocks in central and south Florida.

We also have our own butterfly. The Florida leafwing (*Anaea floralis*) gets its common name because when they are upside down, they look like dead leaves. They have a small tail on their hind wings. Above they are bright red-orange and have dark markings along the edges and across the wings. The undersides of their forewings are yellowish and the undersides of their hindwings are brown with fine lines that are black. They are found in hammocks and woodland edges in south Florida and the Keys and have been occasionally seen as far north as Gainesville. They are endangered.



If we preserve their natural habitats, plants and animals endemic to Florida will thrive. If we continue to destroy their habitats more will become extinct. Our state is unlike any other. Let's keep it that way by preserving what was here before us. We owe it to ourselves and to the creatures with which we share our beautiful state.

by Cindy Conard

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