

Big Bend Critical Linkage

The Big Bend Critical Linkage is one of the most expansive and ecologically intact unprotected landscapes within the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) and the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Spanning approximately 454,965 acres and more than 100 miles of Gulf coastline, it represents a rare, continuous connection between upland and hydric forests, spring-fed rivers, tidal wetlands, and seagrass meadows. These diverse systems sustain water quality and quantity, support estuarine productivity, and provide essential ecosystem services, including aquifer recharge, flood storage, and storm protection. This contiguous coast-to-inland connection, made possible by the predominance of rural land use in the region, allows for natural landward migration of coastal species and communities in response to sea level rise, making this linkage one of Florida's most important strongholds for coastal retreat, thereby fostering resilience in the face of a changing climate.

Most of this critical linkage landscape is a mosaic wetland hardwood, coniferous swamp and extensive working timberlands. Timberlands within this linkage play a critical role in maintaining wildlife movement, supporting hydrological processes, and providing ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, flood storage, and aquifer recharge. Managed sustainably, these lands also hold long-term potential for restoration to native longleaf pine ecosystems, further strengthening the resilience of the corridor. The connectivity across this landscape supports a wide range of wildlife, including the Gulf sturgeon, Florida salt marsh vole, and Florida leaf-flower. The region also provides one of the most promising opportunities for reestablishing a breeding population of the endangered Florida panther by linking Apalachicola National Forest with Big Bend and northwestern Peninsula natural and working lands.

In addition to its ecological importance, the Big Bend linkage sustains cultural heritage and local economies deeply tied to its natural resources. The region is one of the most productive shellfish areas in the Gulf of Mexico, supporting commercial and small-scale fisheries for blue crab, shrimp, oysters, bay scallops, stone crabs, and hard clams. Clean water and healthy estuarine ecosystems are essential to the survival of these fisheries and to the working waterfront communities that depend on them. The Big Bend also supports extensive nature-based recreation, from scalloping and paddling across seagrass meadows to hiking, boating, and wildlife viewing in pine flatwoods, marshes, and swamps.

Protecting the Big Bend Critical Linkage will ensure functional connectivity across Florida's Nature Coast for wide-ranging and local species. Land conservation here provides opportunities for coast-to-inland migration, a key factor in resilience under a changing climate, while also preserving the rural character that allows both ecosystems and people to adapt to shifting conditions. Maintaining this largely undeveloped region is critical for the long-term integrity of the Florida Wildlife Corridor and for safeguarding one of the most wild and resilient coastal landscapes in the southeastern United States.



