

## **Ocala – Osceola Critical Linkage**

The Ocala–Osceola (O2O) Critical Linkage forms a nearly 100-mile connection across north Florida, within the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) and the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

Extending from Ocala National Forest through Camp Blanding Joint Training Center to Osceola National Forest, the linkage ties central Florida’s conservation lands to those northward into Georgia, including the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, which has been nominated for UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

The O2O supports more than 16 threatened and endangered species, including umbrella species whose protection safeguards a wide array of biodiversity. Florida black bear, southern fox squirrel, striped newt, gopher tortoise, red-cockaded woodpecker, Florida scrub-jay, and sand skink inhabit the region’s longleaf pine sandhills, scrub, mesic flatwoods, marshes, and swamps. The southern extent of the linkage encompasses high-quality sandhill, a rare white-cedar swamp, and sand pine scrub that is home to the only known site of the federally listed Etoniah rosemary. The linkage also offers suitable habitat for potential northward expansion of the Florida panther. Collectively, the linkage encompasses some of Florida’s highest-priority lands for biodiversity, landscape integrity, and rare species habitat.

Timberlands cover more than half of the unprotected lands between major forest and military reserves. These working forests provide habitat and connectivity for wildlife while also contributing ecosystem services such as timber production, carbon sequestration, and aquifer recharge. Compared to intensive agriculture or development, timberlands maintain ecological function and can be managed to mimic natural pineland ecosystems. The region includes much of the Florida Natural Areas Inventory’s highest-priority lands for sustainable forestry and restoration potential.

Hydrology defines much of the O2O landscape. Floodplains, basin swamp, baygall swamp, dome swamp and wet flatwoods are the predominant natural communities across the linkage. The corridor spans six major watersheds within the Floridan Aquifer and contains countless springs, from first-magnitude springs like Alexander Springs to smaller, seasonal flows. These water systems sustain drinking water supplies, endemic aquatic and subterranean species, and recreational economies. Hunting, fishing, paddling, and nature-based tourism centered on the O2O’s rivers and springs generate millions of dollars annually while reinforcing the ecological value of the region.

As a designated Sentinel Landscape, the O2O also demonstrates the intersection of conservation, working lands, and national defense. Military installations, particularly Camp Blanding, actively manage high-quality habitat that buffers operations while supporting biodiversity. More than 25 federal, state, and non-governmental partners contribute to land management across the corridor. The future success of the O2O will depend on continued collaboration with private landowners to connect conserved hubs and sustain one of Florida’s most ecologically significant and strategically located corridors.





