

SECTION 4. PUBLIC RECREATION

Public Access

Public access into the Preserve is through the one entrance road, Weedon Drive NE, and from the waters surrounding the island. Public access from the water is typically at the canoe launch and fishing pier.

The only paved roads at Weedon Island Preserve are Weedon Drive NE, which enters the Preserve and terminates at the pier, and the maintenance area access road, which terminates at the maintenance shop and the road to the WIPCNHC. Speed limits are posted and enforced to protect wildlife and visitors.

The Preserve hours of operation are 7:00 a.m. to the time posted at the entrance, typically 15 min. before sunset. The Preserve is open 363 days per year and closed to the public the day after Thanksgiving and on December 25th.

Visitation numbers for the Preserve are derived from a car counter located on the inbound lane located east of the emergency gate on Weedon Drive NE. PCR visitation is estimated separately for weekdays (number of cars x 2.5 people/car) and for weekends and Holidays (number of cars x 3.0 people/car). These estimates do not account for the number of bicyclists entering the Preserve. Visitation into the Preserve is presented in Table 5.

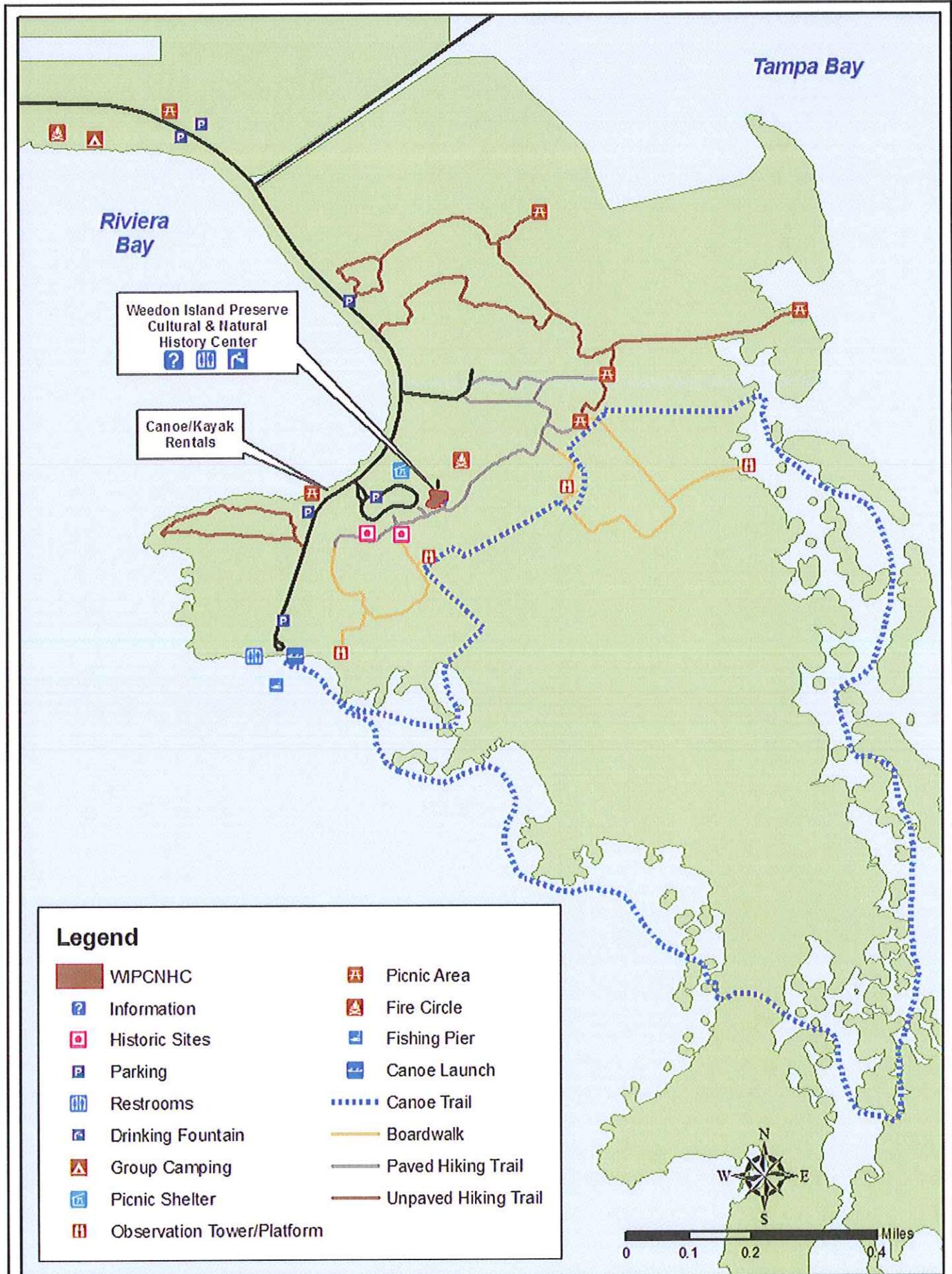
2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
148,373	177,505	214,773	183,685	167,588	245,876	240,267	217,892	246,425

Parking is permitted only in designated spaces. There are 15 parking spaces (1 handicapped) that line the road that leads to the canoe launch and pier. WIPCNHC has 105 (6 handicapped) parking spaces. There are 7 spaces at picnic area #1 and 4 spaces at the trailhead for the Boy Scout Trail. An additional 9 spaces are at the maintenance area. All parking spaces are paved.

The northern portion of the Preserve has no paved roads or designated public access. While it is not designated public access, the shoreline along the Feather Sound area is often used by boaters in Tampa Bay.

Public Recreation Facilities

Weedon Island Preserve is managed for the conservation and protection of natural and historical resources and for resource-based public outdoor recreation which is compatible with the conservation and protection of the Preserve. There are boardwalks, hiking trails, a canoe trail, an observation tower and a fishing pier in the Preserve which provide for hiking, nature viewing, and fishing in the Preserve (Figure 18). Ordinance 10-44 (Appendix 5) provides rules and regulations controlling the public's use of County Parks, Preserves and Management Areas.



Legend

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| WPCNHC | Picnic Area |
| Information | Fire Circle |
| Historic Sites | Fishing Pier |
| Parking | Canoe Launch |
| Restrooms | Canoe Trail |
| Drinking Fountain | Boardwalk |
| Group Camping | Paved Hiking Trail |
| Picnic Shelter | Unpaved Hiking Trail |
| Observation Tower/Platform | |

Figure 18. Weedon Island Preserve Amenities Map

To protect the natural and cultural resources and for visitor safety, all off-trail activity is prohibited unless authorized by PCR. Two possible activities to be permitted in the Preserve since the previous plan was update in 2002 were discussed. Geocaching, an outdoor treasure hunting game using Global Positioning System (GPS), was found to be incompatible with resource protection; unauthorized caches were found throughout the Preserve, often located at remote sites. Access to bicycles on trails was considered but determined to be incompatible with the protection of natural resources and the safety of trail users.

All vehicles (except baby carriages and wheelchairs) are prohibited on all trails. Vehicles, including bicycles, are restricted to Weedon Island Drive NE and the parking lot of the WIPCNHC. Bicycle racks are located at the trailheads with appropriate signage. To protect the natural resources and for visitor safety, some of the general rules for the Preserve prohibit the following:

- dogs and other pets
- alcoholic beverages
- fireworks
- release of any wildlife or domesticated animals

To minimize impacts to the Preserve, some parts of the trails also function as firebreaks. All trails are subject to temporary closure due to wildfires, prescribed burns, downed trees, and routine and emergency maintenance. Individual trail brochures, fliers and/or signs contain pertinent information, including rules, for each of the recreational areas.

Boardwalk and Tower

A 2-mi. handicap-accessible boardwalk meanders through the mosquito-ditched mangrove forests (Figure 17). There are three observation decks on the boardwalk, two which overlook tidal ponds and the other the tidal flats in Tampa Bay. A 45-ft. observation tower, also overlooking Tampa Bay, provides visitors a panoramic view Tampa Bay, St. Petersburg and Tampa areas.

In 2007, 20 interpretive educational signs were installed along the boardwalks and trails. The signs illustrate how various components of an ecosystem are inter-related and detail the importance of many of the natural resources.

In 2008, the boardwalk platform decking, handrail and tower were replaced with a composite lumber material. This \$1.3M project replaced 5,000 linear feet of decking, 3,000 square feet of boardwalk/platform decking and 12,600 linear feet of handrail.

Hiking Trails

The Preserve supports multiple hiking trails (Figure 18) Boy Scout Loop was developed with the assistance of local Boy Scouts of America troops. This 1-mi. unpaved trail loops through scrubby flatwoods, mosquito-ditched mangrove swamps, and maritime and xeric hammocks.

Another 1.7 mi. of trails is accessible from the main loop or from the WIPCNHC parking lot. Three picnic areas are located throughout the trails.

In 2009, a 0.27-mi. trail was cleared to connect to the existing 0.23-mi. trail which provides access to the shoreline of Riviera Bay. This trail demonstrates the cultural and natural significance of the Preserve, and transverses an ecologically diverse area. It also passes shell mound located on the point with visible shell scatter. Also on the mound top are four concrete mixed shell pilings from a 1940's airplane tracking tower. These cultural artifacts create the opportunity to convey information to visitors about the early inhabitants.

Paddling Trail

Until 2007 there were two paddling trails, a south trail and a north trail. The south trail is a 4-mi. loop that starts at the canoe launch. This trail is best accessed at mid to high tide, and meanders through the mosquito ditches, small mangrove islands, and along the edge of Tampa Bay. The north trail has been closed since 2007 due to limited resources. Access to the launch site was closed during construction of the PEF re-powering project, which restricted access to staff for trail maintenance. The trail is inaccessible for paddling at this time.

Fishing Pier and Canoe Launch

A 220-ft. pier, located at the southern end of Weedon Island Drive NE, provides a platform for saltwater fishing at the Preserve. Also provided at this location is a restroom facility, parking spaces, and a canoe washing station.

Located adjacent to the fishing pier is a canoe/kayak launch and floating dock. The south paddling trail and other destinations are accessible from this launch site. The floating dock provides short-term dockage for small boats.

PCR has a contract vendor, Sweetwater Kayaks Outdoors, LLC, that provides rental of canoes and kayaks (Appendix 16). With limited space at the canoe/kayak launch, a reserved launch site is provided to Sweetwater for weekend rentals from 9:00 AM to closing hours of the Preserve (Figure 18). For weekday rentals, Sweetwater provides on-call service from 11:00 AM to closing hours of the Preserve and regularly launch at the canoe/kayak launch located adjacent to the fishing pier.

Camping

Limited group camping is available along the shoreline of Riviera Bay and west of Weedon Drive (Figure 18) on County-owned property in the Preserve. Groups are required to complete a service project to obtain permission to use this primitive camp site. A fire circle has been installed for the convenience and safety of campers.

Maintenance

Maintenance of the trails, boardwalks and public use areas is the responsibility of PCR staff. The PCR Countywide Horticulture Operations is responsible for maintaining mowed areas and fire breaks in the Preserve. Volunteers support maintenance of trails by trimming overgrown vegetation.

Rangers patrol the Preserve a minimum of two times per day provide daily garbage removal and cleaning of the restroom facilities and picnic shelter. Visitors can also report maintenance issues directly to staff or through the County's "SeeClickFix" program. Maintenance needed to public use structures is reported PCR Trades by the Rangers patrolling the trails and boardwalks. The Trades crews complete repairs of boardwalks, fishing pier, restroom facilities and picnic shelter.

The Operations Division of the County's Department of Real Estate Management is responsible for maintenance of WIPCNHC.

Future Public Use

On-going efforts will focus on maintaining existing public access and uses of the Preserve. No new public uses proposed at this time. The existing trails have minimized the impacts to the natural communities while maximizing the public utilization. To improve existing facilities, staff will explore opportunities to add additional trail segments to the South Paddling Trail in conjunction with the Weedon Island South mosquito ditch restoration project.