

WORTH THE TRIP

Robinson Preserve offers unspoiled beauty an hour from home

BY PATRICIA HORWELL

Town Chronicle Correspondent

When you need to get away from it all, Manatee County's Robinson Preserve is just the place for relaxation and contemplation.

Only about an hour away from southern Sarasota County, the preserve includes pristine waters and more than 600 acres of coastal grasslands, saltern, marsh and mangrove habitat.

The property features miles of flat trails that are easily traversed on foot, with a wheelchair or on a bicycle.

Depending on where in the preserve you are (and what time of day you visit) you might see a variety of rare wildlife — including roseate spoonbills, wood storks, bald eagles, osprey and more — in their natural environment.

Birdsong is everywhere. We saw or listened to any number of ducks, osprey, northern cardinals, blue jays, fish crows, killdeer, red-shouldered hawks and marsh wrens. Leaping fish were stalked by egrets, herons and pelicans.

A vast assortment of plants, including saltwort, sea bite, glasswort, smooth cordgrass and succulent sea purslane are part of the landscape here, as well as red and black mangroves and other plantings that attract bees and butterflies.

There are two ways to enter the park. Use the north entrance to access the his-



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ABOVE LEFT: The historic Valentine House, moved from its prior location, serves as the Visitors Center. Although it is only open sporadically (days and hours are listed on the website), the restrooms are open during park hours. **ABOVE RIGHT:** You run into a different kind of traffic at Robinson Preserve.

toric Valentine House, bee and butterfly gardens and the tower. Use the south entrance to visit the expansion and the NEST and canopy zone. The NEST (an acronym for the Mosaic Center for Nature, Exploration, Science and Technology) is home to hands-on activities for all ages. It's only open from 9 a.m.-noon on select Saturdays. But the canopy zone is open every day from sunrise to sunset.

Climb the 40-foot-tall observation tower for a view of four counties and five water bodies. Visitors may cycle or inline skate on 2.5 miles of paved trail, and hikers can explore more than 5 miles of shell and coastal trails.

Robinson Preserve affords kayakers 2.5 miles of waterways to navigate through mangrove tunnels, marshes and more.

We entered from the north and hiked about 1.5 miles each way to the observa-

tion tower. Visitors should wear a head covering and use plenty of sunscreen, since there is no tree cover on that pathway. Wear sturdy walking or hiking shoes. Once you get past the trailhead, there is no more access to drinking water. There is also no option to purchase any. It's best to bring your own to remain hydrated. Picnic tables and restrooms are available at each end of the preserve.







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Robinson Preserve does rent kayak storage tubes for the season, although there is a waiting list. There are 40 kayak storage tubes at the north entrance and 120 at the south entrance. Storage tube rentals are \$480 per year, plus tax. Renters pay annually and are allowed to renew for up to five years. Tubes are 20 feet deep by 3 feet in diameter. The upper tubes are 4.5 feet off the ground. Join the waitlist on the preserve website.

Individual camping is not permitted, but group camping is permitted by reservation. The cost for one overnight stay is currently \$90 per group of 25 people. At

least one adult older than 21 is required for every 10 children under 12 years old. To reserve a campground or for more information, call 941-742-5923.

Several providers rent kayaks and paddleboards and conduct tours at the reserve. All reservations must be made in advance, as there is no option to rent on the day of your visit. Surferbus.com offers kayak and paddleboard rentals and tours. Getupandgokayaking.com offers tours in clear kayaks, which allows paddlers to view what's below the vessel.

Robinson Preserve is open from sunrise to sunset and admission is free. You

can't ask for a better deal than that to bask in a little of Florida's natural magic. 🌞

Robinson Preserve

- **Where:** Sunrise to sunset
- **Where:** North entrance, 1704 99th St. N.W., Bradenton; south entrance, 10299 9th Ave. N.W., Bradenton.
- **Cost:** Free
- **Info:** www.mymanatee.org/departments/natural_resources/preserves/robinson, 941-742-5923



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The gazebo is at the north entrance of the preserve. Butterfly and bee gardens are here.



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