

# Florida Mangroves: Cradle of Life

*Story and photography by Robert La Follette*

One of Florida's most treasured natural resource is our mangroves. They play an important role in our ecosystem and provide a wealth of protection and life that is often overlooked, which has been devastating to its survival.

When early settlers came to Florida, mangroves were considered a wasteland, for they provided little to no resources as opposed to farmland and other landscapes. Today, they are now recognized as a vital component to our environment, and provide a wealth of natural resources that we depend on. Mangroves provide two of the most basic items for survival for animals: food and shelter.

Mangroves are the foundation of life for many animals as they begin their life, as they provide shelter and protection from predators as they develop from juveniles to adults. Many of the commercially important fish begin their lives in the mangroves, such as snapper, snook, mullet, seatrout, redfish as well as other animals such as shrimp, oysters, and blue crabs. Even predators use the mangroves to bear their young such as hammerheads, snakes, and the American crocodile.



Since the mangroves are so dense and virtually impossible to penetrate, they are the perfect nurseries for many of these animals, since they also provide shelter from the hot Florida sun, and also providing a bounty of food for them during their early development of life.

A rich compost of nutrients called "marine compost" from insect and bird droppings, leaf litter and twigs that fall into the water around the mangroves are broken down by microorganisms which then fuel the growth of algae, fungi and bacteria that provide the foundation for larger life that inhabit the mangroves.

Many of our resident birds use the mangroves for nesting and raising their young in the canopies, such as brown pelicans, as well as many herons and egrets such as the little blue heron, great white heron, tri-colored heron and snowy and cattle egrets. Oystercatchers are commonly found around the mangroves, for it is not uncommon for large oyster bars to form along the mangroves, providing them with their specialized diet.

Also migratory birds such as warblers depend on the mangroves for food and shelter during their migration, and without them, many would perish from the world around us. Many of these birds feed solely on the insects, such as mosquitoes, dragonflies, noseems, water bugs and many others that also inhabit the mangroves, and the rich and vast amounts of these insects are vital to their survival. Some of these insects are so dependant on the mangroves themselves, many species are only found in mangroves, and many





have evolved to look the twigs and leaves they live in.

Some species of animals also depend mangroves, and these special species can only be found in mangroves in Florida. Such species such as the mangrove crab, mangrove snake, stone crab, fiddler crab and periwinkle snail thrive in this environment, and without them, will perish.

Humans also benefit from mangroves, for they provide the “first line of defense” from hurricanes and rising waters. Mangroves stabilize the soil along the coastline, capturing pollution and waste from entering the waters. They also serve as windscreens

and act as a buffer that could damage or destroy our coastline.

In Florida, there are four species of mangroves that can be found along our coastline. Because of our latitude, mangroves thrive from central to south Florida. Very few however if any can be found north of Tampa Bay on the gulf coast and Brevard County on the east coast.

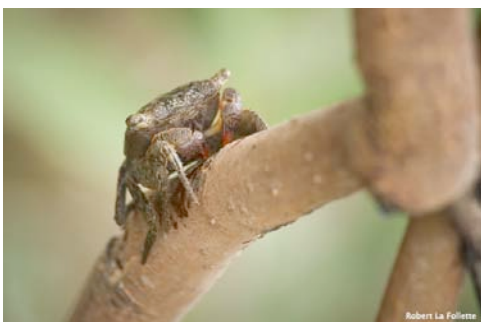
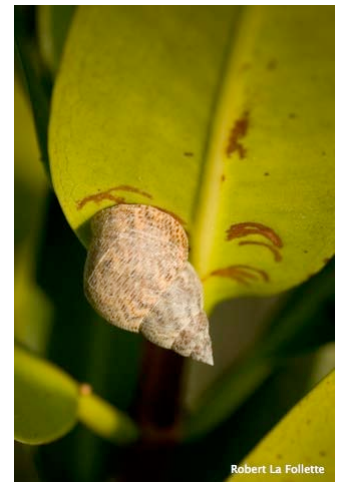
Because of that range, it is estimated that there are between 400,000 – 600,000 acres currently in this range, however this number was much greater before the coastal development for they were destroyed or severely altered.



Of the four species, the most common that many will recognize is the Red Mangrove. These trees are always found along the water, and are easily recognized by their prop roots that shoot out of the water.

These mangroves are often called “walking trees”, since they can and will “move” laterally towards the deeper waters. The other types of mangrove trees that can be found are the Black Mangrove, White Mangrove and Buttonwood Mangrove tree.

The most amazing feat of the mangrove tree is in it’s ability to tolerate saltwater. This is crucial for its survival, since it allows them to flourish in an environment that few others can, so it dominates the coastline landscape. They perform this amazing feat by blocking the absorption of salt at their roots and will expel it through its leaves. Because of this salt on those leaves, it also serves as a natural repellent against disease and plant eaters.



Mangroves propagate through fruit-like seedlings that develop while still on the tree, and then will drop into the waters below. These seedlings will hitchhike on the waters currents until they find a new shore or open area along the coast. Because of their shape, they are perfect to float on the waters, some up to a year, and are also resistant to

salt. When they hit a soft mud, they will stand upright and begin to sprout roots and a new tree has begun.

The biggest threat facing the survival to mangroves today is from development. It is estimated that humans worldwide have destroyed more acres of mangroves than any other coastal ecosystem. Some of these threats are trimming, as well as oil spills, waste and complete removal of these delicate ecosystems.



Today in Florida, mangroves are now protected and regulated by the state to stop the destruction and loss of this precious resource. This in part has brought back the mangroves to a remarkable recovery, and making Florida a natural resource as it once was. So the next time you are along our coastline and see these trees, take a moment to explore them, for they offer a wealth of interesting and amazing feats that only Florida mangroves can.

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### ***About Robert La Follette:***

Since 1989, Robert La Follette has been working as a graphic designer and professional photographer. His photos have won numerous awards and have appeared in Shutterbug, Informant Guest, People, National Geographic Kids, Country Living and Creation Magazines.

La Follette is also a contributing award-winning writer and photographer for Florida Wildlife Magazine, where his article and photographs for "Wildlife Photography 101: 10 Tips For Success" was awarded the "Charlie Award" for writing excellence from the State of Florida and Florida Magazine Association. Robert's article and photography on the Florida Mangroves has also been adopted into classroom and research material for it's extensive research and documentation on the Florida Mangroves ecosystem.

Robert was awarded "Best of Show" at the Boyd Hill Nature Photography Contest in St. Petersburg, Florida. He has also been featured on "i On Tampa Bay" for ION Television Network that showcased his wildlife photography. His work has also been featured on CNN for his story about a Sea Turtle release on Clearwater Beach, as well as for his work on photographing a pair of rare White Tiger cubs on ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX and several newspapers including the St. Petersburg Times, Tampa Tribune and Sarasota Herald-Tribune.

Robert's photography also appears around Tampa Bay, most notably with the Tampa Bay Convention and Visitors Bureau as well as Visit St. Petersburg/Clearwater, where his images showcases the beauty and attractions that make Tampa Bay a world-renowned vacation destination. In addition, Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo and Clearwater Marine Aquarium uses Robert's photography for its beauty and his unique ability to capture their wildlife that is used in their marketing and promotional materials. To view more of Robert's award-winning photography, please visit [www.robertlafollette.com](http://www.robertlafollette.com).