

# Shell Mound Trail

## Before Written History

Before pottery, before the pyramids of Egypt, before the European invasion there was Shell Mound. With its construction spanning over three thousand years, Shell Mound can reveal changes in lifeways of the people who fished and hunted here. Prospects to discover more about Shell Mound and its builders disappear daily as erosion and looting degrade the site. **Staying on the trail will help protect this chapter of our shared human heritage.**

## What Is a Midden?

All the shell you see beneath your feet was placed here 6,000 years ago. Early native cultures recycled their debris (leftover mollusk shells, bones, broken tools) in order to fortify the mud flats where they lived and raised their families. Archaeologists agree that most of the Gulf Coast was manipulated in this way by early peoples as long ago as 7,000 years.

Stabilizing the mudflats allowed ancient fishermen to throw their cast nets and push their dugouts off the shoreline without sinking into the muck formed by settling river sediment from the Suwannee River and tidal creeks. Once fortified, more permanent dwellings could be set about the midden and the clan became more sedentary, not having to travel for food.

## Why a Mound?

In 2003 as many as three hurricanes hit this coastal estuary and flooded much of the midden. The only dry ground was that of the rising twenty-eight foot tall, five-acre heap of shell we call Shell Mound. Such flood-waters would have driven ancient humans upward into the alluring breezes that altitude provides. Thus, upon the midden was built the mound.

This timeworn monument was once larger than today. Mid-century, prior to U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service ownership, much of the mound was carried off in dump trucks for Florida's road-bed construction. The scars of that process remain today. Concerned citizens rescued the mound for future generations' appreciation.

## Walk the Past

As you take the 0.3 mile loop across this ancient site, notice the plants that flourish in the calcium-rich mound: wild coffee, snowberry, Christmas berry, coontie and cedars. Relish the same bird's-eye view of the salt marsh that the ancients did so long ago. A spectacular panorama of sparkling Gulf waters can be enjoyed from a bench atop the mound.

## Enjoy the Present

For a longer hike, take the adjacent Dennis Creek Trail, an easy 1-mile loop crossing a rare salt barren and winding through a coastal island. Breathe-in the sweet aromatic wafts of the vanilla plant (*carphophorous*) growing profusely along the trail. Experience the marshes firsthand by paddling from the convenient launch area where you'll also find a fishing pier accessible year-round. You'll see white ibis, herons, egrets and the wonderful variety of shorebirds as you enjoy the past and present at the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge.