Welcome to Lower Tampa Bay! South Tampa Bay offers recreational opportunities, spectacular species, and multiple birding hotspots. This guide is produced by Audubon Florida, we hope that this guide, produced by Audubon Florida, will increase your awareness and appreciation of the bay waters, islands, shorelines, birds and other wildlife, and the special places of the bay.

Special Places

The Bob Graham Sunshine Skyway Bridge: spans Lower Tampa Bay with a cable-stayed main span and a total length of 4.1 miles as follows: Highway 600 (SR 600), US Highway 41, US Highway 133, and State Road 675. It connects St. Petersburg in Pinellas County and Terra Ceia in Manatee County. This overall 4,423-foot bridge is a $1.314 billion project that replaced an older bridge that was partly destroyed in 1998 when a freighter struck a manatee. The steel cables (made of 89,364 individual wires) keep the bridge from falling into Tampa Bay. The bridge is operational 24 hours a day.

The Skyway Fishing Pier State Park: comprised of the piers at the old Skyway Bridge and extending 0.25 miles into the bay. At the Skyway Fishing Pier State Park, you will catch the largest fish in the state. It is a popular destination for serious anglers and a great place for families to enjoy a day of fishing. The Skyway Pier is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year, for fishing, boating, and sightseeing.

The Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve: encompasses state-owned submerged lands and shallow waters along the Terra Ceia Bay north of the Skyway Bridge. The Preserve is state-designated as an Outstanding Florida Water. It is a significant sea grass habitat and supports a diverse community of fish, invertebrates, and marine mammals, including sea birds, manatees, and sea turtles. The Preserve provides habitat for many migratory birds and access to the Manatee Preserve. The Preserve is open to the public and is a great place for birding and nature watching.

The Terra Ceia Preserve State Park: bordered by the City of Terra Ceia and Terra Ceia Bay, this 2,357-acre wildlife refuge, includes 1,933 acres of upland areas adjacent to the Preserve.

Audubon’s Nina Griffin Washburn Bird Sanctuary and Terra Ceia Little Bird Key (also known as Rich and Paul Bird Sanctuary) are connected and provide nesting habitat for thousands of birds in many species, including pelicans, anhinga, cormorants, herons, egrets, and various shorebirds. The sanctuary is protected by Audubon Florida’s Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve.

Emerson Point Preserve: a 365-acre Manatee County preserve located at the west end of Spread Island and the mouth of Terra Ceia Bay and the Manatee River. This area is designated State Aquatic Preserve and is part of the U.S. National Registry of Historic Places. The Preserve offers passive recreation opportunities and protection for theproxy-National Audubon American colonies and mudflats dating back to 200,000 years ago, which are home to many species of birds and marine animals. Many birds are found nesting in fishing gear on the island. The island is owned by the State of Florida and managed as part of the Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve. The Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve is managed by Audubon’s Florida Coastal Islands Sanctuary.

Tarpon by Jim Gray.

Lionfish: introduced to the southeast U.S. from the S. American species to control the Indo-Pacific lionfish population.

Common Loon: sometimes called “sea coo”, manatees are large, cylindrical-shaped marine mammals with flat tails and small fins. They are native to South America and are found in Tampa Bay during the winter months. They are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Brown Pelican: a large bird with a distinctive red gular sac that it inflates to impress a female. Photo by Tom Bell.

Brown Pelican by Mac Stone.

Reddish Egret: the reddish egret is one of North America’s and one of Florida’s most colorful waterbirds with colors ranging from pale pink to deep red. It is a common sight along the coast and in wetlands throughout the state. The reddish egret is the state bird of Florida.

Reddish Egret by Michael Gäbler.

Lionfish by Michael Gäbler.

Other Egrets & Herons: yellow, red, and Tricolored Herons are all on the list of birds that can be found during the spring and fall seasons.

Snook by Jim Gray: a favorite target for fisherman in the lower Tampa Bay area. The snook is a saltwater gamefish that is a popular target for anglers.

Tarpon by Jim Gray.

Lionfish by Michael Gäbler.

Manatee Key: a 60-acre manatee conservation area located in Port Manatee, the original manatee conservancy area. The Manatee Key is home to many species of marine animals, including manatees, dolphins, and sea turtles.

Manatee Key by Kimball Love.

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