

# **SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF THE SWAMPWALK BOARDWALK**

*Just across the parking lot from Camp Salmen's Main Picnic Pavilion is the entrance to the Swampwalk Boardwalk. As you descend into the swampy bottomland fringing Bayou Liberty (the park's western boundary) you'll note the dramatic changes in geology and surrounding plant life. It's only about four miles from Lake Pontchartrain so the area periodically floods when the lake's level rises.*

Just past the leaning **Live Oak** (*Quercus virginiana*) is a small **Pond**. When water rises in the bayou fish swim past the cypress knees at the pond's opening and hunt in the flooded swamp. If the water stays too long in the swamp it becomes a brown "swamp tea" and if the fish don't get back to the bayou fast enough when the water falls they can get stuck in stagnant water and asphyxiate.

On the left are **Giant Blue Iris** (*Iris giganticaerulea*) that have lovely violet-blue blossoms with yellow accents in the spring. These are one of five colorful Louisiana Iris varieties. They sprout from clumps of tall, wide green blades.

**Spider Lilys** (*Hymenocallis caroliniana*) have elaborate, white springtime flowers that look just like their name suggests. These also grow from clumps of tall, wide green blades.

**Bald Cypress Trees** (*Taxodium distichum*) are a Louisiana icon with Spanish moss hanging from their branches and a little family of "knees" at their base. The exact purpose of these knees remains a mystery but theories suggest they may contribute to the trees stability in the mud and/or its absorption of atmospheric gasses.

**Spanish Moss** (*Tillandsia usneoides*) isn't a moss at all but a type of bromeliad. It has no roots and pretty much lives off air, rainwater and trace minerals leaching from the host tree. It rarely grows in big enough clumps to harm its host.

**Dwarf Palmetto Palms** (*Sabal minor*) are clusters of big, star-shaped leaves that grow on the slightly elevated parts of the swamp floor. Both Native Americans and early European travelers used them to help guide them through the boggy Louisiana landscape. Cajuns and natives also used the plant's tough, fibrous fronds in baskets and to roof their huts and cabins. In the fall, look for clusters of dark berries bourn on tall stalks, a favorite food for birds and mammals.

**Eastern Grey Squirrels** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) are shifty-eyed, compulsive and paranoid, known to hide seeds, nuts and berries in thousands of locations in a season, actually faking this activity if they think someone is watching. They spend summer and fall rifling cypress and pine trees, leaving a mess of sticky half-chewed cypress balls, pine bark, needles, seeds and stripped pine cones discarded on the boardwalk.

**Lizard Tail** (*Saururus cernuus*) has a curious, curved white blossom alongside distinctive, arrow-shaped leaves. In spring these look like a profusion of white question marks growing low on the swamp.

**Blue-tailed Skinks** (*Eumeces fasciatus*) If you're lucky, you'll spot one of these basking in the sun, wearing its suit of bronze with elegant, yellow pinstripes and trailing a vivid, iridescent-blue tail. Sometimes older males even sport a noble red head. They can disappear in the blink of an eye and might leave you wondering, "Did I just see what I thought I just saw?"

**Blackberry bushes** (*Rubus fruticosus*). Botanists say these don't have thorns but instead have "prickles." Right. If you reach into their brambles to pick their tempting fruit, the plant will retaliate by clawing at your flesh. These thorns also help the plant grab onto its surroundings and hold it up to sun. In spring it yields clusters of sweet, tart "aggregate fruit" made of little, round "drupelets."

In the fall it's questionable if the weird clusters of light purple berries growing from the stalks of the **French Mulberry** (a.k.a. Beautyberry, a.k.a. *Callicarpa Americana*) are worth humans eating them but raccoons, 'possums and birds like them just fine.

**Red Swamp Maple** (*Acer rubrum*), with their broad, three-pointed leaves, are the swamp's most popular tree. They begin and end every growing season in spectacular fashion by showing the first color at the end of winter with thousands of red "whirlygig" seeds and then they go out in a blaze of scarlet fall foliage.

**Bayou Liberty** is approximately 20 feet deep off of the viewing platform. It began about ten miles upstream and flows into Lake Pontchartrain, a little more than four miles away (almost ten winding bayou miles). It probably emerged about two million years ago after the ocean receded from the Gulf Coastal plain. Native Americans used it for centuries then the French began to settle on its banks in the early 1700s and began the Creole community of Bonfouca.

