

# **Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park Homosassa, Florida**

*Join us*

*Monday February 19, 2024*

*To view the Manatees and more....*

**9:00-6:00**

When we looked into the likely weather mid-February in Florida, we did not see beach weather. It has been a bit of an unusual 'winter' here and rather than plan a beach day that will be rainy, drizzly and raw, we decided to visit the manatees that know best how to come in from the cold Gulf waters.

There are a number of places to see sheltering manatees, but we selected a state park where you will have the opportunity to observe a variety of Florida's native wildlife. You might enjoy watching the feeding of many manatees hiding out from colder water. You will want to spend time roaming this small park that features captive animals such as alligators, black bear, red wolf, Key deer, and more. All of the animals in the park are unable to survive in the wild due to various reasons. There is some walking involved, but this small park is a great venue to support and visit.

In the early 1900, the Homosassa Springs was a popular train stop. Passengers could have a picnic lunch and take a dip in the springs while train cars were being loaded with cedar, crabs, fish and spring water. In 1924, Bruce Hoover from Chicago made a trip on the Homosassa River and called it, "The most beautiful river and springs in the world." Mr. Hoover built a bridge over the springs for viewing. It is referred to as "The Fish Bowl". An enormous number of fish still congregate in the natural spring bowl. The Underwater Observatory, a unique structure, allows visitors to walk underwater, beneath the springs' surface to watch fish and manatee swim. You can gaze into the depths of the spring and view the fish and manatees in their natural habitat.

We will depart The Villages at 9:00am, a little later than usual for our trip to the springs. Our drive is approximately one hour. There is no need to bring any beach gear. We will arrive at the park around 10:00am. Then you are free to roam the park for hiking, bird watching, viewing manatees, and extraordinary wildlife. Oh...there are also breakfast & lunch options if you are so inclined.

The discounted park entrance fee is included in your trip fee. You may also take a boat tour on Pepper Creek for \$3. The boat tour starts at the visitor center and travels to the west entrance of the park.

Manatee programs are **daily 11 am-1 pm**. You may view them on the bleacher overlooking the Fish Bowl Underwater Observatory.

The park includes a wildlife walk and paved trails for viewing. The boardwalk allows an elevated view into their natural habitats and provides rain shelters along the way. They are accessible for visitors in wheelchairs, as well.

The Fish Bowl Underwater Observatory floats in the mainsprings to allow an up-close view of the spring, the fish, and the manatees. A live feed television screen is located on the sundeck allowing visitors to view fish and manatees from an underwater perspective.

The park is also an excellent site for bird watching. The Pepper Creek Birding Trail runs from the visitor center parking area along the tram road and loops through the parking areas at Fish Bowl Drive and returns via a boat ride along Pepper Creek. A 1.10 mile paved trail also winds throughout the park.

There are two restaurants located in the park:

**The Wildside Cafe:** open for breakfast and lunch; serving salads and sandwiches;  
<https://www.restaurantji.com/fl/homosassa/wildside-caf-/>.

**The Pepper Grill:** open for breakfast and lunch. Breakfast is served until 1pm.  
<https://homosassaspringwildlife.com/menu/>.

There are picnic areas in the park, so if you prefer to pack your own lunch (or pick it up from Publix), that is also an option for you.

You won't want to miss a visit with **Lulu** (short for Lucifer). He just celebrated his 64<sup>th</sup> birthday on January 26<sup>th</sup>. He is one of the oldest living hippos in the world.

Before we head back to The Villages, we will make a stop at **Tampa's Premium Outlet Mall** located in the heart of Wesley Chapel. You may enjoy over 110 shops including Coach, J Crew, Michael Kors, and much more. For a full listing, <https://www.premiumoutlets.com/outlet/tampa/stores>. There are delicious options at Market Hall, including Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen, Johnny Rockets, Bahama Breeze, Bonefish, Miller's Ale, Cheddar's Scratch Kitchen, Longhorn, Carrabbas and more. We'll be there in plenty of time to enjoy any Happy Hour specials!

## DINNER:

**Aussie Grill:** An Outback fast food restaurant ; <https://www.aussiegrill.com/menu>

**Bahama Breeze:** Caribbean chain with Caribbean fare and cocktails;  
[https://www.bahamabreeze.com/menu/entrees/seafood?setRestaurant=3060&cmpid=br:bbag:ie\\_ch:loc\\_ca:BBGMB\\_sn:gmb\\_gt:lutz-fl-3060\\_pl:menu\\_rd:1039](https://www.bahamabreeze.com/menu/entrees/seafood?setRestaurant=3060&cmpid=br:bbag:ie_ch:loc_ca:BBGMB_sn:gmb_gt:lutz-fl-3060_pl:menu_rd:1039)

**Bonefish Grill:** Seafood; <https://locations.bonefishgrill.com/florida/lutz/25264-sierra-center-blvd>

**Carrabba's Italian Grill:** <https://www.carrabbas.com/order/menu/wesley-chapel>.

**Cheddars:** American restaurant chain;  
[https://www.cheddars.com/menu/comfort-food?setRestaurant=2122&cmpid=br:csk\\_ag:ie\\_ch:loc\\_ca:CSKGMB\\_sn:gmb\\_gt:lutz-fl-2122\\_pl:menu\\_rd:1096](https://www.cheddars.com/menu/comfort-food?setRestaurant=2122&cmpid=br:csk_ag:ie_ch:loc_ca:CSKGMB_sn:gmb_gt:lutz-fl-2122_pl:menu_rd:1096).

**Chuy's:** Tex Mex; <https://www.chuys.com/menu/food> .

**Ford's Garage:** American bar food; <https://fordsgarageusa.com/menu-tier-1-sys/?location=wesley-chapel>.

**Miller's Ale House:** A sports pub chain with snacks, steaks, and tap beer;  
<https://millersalehouse.com/menu/>.

**Walk-On's Sports Bistro:** A sports bar with a large menu;  
<https://walk-ons.com/menu>.

We will board the bus at 5:00pm to begin our one hour ride to The Villages.