

### ***13. Sloughs***

A slough is a type of swamp (swamps are forested wetlands) that is best-defined as a wide, shallow, seasonal stream. Sloughs are long depressed areas found in prairies and flatwoods. Sloughs are sometimes called strands. They are found in flat areas that are underlain with sand or limestone. Sloughs tend to be seasonal with the greatest amount of water in them during the summer wet season. They act as nature's ditches, collecting rainwater from surrounding systems (prairies and flatwoods) and shedding that water into other wetlands such as rivers, creeks or lakes.

Sloughs can have a variety of trees found within them. Some dominated by pond cypress are called Cypress Sloughs. Others may have a diverse mixture of hardwoods such as red maple, American elm, pop ash and oaks. Sloughs also contain smaller trees such as dahoon holly, wax myrtle, and fetterbush. Like all swamps, sloughs are very diverse with air plants such as goldfoot fern, shoestring fern, cardinal air plant, needle air plant and others. Since sloughs are fairly flat and water is distributed evenly throughout, sloughs lack the center openness of cypress domes.

Many animals make homes within sloughs, including herons, limpkins, anhingas, spiders, water snakes and many frogs. Animals such as foxes, deer, hogs, hawks and owls will use sloughs for refuge from midday heat, while others, like panthers, alligators and otters use sloughs as travel corridors between breeding, hunting and home grounds.

Sloughs have a hydro-period of about 6 months with late summer and early fall being the wettest times of a normal year. Sloughs are sometimes burned as surrounding prairies and flatwoods burn. Sloughs burn every 20 to 40 years. In wet years, sloughs act as firebreaks preventing fire from spreading from one system to another on the other side.

Sloughs are an important part of the Florida watershed since sloughs collect water from surrounding systems and flow it into other wetland areas. Sloughs help clean water as it travels over the slough floor and plants that absorb many nutrients and harmful chemicals. Roots and dropped leaves stain the water and add tannic acid just as tea leaves do, leaving clear but dark tea-colored water clean enough to drink – if you're very thirsty!

Sloughs are also vital as wildlife travel corridors. Many species use the protective cover of a slough to travel from one ecosystem or area to another. The protective corridors are vital to healthy reproduction, growth, and health of not only wildlife but also the environment as a whole.