

## MANGROVES

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Mangroves are trees that can live near salt water. They protect the coasts by keeping sand from washing away and breaking the force of strong waves caused by storms. Mangroves also make new land by trapping sand and leaves brought in by the tide. Mangrove seeds sprout before they drop from the trees so they can float to another shore where they will grow. Mangrove roots offer hiding places for young fish and shellfish. Their branches are homes for different birds. A rookery is where many birds build their nests in the trees.

## Section 7: Caloosahatchee National Wildlife Refuge

On Interstate 75, cars and trucks roar across the bridges. On the river's north shore, the interstate cuts through the Caloosahatchee Creeks Preserve. The mangrove islands nearby form the Caloosahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

Nick stands in the water near the mangroves. A lizard runs along a branch. A breeze rustles the cabbage palms and sea grapes that grow at the island's center.

Two white egrets and a great blue heron hunt for fish. In the water, three pelicans have eaten and are resting.

The breeze blows again. Nick watches a mangrove leaf fall. Beneath it, he sees many leaves sunk in the water. They are caught in the prop roots of the mangrove. As the water moves, they are ground into smaller and smaller pieces. Animals too small to see live on and eat these bits. Tiny shrimp and baby fish feed on them.

A Styrofoam cup bobs between the roots. A bead of Styrofoam breaks free. It mixes with the leaf bits. If something eats the bead, it could get sick.

A fiddler crab runs across the sand. Nick stabs for it but misses. He stalks across the sand. His footprints join those of crabs, ibis and gulls.