

## About This Guide

This guide includes a map of coastal waters of Lemon Bay, Charlotte Harbor, the Myakka and Peace Rivers, and Pine Island Sound that depicts seagrasses, artificial reefs, parks and preserves, fishing piers, marinas, and boat ramps open to the public. Also featured is information on habitats and animals, popular sport fish, boating safety and protocol, and a resource directory.

The Boating and Angling to Charlotte Harbor was produced by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Please address any comments to, or request additional copies of this guide from:

**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**  
Fish and Wildlife Research Institute  
100 Eighth Avenue S.E., St. Petersburg, FL 33701  
MyFWC.com/BoatingGuides  
boating\_guides@MyFWC.com

**Charlotte County UF/IFAS Extension**  
Florida Sea Grant  
25550 Harbor View Rd #3, Port Charlotte, Florida 33980  
http://charlotte.ifas.ufl.edu/seagrant  
info@seagrant.org

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All photographs courtesy of FWC, unless otherwise specified.



## A Boating and Angling Guide to

# Charlotte Harbor



Historic fish house in Gulf Bay, Florida Sea Grant



Charlotte Harbor, Boca Grande Pass, Cayo Costa, Gasparilla Island, Cape Haze, and Big Pine Island from the International Space Station, NASA

## Resource Directory

<b>Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission</b>	<b>1-888-404-FWCC (3922)</b>
<b>Wildlife Alert Hotline</b>	<b>*FWC</b>
<b>Cell Phones</b>	<b>863-548-3288</b>
<b>Law Enforcement (Lakeland)</b>	<b>863-548-3288</b>
To report oil spills, marine violations, boating accidents, and marine mammal injuries or strandings. Information also available on saltwater fishing and shellfish harvesting.	
<b>Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (St. Petersburg)</b>	<b>727-896-8626</b>
For information on Florida's marine resources and marine research	
<b>Marine Fish Kill Hotline</b>	<b>1-800-636-0511</b>
To report a fish kill or red tide event in your area	
<b>U.S. Coast Guard</b>	
<b>Rescue Station (24 hr. emergency service)</b>	<b>VHF channel 16</b>
<b>Marine Safety Office</b>	<b>(727) 924-3534</b>
<b>National Response Center</b>	<b>1-800-424-8802</b>
To report oil spills and maritime emergencies	
<b>Boat U.S. Foundation Hotline</b>	<b>1-800-336-80AT</b>
For information on boating skills and safety courses offered locally	<b>(336-2628)</b>
<b>NOAA Weather Service Broadcast</b>	<b>813-645-2323</b>
Venice	<b>162.400 MHz/VHF radio</b>
Fort Myers	<b>162.475 MHz/VHF radio</b>
<b>State Parks</b>	
<b>Charlotte Harbor Preserve</b>	<b>941-676-5861</b>
<b>Stump Pass Beach, Don Pedro Island, Gasparilla Island, Cayo Costa</b>	<b>941-964-0373</b>
For more information about Florida's state parks	
<b>Aquatic Preserves</b>	
<b>Lemon Bay, Cape Haze, Gasparilla Sound-Charlotte Harbor</b>	<b>941-575-5861</b>
For more information about Florida's protected coastal waters	
<b>National Wildlife Refuges</b>	
<b>Pine Island Sound, Matlacha Pass, Island Bay</b>	<b>239-472-1100</b>
For information about National Wildlife Refuges around Charlotte Harbor	
<b>Florida Sea Grant Marine Extension Program</b>	
<b>Charlotte County</b>	<b>941-764-4340</b>
Conducts research and education programs on conservation of marine resources	
<b>Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program</b>	<b>239-338-2556</b>
Partnership program implementing long-range master plan for estuary restoration and management	
<b>NOAA Fisheries</b>	
<b>Southeast Regional Office</b>	<b>727-824-6301</b>
For information about marine fisheries in federal waters	
<b>Peace River Wildlife Center</b>	<b>941-637-3830</b>
For assistance with sick, injured wildlife in the Charlotte Harbor/Peace River area	

## Welcome to

# Charlotte Harbor

At high tide, the waters of Charlotte Harbor and its associated bays cover a mosaic of bay bottom habitats including seagrass meadows, sandy bottom, oyster bars, mud flats and flooded forests of mangrove prop-roots. Estuaries like Charlotte Harbor, where salt water from the sea meets and mixes with fresh water from rivers and uplands, are nurseries for young fish, shellfish, and crustaceans, which spend some critical stage of their development in these nearshore waters, protected from larger predators that swim in the open sea.

The lush, shallow water seagrass meadows of Charlotte Harbor are locally known as "flats". Fishing the flats with light tackle or flyrod is an unforgettable, world-class experience. The deeper areas of Charlotte Harbor are world renowned sailing waters.

By boating safely and with greater awareness of the natural environment, you can help protect Charlotte Harbor and the wildlife that depend on these waters for survival.

## Native Habitats

Charlotte Harbor is a rich mosaic of fish and wildlife habitats that form life-sustaining links in an ecosystem as biologically productive as some of the world's most celebrated rain forests. From coastal mangroves and marshes to underwater meadows of seagrass, from the river mouths, across the open bay, to the salty opening of the Gulf of Mexico, each interdependent habitat plays a vital role in this "estuarine machine."

Seagrasses and mangroves contribute significantly to a dynamic food chain that draws nutrients from the harbor floor. As seagrass and mangrove leaves decay, they provide food for small creatures that are ultimately consumed by fish and larger predators in an endless circle of life.

### Seagrasses

Seagrasses are flowering underwater plants found at shallow depths in bays and lagoons and in nearshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico. As a nursery environment, seagrasses support small fish, shrimp, and crabs that hide among the blades and feast on decaying leaves. Seagrasses also help stabilize shifting sands on the bottom of the bay and improve water clarity by trapping fine sediments and particles.



Seagrass acreage is 95% of that found in the 1950s. Seagrass extent has expanded 10% since a recorded low in 1999. However, severe propeller scars have been increasing, taking a toll on the quality of our seagrass beds.

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## Birds of the Harbor

Despite the environmental pressures from growth and development in the region, Charlotte Harbor continues to attract a remarkable variety and number of birds. However, maintaining these bird populations in growing metropolitan areas is challenging. Many species are declining, and some have virtually disappeared due to loss and disruption of habitat.

Islands, beaches, and some inland causeways provide nesting areas for many species of birds including those classified as imperiled. Mud flats and seagrass meadows in shallow sections of the bay provide a bountiful feeding ground for resident, migrant, and wintering shorebirds. Open waters are a habitat for loons, grebes, and ducks. Ospreys and bald eagles can be found throughout Charlotte Harbor.

### YOU CAN HELP:

- Observe posted signs that identify nesting colonies and try to keep a distance of 500 feet.
- Please keep pets leashed and away from posted nesting areas.
- If you happen upon a concentration of birds, you may be near a nesting colony. Carefully pick up your belongings and leave. Choose a spot 500 feet away from the birds and enjoy the view.
- If a bird becomes entangled in fishing gear, carefully remove the hook and monofilament line. Or while walking along the beach, pick up any stray fishing line and dispose of it properly. Birds and other animals that ingest or become entangled in fishing line may die.
- Stay clear of areas that may harbor nesting colonies and avoid areas where feeding birds are visible. Please do not operate a personal watercraft or airboat near the shore except to idle or to reach a destination point. Noise and prop wash from those vessels disturb wildlife and may disrupt nesting and feeding.



### Mangroves

Mangroves are tropical trees that thrive in salty environments along the water's edge. Like seagrasses, they provide food and cover for a vast array of small fish and animals. Their roots anchor shorelines, and their branches serve as nesting sites for a wide variety of birds.

Three species of mangroves are common in Charlotte Harbor. Red mangroves, typically located closest to the water, are easily distinguished by their tangled reddish roots that branch out over the water. Black mangroves feature numerous finger-like projections, called pneumatophores, that surround the base of the tree, and the white mangrove, the leaves of which are yellow-green.

More than 90% of pre-development mangrove area remains. In the last 20 years, mangrove acreage has been relatively stable. However, about five acres are lost every year through permitted development. Thanks to public management of most of the remaining mangrove forests and regulations restricting mangrove removal and trimming, extensive mangrove forests surround Charlotte Harbor's estuarine areas. In our area, mangroves have some of the highest diversity of animals measured.

### Salt Marshes and Mud Flats

Like seagrasses, marshes provide food and cover for a vast array of small fish and wildlife. These marshes, which periodically become submerged, nourish and protect many fish and birds. Marsh areas also buffer upland areas from storms and help filter pollutants from water that runs off the land.



Mud flats throughout the Charlotte Harbor system may be completely exposed at low tide. Although these flats are barren of visible vegetation, they are teeming with life. Small crabs, clams, and worms, which burrow in the mud, supply a feast for birds wading at low tide.



### Oyster Bars

Oysters are immobile shellfish that filter water as they feed. Their gray-white shells are irregular in shape. Live oysters and dead oyster shells form in mounds on the bay floor, creating bars or reefs. More prevalent near river mouths and in sections of the bay that receive a steady diet of fresh water, oyster bars attract adult sheepshead and red drum, making these structures popular fishing spots.

Shellfish harvesting is conditionally allowed in areas around Charlotte Harbor. For information about shellfish harvesting, visit [floridaaquaculture.com](http://floridaaquaculture.com) and [MyFWC.com/fishing/saltwater/regulations/shellfish](http://MyFWC.com/fishing/saltwater/regulations/shellfish).

## Popular Sport Fish

(Fish images © Diane Rome Peables)



**GULF FLOUNDER:** Inshore within bays near or within grass flats during spring and summer; in the Gulf beginning in the fall with the onset of colder weather.



**RED DRUM (Redfish):** Inshore near grass beds, oyster bars, and docks and pilings; deeper channels during the warmest and coolest months.



**SNOOK:** Canals, tidal creeks, and other deep warm waters in cool months; near tidal passes and mangrove fringe at high tide.



**SPOTTED SEATROUT (Speckled seatrout):** Inshore over grass beds, sand, and sandy/mud bottoms; deeper water during warmest and coolest months.



**TARPON:** Commonly found, mostly inshore near bridges, pilings, rock walls, harbors, around structures, and on flats. Also found offshore along beaches and in passes.



**SPANISH MACKEREL:** Inshore, nearshore, and offshore over grass beds and reefs.

In most cases, a license is required for saltwater fishing in Florida waters. Visit [MyFWC.com/fishing/saltwater/regulations](http://MyFWC.com/fishing/saltwater/regulations) for up-to-date information about license requirements, bag limits and seasonal closures.

## Practice Safe Boating

- Plan your route in advance. Use the appropriate nautical charts to reference depth, bridge clearance, and other natural and man-made features before you leave.
- **File a float plan** and leave it with a reliable person at a marina or elsewhere. Include a description of the vessel, radio and safety equipment on board, planned stops, names of passengers, and an estimated time of returning from voyage. Ask that person to notify the Coast Guard or other local authority if you do not return as scheduled.
- **Wear a personal flotation device (PFD).** Per the United States Coast Guard boating safety guidelines, a boat must have a U.S. Coast Guard-approved Type I, II, III, or V life jacket for each person aboard. Boats 16 feet and over must have at least one Type IV throwable device as well. Adult-sized life jackets will not work for children. Special life jackets are available. To work correctly, a life jacket must be worn, fit snugly, and not allow the child's chin or ears to slip through. Life jackets should be tested for wear and buoyancy at least once each year. Waterlogged, faded, or leaky jackets should be discarded.
- Observe and obey posted speed limits. When in doubt, slow down.
- Watch your wake. Remember, you are responsible for damage caused by your vessel's wake. Large wakes can overturn smaller vessels and damage boats which are moored at the dock.
- Know your navigation rules. Use the boating rules of the road to avoid accidents.
- Don't drink alcohol and operate a boat.
- Be sure that your boat is visible at night and in poor weather conditions.
- Make sure your craft has the required safety equipment on board.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary offers a free boat inspection to advise boaters of state and federal safety requirements. Violations found during these courtesy exams will not be reported to authorities.

## Boating Regulatory Zones

On Florida waterways there are signs restricting boat speed. Florida regulates boat speeds in certain areas either for protection of manatees or for boating safety purposes. It is important that boat operators look for signs, understand what they mean, and abide by the speed regulations. Here are the most common signs.

**No Entry:** All vessels and all persons, either in vessels or swimming, diving, or wading, are prohibited from entering the marked area.

**Motorboats Prohibited Zone:** Areas where all vessels equipped with any mechanical means of propulsion are prohibited from entering the marked area, even if the mechanical means of propulsion is not in use.

**No Power-Driven Vessels:** All vessels equipped with any mechanical means of propulsion must turn off the mechanical means of propulsion and, if possible to do so, tilt or raise the mechanical means of propulsion out of the water. The use of any motor, including an electric motor, is prohibited.

**Idle Speed, No Wake Speed:** The slowest speed at which it is still possible to maintain steerage and headway. The vessel should not produce a wake at this speed.

**Slow Speed, Minimum Wake Zone:** Areas where vessels must be fully off plane and completely settled in the water. Any wake created by a vessel in one of these zones must be minimal (very small). If your vessel is traveling with the bow even slightly elevated within one of these zones, it is not proceeding at "Slow Speed" as required by law.

**Maximum 25 MPH, 30 MPH, and 35 MPH Speed Zones:** Controlled areas within which a vessel must not exceed posted speed. "Miles per hour" means speed made good over the bottom measured in statute miles.

## Fishing the Seagrass Flats

- Do not operate your boat in areas that are too shallow for your equipment.
- Use nautical and tide charts to plan your course.
- Never cut through seagrass beds with a propeller. Watch your prop wash for mud or plant life which may indicate that you are too shallow. Remember, scared seagrass takes years to recover!
- Pole or use a trolling motor when traveling across or when fishing flats. Quiet anglers catch more fish.
- If you run aground, turn off your engine, raise the motor, and push or pole your way to deeper water. If necessary, wait for high tide to move your boat.
- Do not crowd another boat. If you see another boat fishing on the flats, do not approach unless called.

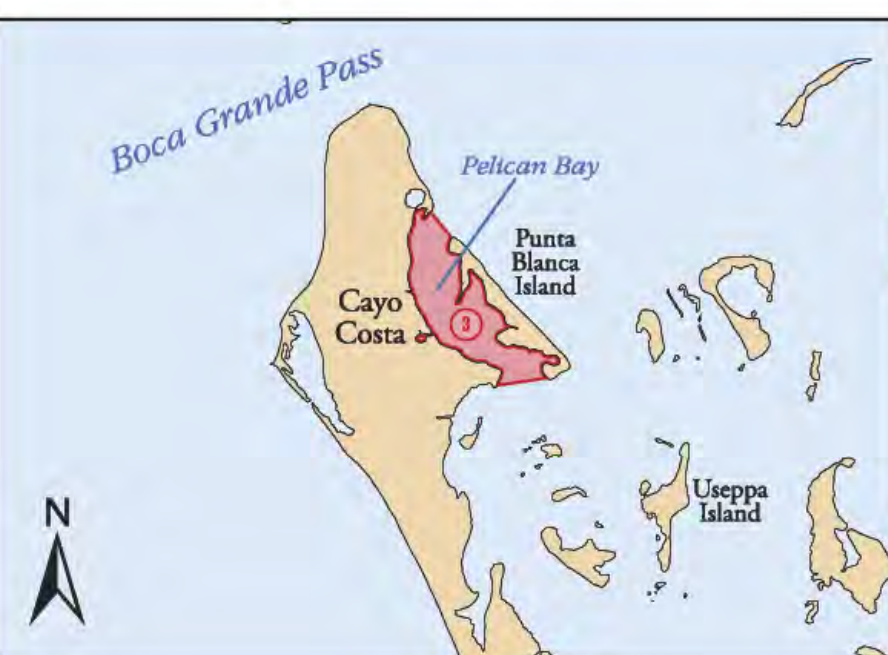
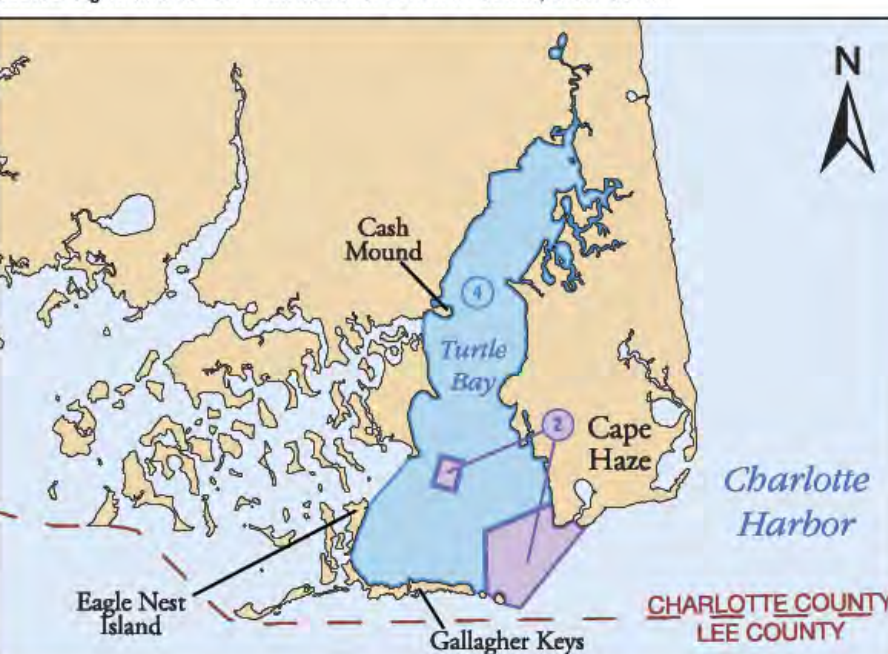


Curtis Kruer

**The Monofilament Recovery and Recycling Program (MRRP)** is a statewide effort to educate the public on the problems caused by monofilament line left in the environment, to encourage recycling through a network of line-recycling bins and drop-off locations, and to conduct volunteer monofilament line cleanup events. Place used or old fishing line in outdoor recycling bins mounted at many piers, boat ramps, and marinas throughout the state. Indoor recycling bins are also available at many tackle shops.

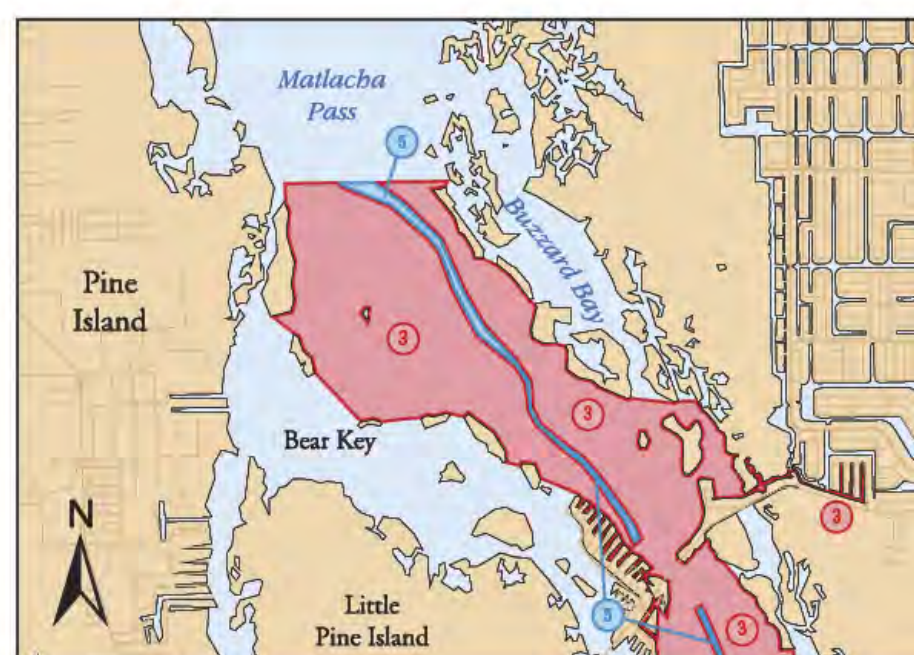
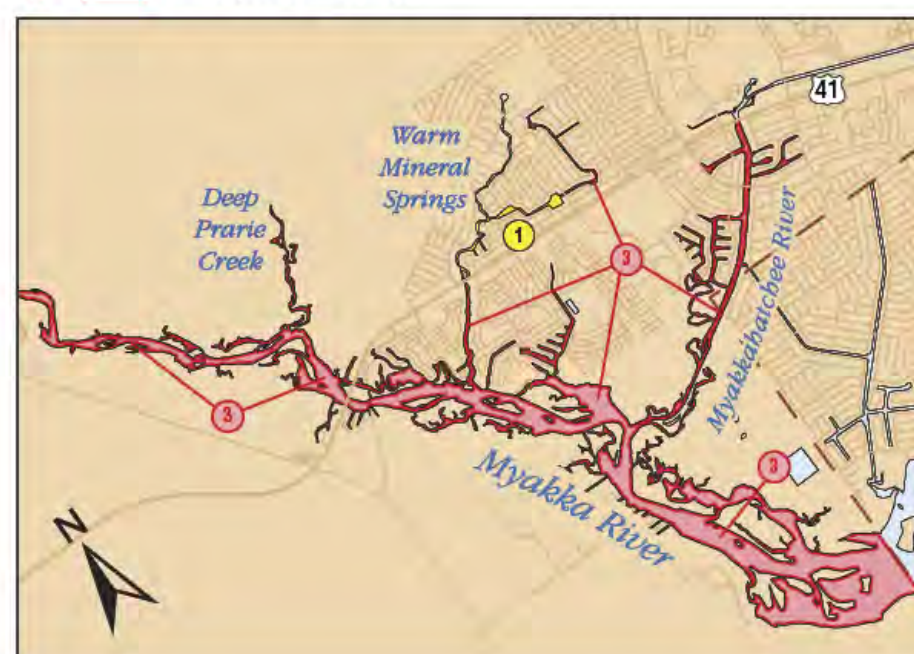
## Boating Regulatory Zones

Only a small number of the boating regulatory zones (boating safety and manatee) in the Charlotte Harbor area are shown on the maps below. Additional zones may be present in residential canals and along city waterfronts. The zones shown here are current as of this guide's publication date. While on the water, please look out for posted signs and follow instructions. When in doubt, slow down.



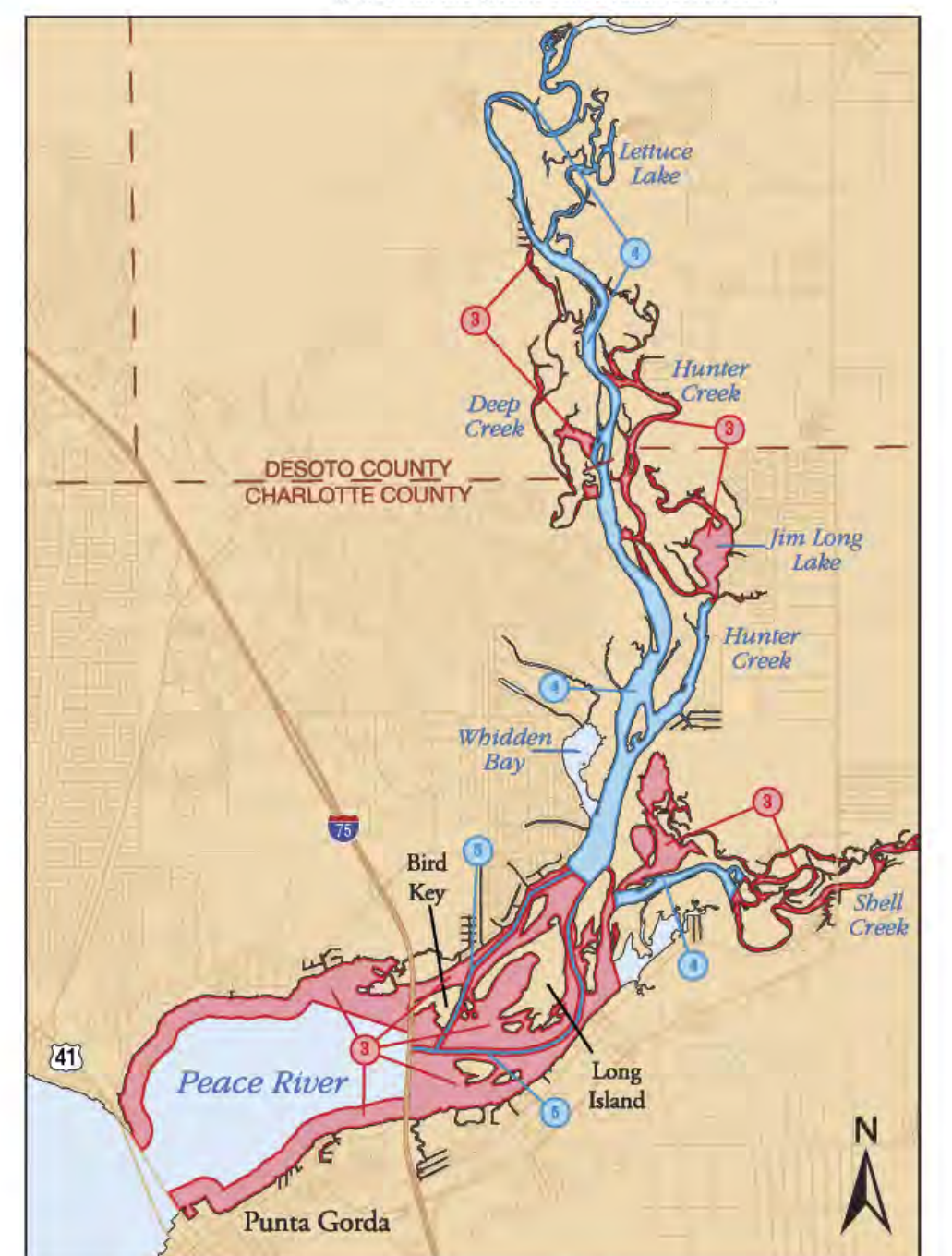
## Legend (for all maps)

- 1. No Entry (All Year)
- 2. Idle Speed (All Year)
- 3. Slow Speed (All Year)
- 4. 25 MPH (All Year)
- 5. 25 MPH (in Marked Channel)



## Boating Regulatory Signs

Here are some examples of the signs you may see on the waters around Charlotte Harbor. For a full description of the zones shown on these signs, look at the Boating Regulatory Zones section on this guide or visit [MyFWC.com/boating/waterway](http://MyFWC.com/boating/waterway).



Data Source (all maps):  
• Manatee Speed Zones and Boating Safety Zones - Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission