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At a recent tourism conference in Orange Beach, I was reacquainted with the wonderful richness of the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve. I remember visiting the Reserve when I was in school, and many times since then, and had assumed that everyone knew about what an awesome resource this living classroom is for people of all ages.

The Weeks Bay Reserve is a living classroom and laboratory where everyone is welcome to come learn about the dynamic world of estuaries, where the river meets the sea. The Reserve gives an opportunity for hands-on experience and a close-up look of the native plants and animals that make our little piece of the world unique, and to see how our piece fits into the rest of the world puzzle.

The first thing that will catch your attention at the Reserve is the Interpretive Center. Inside you'll find not only ecological information about our coastal home, but also historical and archaeological artifacts from those who have called south Alabama "home" long before we were born. Learn about how diverse and beautiful estuaries are, how they are critical to birds, fish, shrimp, crabs, clams and other shellfish, reptiles, marine mammals and even humans. See what a hammer stone looks like, and imagine trying to make tools using one. Get eyeball to eyeball with snakes, alligators, as well as other animals from both land and sea - and even touch a few critters!

The boardwalk is handicap accessible, easy to walk, and has a truly gorgeous view at the end. Walk along the boardwalk and learn how to identify several kinds of trees and plants with a handy provided by the Reserve. There are over two miles of ground trails to explore as well. During the fall, salt marshmallows bloom little pink flowers, and at all times of year the ferns spread out over the ground.

Don't forget to stop and see the native pitcher plant bog. Pitcher plants may not smell as sweet as any rose, but considering this plant eats insects, it's no wonder! Keep your eyes open and look closely, if the season is right you might see a rare rosebud orchid, one of seven different kinds of orchids in the bog.

Besides being a great place to take the family for a fun outing, The Weeks Bay Reserve also supports a variety scientific research studies, has a multimedia classroom for distance learning, offers educational programs for K-12 school groups, has special events, and offers volunteer opportunities.

The Weeks Bay Reserve is managed by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and is also a part of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It is easy to find, located in Baldwin County on Highway 98 just west of the Fish River Bridge, between Foley and Fairhope. The Interpretive Center is open Monday through Saturday 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Sunday 1 p.m. - 5 p.m, and there is no admission fee. Contact the Reserve at (251) 928-9792, or point your browser to www.weeksbay.org for more information. At their website, you can even take an online tour to get a sneak-peek of things to see before you go. If you've never been to Weeks Bay, or if it's been a while since you've taken a leisurely stroll along the boardwalk, pack a picnic and go see what you're missing!