

DIVING EPICENTER

with Ben & Jen

Manatee Season Rules

A Quick Cheat Sheet for Swimming with Manatees in Crystal River

Kings Bay is the only place in the U.S. where in-water manatee viewing is legal — so the rules matter.

The one rule that covers everything: passive observation.

Float still at the surface and let manatees come to you. Never chase, touch, or initiate contact. If a manatee approaches you and you stay calm and still, that's fine — the rule is about what you do, not what the manatee does.

✓ DO

- ✓ **Practice passive observation.** Observe from the surface, from a distance, and let manatees approach on their own terms.
- ✓ **Stay horizontal and still in the water.** A calm, floating snorkeler is non-threatening. Sudden movement and splashing scare them off.
- ✓ **Keep your distance.** Give manatees room — federal guidance suggests around 50 ft where possible, and at least a body length in the water. Stay two kayak-lengths away when paddling.
- ✓ **Let them leave.** If a manatee swims away, let it go. Following a departing manatee is pursuit, and pursuit is illegal.
- ✓ **Go with a guide if it's your first time.** Local operators know the current rules, the open areas, and how to read manatee behavior.

✗ DON'T (these are the federally prohibited behaviors)

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service prohibits all of the following in every part of Kings Bay, including Three Sisters Springs:

- ✗ Chase or pursue a manatee
- ✗ Touch, pet, poke, prod, pinch, grab, or stab a manatee with anything — including your hands and feet
- ✗ Disturb a resting or feeding manatee
- ✗ Dive down from the surface onto a resting or feeding manatee
- ✗ Corner or surround a manatee, or block its path
- ✗ Ride, hold, or stand on a manatee
- ✗ Separate a mother and calf, or split up a group of manatees
- ✗ Give a manatee anything to eat or drink
- ✗ Initiate contact with a tagged or belted manatee (leave tracked animals alone entirely)
- ✗ Interfere with a rescue or research activity

Even a manatee rolling over to “show its belly” is not an invitation to touch — it's just repositioning. Look, don't touch.

WHEN & WHERE — Season and Closures

- ▶ **Manatee season.** Roughly mid-November through March, when Gulf temperatures drop and manatees crowd into the 72°F springs. Peak numbers come on cold-front days — hundreds can gather in Kings Bay at once.
- ▶ **Sanctuary closures.** Seven manatee sanctuaries in Kings Bay are closed to all water activity from November 15 to March 31 every year. These are marked by buoys — no swimming, boating, or entry, period.
- ▶ **Three Sisters Springs.** Access is water-only — you must paddle in from a public Kings Bay launch; there's no swimming entry from the boardwalk. In-water access runs sunrise to sunset and can close entirely during manatee season.
- ▶ **Cold-water full closures.** When water drops to about 62°F or colder, the refuge may rope off all springs so manatees can rest undisturbed. These closures can happen with little notice.
- ▶ **The boardwalk is separate.** The Three Sisters Springs boardwalk (a City of Crystal River service, paid admission) stays open even when in-water access is closed — a great backup way to see manatees from above.

WHY IT MATTERS

Manatees are federally protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and Florida's Manatee Sanctuary Act. Harassment includes anything that disrupts their natural behavior — feeding, resting, nursing, or breathing.

Penalties are real: state fines start around \$500, and the most serious federal violations can reach \$50,000 and up to a year in prison. Beyond the law, feeding and touching make manatees lose their natural caution around boats — which is the leading human-related cause of manatee deaths.

Rules and closures change year to year and can be updated mid-season. Before you go, check the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge (fws.gov/refuge/crystal-river) or their Facebook page for current closures.

See you at the next spot.

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