

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Okefenokee

*National Wildlife Refuge  
The Swamp Walk Trail  
Guide*



*The Swamp Walk is a .75 mile wooden walkway that leads to a 50-foot high*



*observation tower overlooking Okefenokee Swamp. To fully enjoy your journey, please keep the following in mind during your walk:*

*Be prepared for biting flies, mosquitoes, and ticks.*

*Feeding wildlife is dangerous and forbidden. Do not throw items at or otherwise disturb any animal.*

## **The Refuge**

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is one of 500 refuges operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It was established to protect the native wildlife of this unique ecosystem.

The wooden walkway before you gently winds through cypress trees and open prairie marshlands. It extends 3/4 of a mile into Chesser Prairie, an area characterized by grasses and other vegetation. These wet prairies make up about 20% of the Okefenokee.

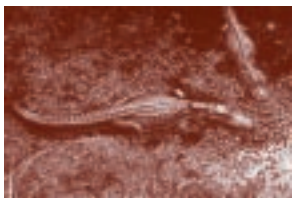


Along the way, you may encounter carnivorous plants, such as pitcher plants and bladderworts, as well as cinnamon ferns, sphagnum moss and many other plants. As these plants partially decay, they accumulate in layers as peat on the sandy bottom of the swamp. By

definition, part of the Okefenokee Swamp is not a swamp at all. It is actually a bog, a peat-accumulating wetland which receives most of its water from rainfall.

## **1—Gator Holes**

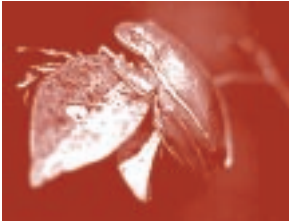
Look before you at the alligator hole: an area in the swamp where alligators excavate the peat, causing depressions. 'Gators make underwater tunnels through the thick vegetation, often linking with other 'gator holes. Their excavations keep ponds full of water and reduce vegetation growth. In dry seasons, these areas may contain the only water deep enough to sustain fish, turtles, and other aquatic life. Large turtles are known to



live in this particular 'gator hole. If you sit quietly, you may catch a glimpse of a Florida softshell turtle.

Listen carefully and you may hear sounds from underneath the boardwalk. These are usually from frogs, snakes, and raccoons. Because the boardwalk blocks sunlight,

plants do not grow there and many animals use this area as a pathway. On top of the boardwalk, anole lizards may be seen as they warm themselves on the sun-bleached boards. Because anoles may change color they are often mistaken for chameleons.



## **2—Insect-eating Plants!**

Down this pathway is a shelter which may offer excellent photo opportunities. On the way to the shelter are small ponds with many pitcher plants. Okefenokee is home to three species of these carnivorous plants: hooded, parrot, and trumpet. These cleverly designed plants have a system of trapping insects in the juices at the bottom of their “pitchers”, which are actually modified leaves. When the insect realizes its mistake, tiny downward-pointing hairs prevent it from crawling out. The plant’s juices then digest the insect, extracting nitrogen from its body.



## **3—From Pond to Forest**

Look at the pond that is filling in with thick vegetation. This process is called swamp succession. As more and more vegetation encroaches on the pond, it begins to fill in and may eventually support large trees.

On your way to the next shelter, Chesser Prairie is revealed through openings in the vegetation. Florida sandhill cranes have been spotted nesting in this area,

usually raising only one of the two chicks that hatch. Migratory greater sandhill cranes can be seen in winter months as they prepare for their flight north to spring nesting sites.

#### **4—Watch the birdies**

If you choose to walk to this shelter, you may be able to spot parula warblers as they fly in small groups. You are also likely to hear them as they nest in the Spanish moss in the overhead canopy.



Spanish moss is an abundant plant in the south that gets its nutrients from rain water and the surface of the trees on which it grows. It doesn't harm the trees, but it is home to many irritating insects, such as chiggers and ticks.

#### **5—Cypress Trees**

Look for dead cypress trees rising out of the water. These particular trees were killed in the last great wildfire of 1954-1955. On the average, intense wildfires burn the swamp on 20-year cycles following periods of drought.

The wood of cypress trees is valued for its durability. These majestic trees are unusual among conifers because they are deciduous,

meaning they lose their leaves in the fall and grow new ones in the spring. Live cypress trees are a favorite scratching post for black bears. Look for signs of where bears have sharpened their claws or scratched their back. The bear population in Okefenokee is estimated at



around 400 individuals and they inhabit the entire swamp and its islands. Okefenokee is one of the last strongholds for black bears in the southeast.

## 6—Prairies and Ponds

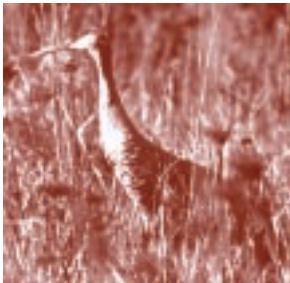
This shelter offers a view of a deep pond, as well as the prairie. Grasses and wildflowers are common, as well as carnivorous bladderworts, which have tiny yellow flowers that bloom throughout the summer. Their wagon-wheel shaped root system snares aquatic insects.

Alligators nest near this area also. Their mounds of peat and vegetation rise above the water level and may contain 30-50 eggs, which are laid in June and July. As the vegetation decays and releases heat, the eggs incubate and usually hatch in late August. The young stay with their mother until they are over a year old. Mother alligators are very protective so, as with all wild animals, use extreme caution when viewing them. Feeding wild animals may make them more aggressive toward humans and is very dangerous, as well as strictly forbidden.



## 7—Owl's Roost Tower

Owl's Roost Tower looks over Seagrove Lake and Chesser Prairie. The base of the tower is ideal nesting habitat for prothonotary warblers, who normally seek cavities in trees to raise their young. These brilliant yellow birds are inquisitive and may fly near quiet visitors to inspect them. The tower is 50-feet high and will take you to the tree tops for a bird's eye view of the swamp.



Common sights from the tower are great egrets (large, white wading birds) and great blue herons. Although not as common, three other white wading birds may be observed from the tower. Snowy egrets are

completely white and have a black beak and yellow feet. Cattle egrets are often found in more grassy areas, as they are insect, rather than fish, eaters. They have a yellow beak and during breeding season may have a rusty hue. Wood storks have a black head and black on the wings.

Walking along the Swamp Island Boardwalk, the Okefenokee Swamp reveals just a small glimpse of itself. The delights of the swamp unfold with each step. Share the joy of nature and respect what it teaches. With nature as your guide, mysteries can become knowledge and a simple walk on a wooden pathway can become an unforgettable venture into the Okefenokee Swamp.



*For more  
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on the refuge  
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