

Okefenokee—St. Marys River Adventure Day 1
Total Distance: 14 miles (7 in and 7 out)
Launch Site & Take Out: Okefenokee Adventures: 30.738282, -82.140397

Points of Interest

Mile 0.2—Suwannee Canal—Our route into the heart of the swamp is a manmade channel that dates to 1891 when the Suwannee Canal Company began its efforts to drain the swamp. During the late 19th century, many Georgia leaders became transfixed on developing the swamp’s “waste lands.” The belief was that the Okefenokee, if drained properly, would become immensely valuable. The swamp’s water could be redirected to a canal connecting the Atlantic Coast with the Gulf of Mexico, the swamp’s valuable timber could be harvested and the rich peat, once dry, would grow vast quantities of food. One surveyor of the swamp in 1888 reported that anyone who invested in such drainage schemes would ultimately be worth “millions.” “I know that below the six feet of muck and decaying vegetation there is a firm, rich earth which will grow anything in the world,” he wrote. Bolstered by these glowing reports, the Suwannee Canal Company led by Henry Jackson of Savannah purchased from Georgia more than 200,000 acres for 26.5 cents an acre and work on the canal began. All told, only about 12 miles of canals were completed into the swamp (out of an estimated 300 needed to drain the land) and the effort to dig a canal from the swamp to the St. Marys River proved problematic. Trail Ridge rises on the east side of the swamp and digging through it would have required a six-mile ditch more than 40 feet deep. The project soon became known as “Jackson’s Folly,” but it did open up the swamp’s timber for harvesting over the next 30 years. Our launch site was once home to a massive saw mill.

Mile 1.6—Okefenokee Wilderness Area—Here, the Suwannee Canal enters the 353,981-acre Okefenokee Wilderness Area. Among wilderness areas in the Eastern U.S., it is second in size only to the 1.2 million acre Everglades Wilderness in Florida. The country’s first wilderness areas were created in 1964 with the passage of the Wilderness Act which established these areas as places “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” As such, roads, structures, motorized vessels are prohibited within wilderness areas.

Mile 1.9—Okefenokee Wilderness Canoe Trails—Here the Okefenokee Wilderness Canoe Trail system forks. To the right, the Orange Trail travels northwest to Chase Prairie and Billys Lake while the left fork leads to the Pink Trail, our route to Chesser Prairie and Monkey Lake. The swamp’s 120-mile canoe trail system spans the width of the swamp with forks traveling both north and south. Reservations are required for overnight trips and are highly sought after and difficult to score (be prepared to call often!)

Mile 2.5—Chesser Prairie & Okefenokee Lexicon—Shortly after turning south toward Monkey Lake, the pink trail enters Chesser Prairie, but don’t expect waving grasslands and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Befitting of such an uncommon natural area, many common words mean something different in the Okefenokee. Here’s a few:

Prairie—Prairies are treeless expanses of marsh and pond dominated by aquatic plants like water lily, golden club, bladderwort, paint root, maidencane and a variety of sedges and grasses. There are 22 named prairies in the swamp which make up about 14 percent of the swamp’s land surface. The swamp is very shallow in these areas with just six to 18 inches of water covering the swamp’s peaty bed.

Houses—Don’t expect gables and windows. In the swamp, forested islands are called houses or hammocks. They dot the prairies and can be seen in numerous locations along our Pink Trail route. Houses are also called “heads” by some. Pond cypress, blackgum, red maple, bay and pine are the dominant trees of these houses.

Battery—Don’t look for the Energizer bunny. A battery is a mass of peat that is pushed to the surface of the swamp by the buoyant force of trapped methane and carbon dioxide (by-products of underwater decomposition). There’s a lot of decomposition happening down there. The peat that is created by the decomposing organic matter builds up slowly over time—about an inch every 50 years. Along the edges of the swamp the peat is thin, but in other places it’s 15-foot deep—that’s about 6,000 years of peat! In most areas of the swamp, the peat is five to ten feet thick. Batteries are also called “blowups.”

Mile 3—Pitcher Plants—Here and along much of the route to Monkey Lake are these (and other) carnivorous plants. The showiest and most easily identified are the trumpet and hooded pitcher plants. These plants sport tall, hollow, fleshy stalks with “hoods” at the top. Insects are lured into these stalks where down-turned hairs on the hollow insides direct the unsuspecting bugs to liquid digestive fluid at the bottom of the stalk. These carnivorous plants are designed for highly acidic, low-nitrogen environments; the insects provide the nitrogen they need. If you were to slice open one of these plants, you’d find the skeletal remains of insects at the bottom.

Mile 5.6—“Dead Tree” House—To the left here is a “house” or “hammock” populated by skeletal trees. In April 2017, the West Mims fire, sparked by a lightning strike, burned more than 100,000 acres in and around the swamp, including this area. One wouldn’t naturally associate fires with such a wet place, but there’s lots of fuel in the swamp—peat, after all, is the precursor to coal and is highly combustible. Periodic wildfires are a natural and important part of the Okefenokee ecosystem. They generate nutrients, create wetlands and ponds, and thus, more habitat for swamp-loving critters. The fires also keep at bay upland hardwood forests that over time would encroach upon the swamp’s footprint. Accustomed to the fires, the swamp’s critters are not much threatened by them. That said, dramatic changes to the swamp ecosystem—such as the significant lowering of water levels in the swamp—could tip nature’s balance and lead to more frequent and extensive fires and alter the ecosystem irreparably.

Mile 6.9—Monkey Lake—Here at this small pond is the Monkey Lake Shelter (easy to miss if you are not looking for it). It is one of a dozen such overnight shelters (complete with porta toilet) available for overnight camping in the national wildlife refuge

