

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker



The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in southeastern Georgia protects one of the oldest and most primitive swamps in America. The refuge was established in 1936 to preserve the Okefenokee Swamp. The refuge encompasses approximately 402,000 acres of open wet “prairies,”

cypress forests, scrub-shrub, open lakes, and upland forest habitat.

A species that used to reside in the swamp is the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. For centuries ivory-bills inhabited the dense forests and swamps of the southeastern U.S. The Okefenokee Swamp was home to the ivory-bill, with the earliest reported sighting occurring in 1860. However, sightings were sporadic, with confirmed observations rarer still.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) didn’t acquire the Okefenokee in “pristine” condition. Over 90% of the swamp had been logged by the time it became a national wildlife refuge in 1936, including many of the mature stands and forests of red-gum, water oak, and black gum-bay, which was the principle habitat for the swamp’s small population of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. The last sighting of an ivory-bill at Okefenokee occurred in 1942, when then Refuge Biologist Hayden “Tony” Carter and his

wife Margaret observed one at close range. While there were a few promising reports through the mid 1960s, no additional sightings have been confirmed. In fact, by 1963 Refuge Biologist Eugene Cypert concluded that years of extensive logging operations in and around the Okefenokee Swamp had led to the ivory-bill’s decline. He further concluded that the rare birds were no longer present in the refuge.

Today, as part of the on-going study of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the Southeast, researchers are re-examining the Okefenokee NWR for potential ivory-bill habitat. The Service has partnered with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources on a joint research survey of the vast refuge for habitat that might support a small population. The habitat survey will be concentrated on approximately 80,000 acres in the refuge’s northwestern section, and will include areas where ivory-bill sightings occurred in the past. Since logging has not occurred in the search area for almost 80 years, most of the forests of cypress, bay and gum trees have matured, prompting researchers to examine the suitability of the habitat to sustain ivory-bills.

The survey will be conducted in early April 2006. Areas within the swamp to be surveyed include Minnie’s Island, Cravens Hammock, Hickory Hammock, and Pine Island. Researchers will access these areas either by canoe, vehicle and/or helicopter. Once in, researchers will evaluate the habitat type, and search for any possible signs of ivory-bill activity, past or present. Signs might include specific forging marks on trees, cavities, and/or auditory signs, such as the ivory-bill’s distinctive “double-knock.”

