

# ADVENTURE

*Many heed call to enjoy areas ‘untrammelled by man’*

BY DEBORAH JEROME

Not long after we began our canoe trip in Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness in Georgia, I spotted my first alligator—its enormous head visible above the water’s surface, its body hidden under the tea-colored bog. You usually gauge a gator’s length by estimating in inches the distance between its eyes and snout and converting that to feet. In this case: a gator about 10 feet long.

**M**y companions and I paddled (quickly) past the big gator and headed south into the Grand Prairie. Our canoe was suddenly bombarded with a brown geyser of water, peat and mud. Peat blowouts, caused by the release of methane gases from below, had blocked our route with an impassable island, filling in the once recognizable, open trail. We lost all sense of direction. Not knowing whether we were on solid footing or a floating island, we stayed in our boat and wedged our way free. Thankfully, we maneuvered our way back to the trail.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 made my experience possible. This definition in the act explains why: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area... of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions...”

Wilderness areas are ideal for hiking, canoeing/kayaking, camping, photography, environmental education, interpretation, hunting, fishing and more—as long as those activities are compatible and appropriate with preserving wilderness character. But wilderness can be “loved to death” only too easily. As a result, wilderness administrators face many challenges.

The Wilderness Act specifies that as managers we maintain the natural setting and provide outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation without diminishing the wilderness character. So, those who manage wilderness may adjust the number and distribution of visitors at any given time to maintain the experience and achieve wilderness objectives.

Wilderness administrators also manage each unit in the National Wilderness Preservation System as the most wild and undeveloped extreme within the spectrum of a wildlife refuge—applying the “minimum necessary” standard before taking administrative action in wilderness.

Commercial outfitting and guiding are two of the few commercial services permitted by the Wilderness Act to enhance the recreational experience in some areas “to the extent necessary,” as the act says, and if found compatible under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Commercial guided boat tours led by experienced naturalists are offered at Okefenokee, as well as boat and camping equipment rentals, food and supplies.

The boat tours take advantage of the 120 miles of boat trails Congress requires be maintained. The boat trails are the only access into the wilderness and would quickly become overgrown and impassable unless maintained year-round by staff and volunteers. Depending on the location of a trail, water level and other factors, the “minimum necessary” requirement for clearing a trail may be hand tools and canoes or it may involve motorized boats and equipment.

Every dip of my paddle through the Okefenokee Wilderness brought a new experience that trumped the last: the sweet smell of flowering water plants, the amazing starlit night undiminished by city lights, the quiet swooshing sound of sandhill cranes overhead. Like most wilderness experiences, the trip was unforgettable. □

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# AWAITS

**VISIT** It takes careful planning to visit wilderness. The Service has 75 wilderness areas on 63 refuges in 26 states. Find the perfect adventure by going online to find wilderness in the Service: <[www.fws.gov/refuges/whm/wilderness.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/whm/wilderness.html)>

**Above:** Boat trails are the only access into Okefenokee Wilderness. **Below:** Alligators are common in Okefenokee Wilderness in Georgia.

