

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
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<http://www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee>

News Release



For Immediate Release

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Supervisory Refuge Ranger

Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge Conducting Lake Drawdown

Lakeland, GA.... Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge, located on Hwy 122 outside of Lakeland, is conducting a periodic drawdown on lake levels as a management tool for both improving the lake habitat and to conduct a necessary maintenance project. Banks Lake, a popular lake for fishing and boating recreation, has been managed as a National Wildlife Refuge since the property was purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1985. The refuge was established to provide optimum habitat for a diversity of wildlife including threatened and endangered species and to provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities to the visiting public.

Over time, the vegetation in the lake grows to such dense coverage that it is a detriment to the health of the fish population and interferes with navigation by boats. It is at this point, normally every 4-5 years, that the refuge determines that a drawdown of the lake during the winter is necessary to reduce the vegetation coverage by freezing the exposed plants. The lake drawdown is done very gradually, leaving a 30% coverage of water in Banks Lake, so the sport fishery will be sustained. The refuge is anticipating the lake level to be at its lowest point from now until March, allowing the spring rains to bring water levels back up to normal. **The refuge has changed the regulation on largemouth bass to catch and release ONLY from December 1, 2015 –May 1, 2016. All other fish species still follow the state limits.** Beginning in late January, a construction project will be completed to replace the water control structure which transports water between Banks Lake and Lake Irma. This project should take approximately three (3) weeks and will allow the refuge to better manage water levels in the future. With a successful planned drawdown, the refuge will achieve multi-year vegetation management, while improving the fishery and boating access.

During the drawdown, public access is still permitted to Banks Lake, although access will be limited based on the water level. Banks Lake Outdoors, the concession operation managed by the Lakeland-Lanier Chamber of Commerce, will be operational under an abbreviated schedule due to the impacts of the drawdown on their operation and visitation. If you would like to speak to the staff of Banks Lake Outdoors, please contact the concession at 229-569-0147. Any questions about the lake drawdown or other management practices can be directed to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters at 912-496-7366 or via email at Okefenokee@fws.gov.

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The Main Entrance (Suwannee Canal Recreation Area) to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is located 11 miles southwest of Folkston, GA off Hwy 121/23. The refuge is open daily and offers a variety of opportunities for the visiting public. Call 912-496-7836 or visit the refuge website at www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee for hours of operation, upcoming events, and entrance fee information.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook pages at www.facebook.com/okefenokeewildliferefuge or www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwssoutheast, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwssoutheast>.