



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**The new Okefenokee Swamp exhibit at the Georgia Visitor Information Center – Port Wentworth (Savannah) – is officially open!**

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The new Okefenokee Swamp exhibit at the Georgia Welcome Center opened Monday October, 19. This exhibit celebrates the wonder of the Okefenokee Swamp and will be permanently housed at the Georgia Visitor Information Center - Port Wentworth (Savannah), I-95 South, Mile Marker 111, Port Wentworth, GA 31407. This exhibit features a full alligator mounted in an authentic setting, with information about the Okefenokee gateways—Fargo, Folkston, and Waycross.

The grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony was officiated by Dr. William Clark, Chair of the Okefenokee Swamp Park Board of Trustees with speakers including Congressman Buddy Carter, Michael Lusk, Refuge Manager of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, David Viker, National Wildlife Refuge System Regional Chief, as well as Mark Jaronski, the Deputy Commissioner of Tourism, Explore GA and Jeff Cown, Director of Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Of Georgia's seven natural wonders, the Okefenokee is the most vast, wild and fabled—the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern U.S. The “land of trembling earth,” the Okefenokee Swamp, encompasses nearly 700 square miles of Clinch, Ware, and Charlton counties in Georgia and Baker County in Florida. Considered the largest blackwater wetland in the U.S. it has been protected by the federal government since 1937, has been named a Wetland of International Importance, designated as a National Natural Landmark and is listed as a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site. A biological treasure trove, it harbors more than 600 species of plants, 40 mammals, 50 reptiles, and 60 amphibians. More than 200 species of birds have been identified within the swamp, including the federally protected

red cockaded woodpecker and wood stork. Beneath the surface of the swamp's tea-colored water can be found 34 species of fish. The swamp also provides the headwaters of the Suwannee and St. Marys Rivers.

Dr. Clark, Chair of the Okefenokee Swamp Park Board of Trustees, kicked off the ceremony with an acknowledgement of the public-private partnership that forms the Okefenokee Partnership.

“Under the leadership of Michael Lusk, Refuge Manager for the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, an initial meeting was convened at the Refuge Headquarters in early 2018 to explore ways we could collaborate to increase visitation at each of our entrances. The team includes leaders from each of the entrances and the Gateway cities of Fargo, Folkston, and Waycross.”

As sponsor of this exhibit, the public-private Okefenokee Partnership (OP)—consisting of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, Stephen C. Foster State Park, Okefenokee Swamp Park, and Okefenokee gateway communities— is proud to have this representation greet travelers as they enter the state of Georgia. This exhibit showcases the opportunities each visitor entrance of the Okefenokee Swamp offers and will increase visitation and ecotourism to south Georgia.

Ann Purcell, representing the GA Department of Transportation Board, which owns and operates the Visitor Information Center, shared

“As the 1st Congressional District Representative to the State Transportation Board along with the entire Board, we are pleased to welcome the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge's impressive Okefenokee Swamp Exhibit to our center, which welcomes millions of visitors each year.”

Representing the GA Department of Economic Development, Mark Jaronski, the Deputy Commissioner of Tourism, Explore GA, shared

“Today, not only do we celebrate the Okefenokee Swamp, but also the partnerships that we enjoy here at the Georgia Welcome Center in Port Wentworth and really all of our Visitor Information Centers across the state of Georgia. There is no doubt that this new exhibit will attract the attention of our visitors and increase engagement between our guests and Georgia's natural resources.”

Representing the 1st District in southeast Georgia, that includes the entire coast of GA and stretches across the Okefenokee Swamp, Congressman Buddy Carter shared the following remarks and perspective,

“This is a very, very special occasion for our District, State and Country. This public-private partnership is extremely important and the key to even greater success in the Okefenokee. With all the beauty we have in southeast Georgia, we have so much to be thankful for and we need to make sure we preserve it. Thank you and god bless.”

Representing the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Regional Chief, David Viker, a 28-year veteran of the US Fish and Wildlife Service who since 2011 has served as the regional chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, leading 700 employees on 131 wildlife refuges in 10 southeast states and the Caribbean, shared the following,

“There is so much to be excited about today. The Okefenokee is enormous, magnificent and world-renowned. There is no national wildlife refuge in the eastern U.S., in our half of the continent, as large as the Okefenokee. As part of the national trail system, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is known across the globe and receives 600,000 visits per year, 10% of that visitation is international travel, supporting 753 jobs, 17 million in employee wages, 5 million in tax revenue and 64 million in total economic output. And, a very special thank you to our Lead Ranger, Susan Heisey who has been the driving force behind getting this project done!”

Jeff Cown with the GA Department of Natural Resources, shared remarks from his perspective as Director of GA State Parks and Historic Sites Division,

“It is with this project that the Okefenokee Partnership has tied together our agencies and stakeholders in these communities. This opportunity is several years in the making and represents a high level of commitment and collaboration. This is the first exhibit of its kind for Georgia State Parks and serves a purpose for State Parks like Stephen C. Foster, Laura Walker and the Suwannee River Eco-Lodge as exciting regional destinations in southeast Georgia. Let me now thank the people who really did this, Bryan Gray, Park Manager of Stephen C. Foster State Park, along with Zach Szemborski, Assistant Park Manager, Josh Snead, Interpretive Ranger and Bobby Wilson,, State Parks and Historic Sites Division Region 2 Assistant Manager.”

Michael Lusk, a wildlife biologist with national and international experience in endangered species recovery, Manager of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and Chairman of the Okefenokee Partnership, shared his comments and leadership perspective,

“I want to share a few things about the Okefenokee Swamp that you may not be aware of. A publication from National Geographic in 2012 identified the Okefenokee Swamp as one of the 100 most beautiful places in the entire world at #49. National Geographic said we have one of the most beautiful places in the world right here in south Georgia and I hope this exhibit will help people realize what a unique and beautiful place this is. In 2017, USA Today did a poll of the top 10 most beautiful campgrounds in the U.S. and our platform system and 120 miles of water trails came in #2. The second most beautiful campground in the entire U.S.! The Okefenokee is not just a wonderful place to visit, it is 438,000 acres of blackwater swamp, the largest in North America, the Refuge is 407,000 acres of that. If you want to come to a place to find out what the world was like before the hand of man laid heavily upon it, this is the place to come. ”

The Okefenokee Swamp exhibit opening concluded with a ceremonial ribbon cutting led by Susie Heisey of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and included the Okefenokee Partnership members with the support of Congressman Carter.

For updated information on hours of operations and the visitor opportunities available at the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, please visit their website at [www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee) or follow on Facebook ([@OkefenokeeWildlifeRefuge](https://www.facebook.com/OkefenokeeWildlifeRefuge)). For tour information and services provided by Okefenokee Adventures, onsite concession located at the refuge, visit their website at [www.okefenokeeadventures.com](http://www.okefenokeeadventures.com) or call 912-496-7156. For updated information on hours of operations and services provided at Stephen C. Foster State Park, please call 912-637-5274 or visit their website at <https://gastateparks.org/StephenCFoster>. To learn more about the Okefenokee Swamp Park (OSP) in Waycross, please visit <https://okeswamp.com>.

At all locations, expert guides offer interesting and educational tours as they share their love of the swamp and their knowledge about its cultural and natural history. Visitors can also have a self-guided adventure including hiking trails, boardwalks, and even an overnight canoe trip along the swamp's water trails. Be sure to plan a trip that includes all three entrances into the vast and unique Okefenokee Swamp to learn about this natural landmark in south Georgia.