

Okefenokee at a Glance

The Okefenokee Swamp is located in Ware, Charlton, and Clinch Counties, Georgia and Baker County, Florida.

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order in 1936.

The Okefenokee Swamp covers 438,000 acres. It is 38 miles in length at its longest point by 25 miles in width at its widest point. The swamp is approximately 700 square miles.

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is over 402,000 acres. The wilderness area consists of 353,981 acres and was created by the Okefenokee Wilderness Act of 1974 which is part of the Wilderness Preservation System.

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern United States. It is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which is under the Department of the Interior.

The Okefenokee Swamp is approximately 7000 years old. It is a vast peat-filled bog inside a huge, saucer-shaped depression that was once part of the ocean floor.

The elevation of the swamp varies. There is a 25 foot drop from the northwest side to the southwest side. The range in elevation is from 128 feet above sea level on the northeast side to 103 feet on the southwest side. The vegetative indicator of the natural swamp line is the presence of the saw palmetto.

The Suwannee River is the principle outlet of the swamp. The Suwannee flows from the west side of the swamp and empties into the Gulf of Mexico near Cedar Key, Florida. The Suwannee River is 280 miles long.

A small area of the southeastern part of the swamp is drained by the St. Marys River. The St. Marys River empties into the Atlantic near St. Marys, Georgia. The St. Marys River is 190 miles long.

The Okefenokee Swamp derives its name from Choctaw Indian words meaning "quivering earth" or "Land of the Trembling Earth."

The dark tea color of the swamp water is due to tannic acid, derived from dissolved vegetative material and peat.

The entire swamp is covered with peat beds which overlay the sand floor. Peat is organic material formed by the decomposition of plants in water. In the Okefenokee Swamp, it takes about 50 years for one inch of peat to form at the base of the swamp. The peat ranges in depth from thin layers at the edges of the swamp and islands to more than 15 feet in places. The average depth of the peat is 5-10 feet. Unstable peat masses will tremble, giving the Okefenokee its name "Land of the Trembling Earth."

Average annual temperature is 68 degrees F. The average annual rainfall is 60 inches.

Rainfall accounts for approximately 95% of the water in the Okefenokee Swamp. 80% of the rainfall is returned to the atmosphere by evapotranspiration, leaving only 20% to find its way down the Suwannee and St. Mary's Rivers.

Islands in the swamp occupy 25,000 acres. There are 70 islands that are greater than 20 acres in area. Cowhouse is the largest island and occupies 8,200 acres. Billys Island covers 3,000 acres and is the second largest island in the swamp. The third largest island is Blackjack Island.

There are 60 named lakes in the Okefenokee that occupy approximately 500 acres. Billys Lake (60 acres), Double Lake, and Big Water Lake are the largest lakes.

The prairies are untimbered areas in the swamp (marsh or pond areas) and cover 60,500 acres. There are 22 named prairies in the Okefenokee Swamp. Chase Prairie is the largest prairie (6,600 acres), followed by Floyd's Prairie and Sapling Prairie. In normal water levels the prairies are flooded with 6-18 inches of water. The predominant vegetation that occurs in the prairies includes: water lily, golden club, paintroot, bladderwort, maidencane, and a variety of sedges and grasses.

A battery is a mass of peat that is pushed to the surface of the swamp water by the buoyant force of trapped methane and carbon dioxide, by-products of underwater decomposition. Many people in the Okefenokee region call such formations "blow-ups."

A house is a tree covered island common throughout the prairies of the Okefenokee Swamp. Common trees of the houses include pond cypress, blackgum, red maple, bay and pine.

Eight habitat types occur in the Okefenokee Swamp:

- Shrub swamp (34%)
- Mixed cypress forest (23%)
- Prairies (21%)
- Pure cypress forest (9%)
- Swamp islands (8%)
- Blackgum forest (6%)
- Bay forest (6%)

Major steps of swamp succession are: open lake, prairie, shrub forest, and then tree forest.

370,000 acres of the Okefenokee Swamp are classified as wetlands.

There are 233 species of birds that have been identified in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, 49 species of mammals, 64 species of reptiles, 37 species of amphibians and 39 species of fish.

Endangered species found on the refuge include the red-cockaded woodpecker, American bald eagle, and the wood stork. The American alligator was formerly listed as an endangered species. Its population has recovered to the point that it has been taken off the Endangered Species List. The American alligator is now classified as "threatened due to similarity of appearance," because its hide is very similar to those of other crocodilians which may be extremely endangered. It was removed from the Endangered Species List in June of 1987.

Insectivorous (carnivorous) plants include golden trumpet, hooded, parrot and trumpet pitcher plants, sundews (2 species), bladderworts (4 species), butterworts (3 species).

There are 621 species of plants found on the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

The Suwannee Canal was dug 1891-1893 in an attempt to drain the swamp to facilitate logging and eventual crop cultivation. The canal project was abandoned after 11½ miles of canal were

completed into the swamp. The Suwannee Canal now serves as an access route to eastern and south central portions of the swamp.

Large amounts of timber were removed from the swamp from 1909-1927 by the Hebard Cypress Company. Over 400 million feet of timber, most of it cypress, were removed during this period.

Large fires in the swamp run in a 20-30 year cycle. Intense fires sometimes create prairies and occasionally deep lakes. Dates of large fires in the Okefenokee are : 1844, 1860, 1910, 1932, 1954.

There are five entrances to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge:

Main Entrance - Suwannee Canal Recreation Area (Folkston).

Secondary East Entrance - Kingfisher Landing (Between Folkston and Waycross).

West Entrance - Stephen C. Foster State Park (Fargo).

Secondary West Entrance - Suwannee River Sill (Fargo).

North Entrance - Okefenokee Swamp Park (Waycross).

Visitation at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is approximately 400,000 people per year.

Native Americans occupied the Okefenokee Swamp as early as 2500 B.C. Tribes of the Deptford Culture, the Swift Creek Culture, and the Weeden Island Culture occupied sites within the Okefenokee. The last tribe to seek sanctuary in the swamp, the Seminoles, conducted raids on settlers in surrounding areas. An armed militia led by General Charles R. Floyd ended the era in 1850, by driving the Seminoles into Florida.