Lake Drummond

Lake Drummond, at 3,100 acres, is the largest natural lake in Virginia. The lake was formed about 4,000 years ago, likely after a fire burned away several feet of peat soils. Peat from the swamp's organic soil colors the lake's water a dark brown, but despite its murky appearance, the lake is only about three feet deep in most places.

The lake's acidity and dark color limits the abundance of plants in the lake. Despite this, the lake is home to several species of fish, including mud sunfish, yellow perch, brown and yellow bullhead catfish, bowfin and crappie. Contrary to popular myth, there are no alligators in the lake.

In the winter, the lake provides a resting place for thousands of migratory birds including Tundra Swans and Snow Geese. In the summer, keep an eye out for Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets, as well as Northern Parula Warblers and Prothonotary Warblers nesting in the cypress trees. The shore of the lake is also home to a Bald Eagle nest.

Lake Drummond is the main source of water for the Dismal Swamp Canal, which borders the eastern edge of the refuge. The canal, originally dug by hand with slave labor, was initially proposed by George Washington. It was also an important strategic position during the American Civil War. The canal is still in use today, making it the oldest continually-operating canal in America.

Please check our web site or call the refuge headquarters for current information on auto access into the Railroad Ditch Trail. The refuge office is open Monday-Friday from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. The office is closed on weekends and federal holidays.

Hiking and biking are allowed on refuge trails, including the Railroad Ditch Trail, everyday, sunrise to sunset.

The Railroad Ditch Trail is occasionally closed for hunts, maintenance, prescribed burns and other management events.

Great Dismal Swamp
National Wildlife Refuge
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Suffolk, VA 23434
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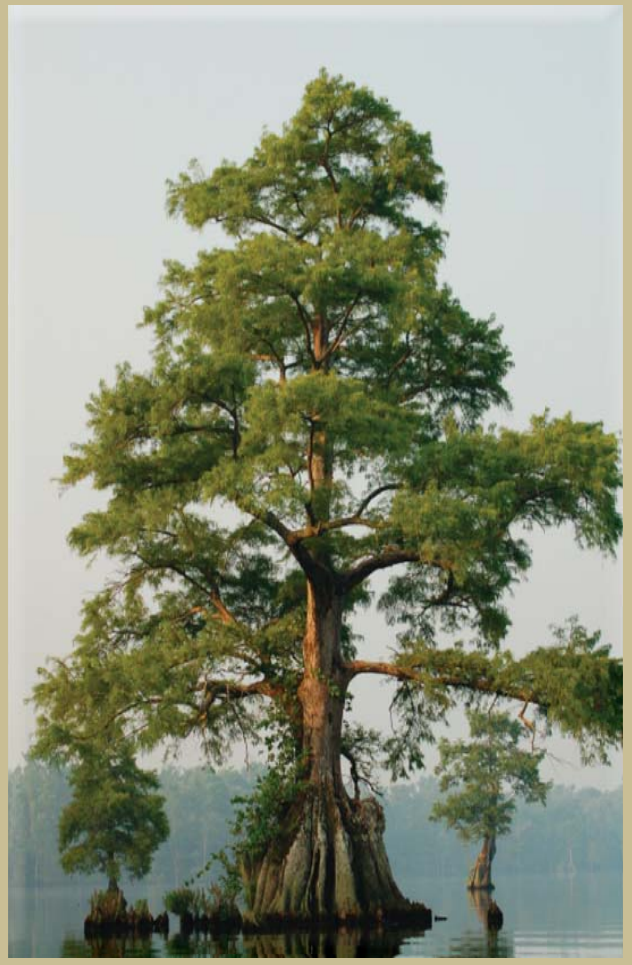
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Great Dismal Swamp
National Wildlife Refuge



Railroad Ditch Trail Guide

Sights and stops along the way to Lake Drummond

Welcome to the Great Dismal Swamp!

The Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge is a place of both ecological importance and historical significance. The refuge is the largest intact remnant of a vast habitat that once covered more than one million acres of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Over 200 species of birds and nearly 100 species of butterflies and skippers have been identified on the refuge. It is also home to the largest black bear population in eastern Virginia.

The Auto tour route is a popular way to see Lake Drummond, but there are plenty of other sights along the way. As you drive, please watch out for snakes and turtles sunning themselves in the road. And be sure to bring your binoculars and cameras, because you never know what you might see!

Pines Trail

Begin your tour by walking the Pines Trail, a quarter-mile loop around the refuge headquarters that winds through a stand of pines, including recently planted long leaf pines. Long leaf pines once dominated the Southeast, but logging and development have reduced them to only about 5% of their original range.

The refuge conducts prescribed burns in this area every few years. Carefully burning the forest under controlled conditions prevents the buildup of plant matter that could fuel a larger, more destructive fire. Additionally, long leaf pines depend on periodic fires to clear out undergrowth and allow seeds to germinate. Burns also create a more diverse habitat for a variety of animals.

Some animals you might spot along the Pines Trail include: Redheaded Woodpeckers, Pileated Woodpeckers, Summer Tanagers, black rat snakes and deer.

Underground Railroad Pavilion

As you travel down Railroad Ditch, you will see the Underground Railroad Pavilion on your right. The pavilion was built to showcase the Great Dismal Swamp's role as a stop on the Underground Railroad as well as a hiding place for permanent, multi-generational communities of escaped slaves known as maroons. In 2004, the Great Dismal Swamp became the first National Wildlife Refuge designated as an important site on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. The Swamp will also be a featured exhibit in the new National Museum of African-American History and Culture being built on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Stop by the pavilion to learn more about this important aspect of American history.

Railroad-West Marsh

At the intersection of Railroad and West Ditches lies an area where the dense hardwood forest is replaced by tall marsh grasses and cypress trees. This 10-acre marsh was created through a series of prescribed burns, allowing a different habitat type to take hold.

The Railroad-West Marsh is home to several beaver lodges, including one that is visible from the road. You might also see otters, turtles, wood ducks, herons and mallards.

Future plans for the marsh include a boardwalk trail with several bird photography blinds, so be sure to come back and visit again!

West Ditch Boardwalk Trail

Midway down West Ditch, you will see a boardwalk trail on the right. The trail leads to a Bald Cypress tree approximately 800 years old. Although the entire Dismal Swamp has been logged, a few old-growth trees like this one remain. This tree was topped by lightning and is only about one-half to two-thirds of its original height. Centuries ago, much of the swamp was dominated by cypress like this one.

If you would like to walk out to the tree, please park your car along the opposite side of the road so others can drive past.

Lateral West Fire Scar

In recent years, several severe wildfires have affected the swamp. The 2008 South One Fire lasted 121 days and burned 4,800 acres. It was followed in 2011 by the Lateral West Fire, which burned 6,300 acres, much of which was in the South One fire scar, and smoldered for nearly four months. The elevation in the fire scar is now up to five feet lower than it was before the fire, and it will take centuries for this peat to regenerate.

Fire has always been a part of the Dismal Swamp's history, especially during times of drought. Wildfires in the swamp are difficult to put out because even the swamp's peat soils can burn. In the early part of the 20th century, a fire raged for three years. As the area surrounding the swamp has become more populated, however, fire suppression and prevention have become a priority.