

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is one of over 550 refuges throughout the United States and its territories. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Okefenokee Swamp as a refuge in 1937. Most of the refuge is protected by the Wilderness Act of 1964, where *“the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”*

The National Wildlife Refuge System administers a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Swamp Island Drive is an 8-mile driving, biking and walking loop. This guide corresponds to the numbered markers seen along the drive. Please keep the following in mind as you explore the drive and its trails:

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The speed limit is 15 miles per hour. Watch for wildlife, pedestrians, and bicyclists.

All rules of the road apply—passengers must remain inside vehicles, including pickup trucks, while moving.

Prepare for biting flies, mosquitoes, and ticks. Avoid the fire ant mounds.

Feeding wildlife is strictly prohibited. Do not throw items at or otherwise disturb the wildlife. Never touch an alligator!

Litter should not be part of the landscape. Put all trash and garbage in the receptacles provided. Thank you!

- 1. Canal Diggers Trail— 1/2 mile**—The deep channel you crossed is the Suwannee Canal, which was built in 1891 in an attempt to drain the swamp into the St. Marys River and to the Atlantic Ocean. The goal was to reach the cypress forests for logging and to create farmland. After 12 miles of canal was dug, the company abandoned the project in 1895 due to lack of funds and unstable sand banks at this end.



However, sand is essential for gopher tortoises, which dig deep burrows.



- 2. Longleaf Pine Restoration** can be seen all along the drive.

Once covering 90 million acres in the southeast, fewer than 3 million acres of longleaf pine remain. Prior to establishment of the refuge, most of the longleaf had been harvested, leaving only deformed culls and saplings. While slash pine became the commercial tree of choice, the refuge is restoring the longleaf where it had been eliminated. Forest management selectively thins areas for natural regeneration, and longleaf seedlings are planted in openings.

- 3.** A slight elevation change created this **hardwood hammock** where oaks and other deciduous trees are common. Black bears and turkeys feed on acorns and other fruit here.



- 4. The pond** on the right was dug to supply sand for the road you are traveling on. It is a popular area to observe alligators. Almost every year there is a female alligator with young. Courtship begins around April and mating occurs in May. Eggs are laid in June or July and the young hatch two months later. The female aggressively defends her young, so keep your distance!



- 5.** Although the **bat box** to the right was built to attract these flying mammals, they have found adequate roosts in hollow trees and have never used it.



The **Upland Discovery Trail** to the left is a short loop featuring white-banded trees, home



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of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Two of the trees contain artificial nesting cavities. Loss of the mature longleaf pine forest is a major reason the species is endangered. These birds depend on the longleaf pine forest, and require mature trees that are at least 60 years old.

Those trees generally have red heart disease which makes the cavity soft and easier to excavate. However, since these woodpeckers drill into living trees, it takes them longer to complete a cavity than other woodpeckers that use dead trees. The white bands indicate roosting trees where the birds live in family groups. A breeding pair is helped by the male offspring from the previous year to raise the chicks.

Most of the commercial timber plantations outside the refuge are harvested 20 years after planting for quick yield. Much of the longleaf habitat disappeared because of conversion to slash pine for pulpwood.



- 6.** The right side of the Swamp Island Drive was ignited on June 13, 2011 for suppression purposes during a **wild-fire**. This was not an ideal situation and the timber was lost. Blue paint means trees are designated for removal.

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Under controlled conditions, **prescribed fires** are used to keep the understory in check and kill less desirable tree seedlings without devastating an entire stand. Longleaf pines are adapted to natural lightning-caused fire and depend on it for survival. The left side of the drive has been burned under prescription every three to four years.



7. Wildlife openings you passed are the small fields on either side of the drive. These areas are mowed to stimulate new plant growth. White-tailed deer, bobwhite quail and turkey are drawn to the young



growth and forage in these openings, making them more visible.

8. The federally threatened eastern indigo snake, although secretive, is an important part of the food web. At lengths up to 8.5 feet, it is North America's longest snake.



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9. The long, narrow ponds along the left side of the road are called **borrow ditches** where material for the road was dug. You could say it was "borrowed" and never



returned.

They are rich in aquatic animal and plant life. Keep a lookout for alligators and turtles. You may also see hooded pitcher plants and two kinds of butterworts growing along the bank, as well as bladderworts in the water. All three are among Okefenokee's famous carnivorous plants. Snakes are also abundant so watch where you step.

10. Imagine returning home from a day in town in 1860. As you crossed the small stretch of swamp that you see on either side of the road, you would know you were almost home. A slight rise brings you onto **Chesser Island** where the W.T. Chesser family settled in 1858.



11. Chesser Island Homestead was built by Tom and Iva Chesser in 1927. Although sugar cane was this pioneer family's cash crop, they also hunted, kept livestock, tended beehives, and had a substantial garden. Turpentine, made from pine resin, also provided an income. Swamp settlers were a self-sufficient and industrious people. Walking among this homestead, you get a feel for what it was like as an early settler on the edge of the Swamp.

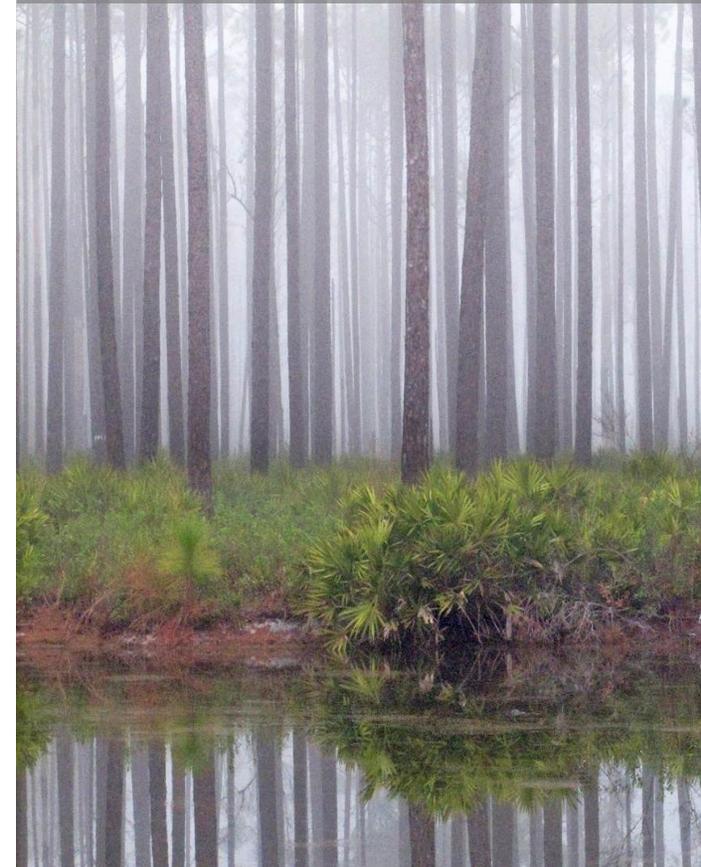


12. The Chesser Island boardwalk extended 3/4 mile into the swamp and was an integral part of the visitor experience. Then in June 2011, wildfire consumed it.

Reconstruction has begun and will follow the same path to a 40 foot observation tower. However, it will be more fire-resistant, with a recycled plastic-wood composite, metal posts and a sprinkler system. Completion is expected in August.



Come again to see the many seasons of the Okefenokee.



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Swamp Island Drive Guide

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