

Okefenokee

National Wildlife Refuge



photo: USFWS



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photo: J. Taylor

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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1936.
- Acres: 401,880 (628 square miles) roughly 35 miles north to south and 25 miles east to west.
- Located in Charlton, Ware, and Clinch counties, Georgia as well as Baker County, Florida.
- Location summary: the refuge's northern boundary is located just south of Waycross, Georgia. The eastern boundary is just west of a line extending from Folkston, Georgia to Jacksonville, Florida. The western boundary of the refuge parallels U.S. 441 from about Lake City, Florida to Homerville, Georgia.
- Administers Banks Lake NWR.

Natural History

- The swamp is thought to be 6,000-8,000 years old. It is contained in a saucer-shaped depression that drains toward the south and southwest. Drainage from the swamp forms the headwaters for the St. Marys River and the Suwannee River.
- Indians inhabited the swamp for centuries and coined the term "Okefenokee" which means "land that trembles when you walk on it."
- The Swamp survived an attempt at draining in the late 1800's and was logged extensively in the early 1900's before becoming a refuge in 1937 by declaration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Financial Impact of the Refuge

- 30.5-person staff.
- Refuge hosts over 400,000 visitors annually.
- Resident and non-resident visitors generate in excess of \$64 million yearly to Charlton, Ware, and Clinch counties, Georgia.

Refuge Objectives

- To provide protection to the unique environmental qualities of the Okefenokee ecosystem.
- To provide optimum habitat and protection for endangered and threatened species.
- To provide optimum habitat for a wide diversity of fish, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.
- To provide opportunities for fish and wildlife oriented recreation, interpretation and environmental education.

Management Tools

- Prescribed burning.
- Wildlife and wildland research and surveys.
- Law enforcement.
- Interpretation/education.
- Wildfire (natural burns).
- Forest management.

Public Use Opportunities

- Trails (hiking and boating).
- Auto tour route.
- Fishing.
- Hunting.
- Observation towers.
- Boardwalks.
- Wildlife observation.
- Photography.
- Wilderness canoe trails.
- Camping.

Calendar of Events

February: Wings Over the Swamp.

March: St. Marys River Clean-up.

April: National Wildlife Week Celebration, Earth Day Art Festival.

May: Migratory Bird Day. National Fishing Day.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

September: National Public Lands Day.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week, Okefenokee Festival, deer hunting.

November: Cane Grinding.

December: Christmas on Chesser Island.

Questions and Answers

Do alligators and snakes get in the boat with you?

These are wild animals and are more afraid of you than you are of them. Give them plenty of room, and they will avoid you.

What time do you feed the wildlife?

We do not feed, nor do we allow visitors to feed, wildlife. Feeding destroys their natural fear of people and encourages altercations between you and wildlife.

What is the most severe threat to Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge?

Increasing local visitation and the need for Refuge Visitor Services in the face of declining and flat line budget levels (not adjusted for annual inflation) are driving staffing declines and adjustments to visitor services that are less than complimentary to the Refuge, the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Economic activity in and around the refuge including but not limited to residential home development along refuge boundary lines, local and regional highway and infra-structure improvement as well as fuel prices and other economic factors are projected to increase daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly visitation as well as individualized requests for partnerships, special uses of refuge resources, and other visitor services directly related to the operation and management of the Refuge and the designated Okefenokee Wilderness Area.

However, flat line and declining refuge budgets are forcing staffing cuts, declines in operational budgets, as well as adjustments to current employee duty schedules and other work assignments. Refuge managers are currently planning staff cuts, and cuts to services offered which may include employee re-assignments, partial or temporary closure of facilities, altering hours of operation, reductions of participation in special events and other community activities. Refuge managers have been challenged with identifying and successfully implementing a plan for “Doing Less with Less Funding and Manpower.”

Why are your State Park and the Parks at the other entrances so different?

Okefenokee is a National Wildlife Refuge, not a park. Our primary emphasis here is protecting wildlife and habitat. People (visitors) and the recreational facilities they need for support are a secondary aspect of what we do. Visitor use is encouraged at refuges to educate the public about what we do for wildlife.

Where do I get the airboat ride?

There is no airboat use at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.