The watery world of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge may be the only place in the U.S. where such an inhospitable-sounding combination adds up to perfect camping.

I almost didn’t go at all. I had no campsite reservation and was yet to be persuaded that spending the night in a tent in the middle of a gator-filled swamp wasn’t pure insanity.

But I’m one of those travelers who can’t pass up an opportunity, however life-threatening and soggy it sounds. So when I entered the visitors’ center at the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, which straddles the border between Georgia and Florida, and was told they just happened to have a walk-up camping permit for that night, I started loading the canoe.

Iconically, like so much of our public lands, the reason we can access the Okefenokee area at all is because of previous logging activity. Back in the 1800s the Okefenokee Swamp was heavily dredged in an attempt to drain it so loggers could more easily get at the vast cypress groves.

That trick didn’t work, but 11½ miles of canals were eventually cleared, and by 1927 the Hebardi Cypress Company had removed more than 430 million board feet of timber from the area. Ten years later an executive order designated the area a National Wildlife Refuge, and today its nearly 400,000 acres constitute the largest (and wettest) national wildlife refuge in the eastern United States.

SWAMP FROM THE GATOR

But I'm not thinking about logging as I slip the tip of my tuffa-lunged cane silently out of the familiarity of my terrestrial world and into the wetnose unknown of the Okefenokee, stained coffee-brown from tannic acid leaking out of some of the swamp's 25 species of plants, including the towering Spanish moss-covered cypress trees near those loggers. There was no body to paddle through. During the roughly 5-mile loop I made out to the Round Top Shelter and back, I averaged 500 strokes per mile. You do the math.

That kind of exertion is a good reason to pause frequently and enjoy the complete silence, disturbed only by the cheerful sounds of Florida Cooter turtles splashing into the water and the mysterious swoosh of birds' wings overhead. What you won't hear are people. Even though the refuge attracts nearly half a million visitors a year, I saw only four other paddlers during my two days on the swamp.

Tent

I was getting comfortable with the gators and the swamp but was still uncertain about spending the night in their midst until I guided up to the Round Top Shelter and huddled my camp near up onto the platform to prevent any hiccups from leaping into it from the water.

The Round Top— one of five wood shelter campites throughout the refuge—is a wooden wooden platform built a few inches above the water line, complete with partial roof, a large picnic table and benches around the perimeter plus a very clean composting toilet. The other three designated camping areas in the refuge are on dry land, including one unoccupied cabin on Floyd's Island.

Perhaps the nicest thing about the campites in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is that each is reserved for a single camping party and the platforms are spaced miles apart, that's the place to myself. The spot was so secluded that there really was no need to move the outhouse door and the Okefenokee is now on my very short list of great places to camp.

But I wasn't entirely alone, and the silence I'd enjoyed during the paddle in was wonderfully broken by the sound of a beautiful midsummer night's descent. First the frogs, the most vocal of the 140 species of amphibian, came to life in a busy free-swimming cacophony. Then members of the 258 species of birds here in the refuge— including red-tailed hawks, blue herons and wood ducks—decided it was their turn.

The conversation was dominated by dozens of elegantly enormous sandhill cranes in the process of courting and bedding down for the night. As the flew low over the shelter, they spread the ground with their trills while preening their feathers, standing tall and silent, as the crows stared at them from their nearby trees.

In the middle of the night I awoke to what sounded like a splash, thrill and crash of an alligator's stealth attack on the nearby sandhill cranes. The next morning a satisfied-looking gator watched as I packed a fishing bag, ready to glide off it's world and back into the refuge.

THE OKEFENOKKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The refuge straddles the border between Georgia and Florida and is the nearly 400,000-acre.

IF YOU GO

WHERE

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge; www.fws.gov/okefenokee

HOW

Reserve wilderness canoeing and camping permits up to two months in advance by calling 912-426-3331. You can receive up to five nights of camping in the refuge except during the peak months of March and April, when a five-night maximum is imposed.

COST

$10 per person per day for a Wilderness Canoeing Permit that includes camping, $20 per day for group canoe.

DON'T FORGET

• Plenty of drinking water. The swamp water has so many suspended organic particles that filter out pump-style water purifiers and it remains muddy and unappealing even after being treated with non-pump methods such as UV light purification systems or iodine drops.


• A lightweight bladder, life and emergency kit such as the Adventure Medical Kits Ultralight Paddler, which contains in its own waterproof bag, 10 liters, www.adventuremedicalkits.com/products/kit-ultralight-paddler.html.

• A single-use toilet paper (it breaks down faster) for the composting toilets provided at all camping areas within the refuge.

Photos by ERIC MCLEOD, Special to the Star-Tribune.

Above: The moss-covered cypress trees that escaped the loggers, or have grown since, provide safe refuge for 25 species of birds that live in the refuge. Below: The refuge contains about 120 miles of well-marked and color-coded canoe trails, many of which are off-limit to motor boats.