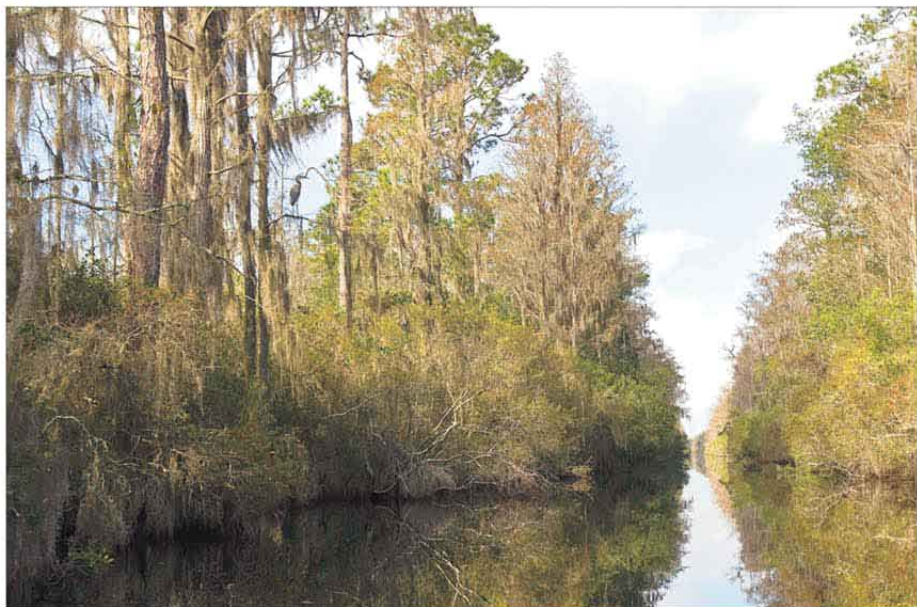


ADVENTURE ISSUE

## Gators. Tent. Swamp. Really.



Canals dug long ago by loggers created miles of water trails that are now used by canoeists to navigate through the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. By day the paddlers spend their time surrounded by moss-covered trees, and at night they pitch their tents and roll out their sleeping bags on rugged camp platforms that keep them elevated only a few inches above the alligator-infested swamp.

Story by KAREN CATCHPOLE • Special to the Star Tribune | Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune

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.

Ironically, 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 Hebard 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.

## Gators. Tent. Swamp. Really.

## SWAMP FROM GI

## Gator

But I'm not thinking about logging as I slip the tip of my huge rented canoe silently out of the familiarity of my terrestrial world and into the watery unknown of the Okefenokee, stained coffee-brown from tannic acid leaching out of some of the swamp's 62 species of plants, including the towering Spanish moss-covered cypress trees that those loggers wanted so badly.

To make a landlubber's entry into this watery world a little easier, the refuge has taken the original 110 miles of logging canals and expanded them to create 120 miles of easy-to-follow, well-signed and color-coded canoe trails with a series of designated camping areas along the way. I headed out on the Purple Trail toward the Round Top Shelter.

Within half a mile of the put-in, the once-endangered American alligator, one of 64 species of reptiles in the refuge, made it clear that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. They were everywhere—in the water, under my canoe, sunning on the banks—often with their massive jaws ajar as if to make sure I could see the rows of certain death inside.

The gators are so plentiful that I found myself pretty much at eye level with a never-ending cast of silently sinister gators, which average 8 to 14 feet long and are most active in the summer.

Luckily, the alligators proved to be surprisingly skittish and most of them dove off the banks or dropped below the water's surface, as if sucked under by gentle unseen forces, whenever I paddled past. Their Nervous Nelly nature and a sense of mutual respect prevented a run-in. I didn't try to turn them into handbags and the alligators didn't flip my canoe.

## Swamp

Native Americans named this swamp Okefenokee, which has been translated to mean "Land of the Trembling Earth," and that's no mere hyperbole or bit of historic romance. The Okefenokee is located over a 700-year-old depression that was once the bottom of the ocean. Through the years the sandy bottom of the depression has become covered with a slow-growing peat, which ranges in thickness from delicately thin layers to 15 feet.

Because the peat is unstable, you can make areas of the Okefenokee literally tremble by jumping on the ground. In addition to this wobbly swampland, the refuge also harbors 70 islands stable enough for black bear and deer to rove over them, as well as 60 lakes.

The Okefenokee is also remarkably flat with a mere 25-foot change in elevation throughout the refuge. This means you won't have to contend with rapids, but you will be faced with miles and miles of glassy, dark, seemingly bottomless water

to paddle through. During the roughly 25-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 enough reason to pass frequently and enjoy the complete silence, disturbed only by the cheerful sounds of Florida Cooters plopping 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 I was still uncertain about spending the night in their midst until I glided up to the Round Top Shelter and hauled my canoe up onto the platform to prevent any hitchhikers from leaping into it from the water.

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

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

But I wasn't entirely alone, and the silence I'd enjoyed during the paddle-in was pleasantly broken as the sun began its slow descent. First the frogs, the most vocal of the refuge's 37 species of amphibian, came to life in a crazy free-jazz cacophony. Then members of the 233 species of birds that live in or migrate through the refuge—including red-tailed hawks, bald herons and wood storks—decided it was their turn.

The conversation was dominated by dozens of elegantly enormous sandhill cranes in the process of recovering and bedding down for the night. As the flock flew over, those already on the ground hollered in unison as if to guide them in with the avian version of "Hey! We're over here!"

The roof over Round Top Shelter provided enough cover to act as a blind and birds, mammals and amphibians traveled over, under and past me for hours without giving me a second glance—except for the alligators.

As I put up my tent (my initial plan—to sleep without one to afford a clearer view of the stars was thwarted by the arrival of



Photos by ERIC MOHL. Special to the Star Tribune

Above: The moss-covered cypress trees that escaped the loggers, or have grown since, provide safe refuge for 23 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.



mosquitoes), I noticed one alligator lurking a foot or two off the edge of the platform.

All I could see were its eyes. Glossy orbs the same color as the still, dark water, they came into view only when errant rays of the setting sun glinted off them.

The eyes certainly saw me, too, and they didn't waver as I

dragged off the platform by the foot of my sleeping bag!

Although the rangers had assured me that the alligators have never crawled up onto a camping platform, there was no barrier to stop them.

A chorus of more benign swamp inhabitants distracted me from those disturbing thoughts and I fell asleep to the sounds of singing frogs, the occasional buzzing mosquito and dozens of snoring birds, feathers rustling softly from their nearby roosts.

In the middle of the night I awoke to what sounded like the splash, thrash and crash of an alligator's stealth attack on the nearby sandhill crane.

The next morning a satisfied-looking gator watched as I packed up, ready to glide out of his world and back into mine.

As pitch blackness took over my inferior human eyes lost sight of the gator. What's to stop that alligator from hauling itself up onto the platform as I sleep? And what would it feel like to be

## THE OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The refuge straddles the border between Georgia and Florida and covers nearly 400,000 acres.



Source: USGS, iStockphoto

## 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 1-912-496-3311. You can reserve up to five nights of camping in the refuge except during the peak months of March and April, when a two-night maximum is imposed.

## COST

\$10 per person per day for a Wilderness Canoeing permit that includes camping. \$20 per day for a two-man canoe.

## DON'T FORGET

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

- Sunscreen and lots of it. I relied on extremely water- and sweat-resistant KINSEYS SPF 30 Fragrance Free Sunscreen Spray (\$18.99, www.kinseys.com/product.php?pg=sun-care-products&show=spf30spray) for protection against sunburn. And PABA-free formulas are perfect for sensitive skin and the nonaerosol pump spray is nice to the environment.

- A lightweight blister, bite and emergency kit such as the Adventure Medical Kits Ultralight Paddler, which comes in its own waterproof bag (535, 10 ounces, www.adventuremedicalkits.com/product.php?product=1088&catname=Paddler&gprname=Ultralight20Paddler).

- Single-ply toilet paper (it breaks down faster) for the composting toilets provided at all camping areas within the refuge.

Travel writer Karen Caputo and her photographer husband, Eric Mohl, embarked on a road trip through North, Central and South America more than three years ago and have logged more than 100,000 miles. Follow along at [www.thetravelyears.com](http://www.thetravelyears.com).