

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Okefenokee

*National Wildlife Refuge
The Swamp Island Drive
Trail Guide*



Swamp Island Drive is a 9-mile driving, biking, and walking loop. This guide corresponds to numbered markers.

Please keep the following in mind as you drive this trail:

The speed limit is 15 m.p.h. Remember to watch for bicyclists and wildlife.

Prepare for biting flies, mosquitos, and ticks. Biting fire ants build conical mounds — avoid them.

Feeding wildlife is dangerous and forbidden. Do not throw items at or otherwise disturb any animal.

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is one of 500 refuges operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It was established in 1937 to protect the native wildlife of this unique ecosystem.

1—Canal Digger's Trail

The 1/2 mile Canal Digger's Trail winds around the historic Suwannee Canal, which was built in 1891 in an attempt to drain the swamp. This unique trail takes you high on foot bridges, among upland pine forests, and low along the Suwannee Canal's flowing waters. An interpretive guide to this trail is available at the trailhead and the Visitor Center.

2—Wildlife Openings

The small fields on either side of the drive are wildlife openings, which are mowed to encourage new plant growth for wildlife such as white-tailed deer, bobwhite quail, and wild turkey. These openings also offer opportunities to view elusive wildlife.



3—Hardwood Plot

A slight elevation change creates this forest of mixed pine and hardwoods, rather than the more characteristic slash pine and saw-toothed palmetto. Water oak, wild grape, and persimmon provide food for black bears, turkeys, and other animals, while gopher tortoises and snakes use the dry sand for burrows.



4—The Pond

Alligators, kingfishers, kingbirds, and pileated woodpeckers are residents or visitors to the pond. Titi and wax myrtle plants can be seen along the pond's edge. Remember: Please do not feed or disturb the wildlife!

5—Upland Discovery Trail

Red-cockaded woodpeckers, an endangered species, may be found among these trees. The birds are identified by their large white cheek patches — the males have a red cockade, or small mark, behind their eyes. Red cockaded woodpeckers often nest in pine trees affected by “red heart”, a fungus which softens the tree's hard center. This makes excavating nest sites easier. Fewer mature pines available for nesting is a major reason that the species is endangered.



6—Superior Tree

A white band and sign mark the slash pine labelled “superior” in quality by the Georgia Forestry Commission. When applied to a tree, the term “superior” means that it has good form and growth rate. Periodically, the Commission will use live twigs from this tree to graft onto small rooted slash pines in an attempt to produce more trees with superior genes. The seeds from this new tree can then be cultivated for growing other trees.



7—Prescribed Burn

Compare the amount of vegetation in each marked area. This region has one of the highest rates of lightning strikes in the country, so care is taken to reduce wildfire damage. Prescribed burns

diminish the amount of fuel a wildfire may consume. Although fire is a natural element and aids in the regeneration of the swamp, certain areas need protection. Prescribed burns can also be an excellent tool to improve habitat for animals, such as the red-cockaded woodpecker.

8—Borrow Ditches

The long, narrow ponds stretching along the left side of the road are called “borrow ditches” and they are rich in aquatic and plant life. Most of Okefenokee’s ditches have carnivorous pitcher plants (both hooded and parrot) and bladderworts, some ditches have cattails and water lilies. These areas offer excellent wildflower viewing areas year-round, with orchids, rose pogonia, and iris. Borrow ditches are also home to turtles, alligators, and snakes.

9—Chesser Island

Chesser Island begins where the road forks into a one-way drive and was settled by the Chesser family in 1858. Evidence suggests that the

island was originally settled between 2500 and 1000 B.C. by Native Americans who lived in the swamp.

Because there has been so little archeological research done in this section of Georgia, much of their history and cultural

development is unknown. Fragments of their pottery and an Indian mound, which was probably built between 200 and 900 A.D., can be seen on the trail approaching the Chesser Island homestead.



10—Chesser Island Homestead

This homestead was built by the Chesser family in 1927 and is an example of how swamp pioneers lived in this harsh environment.

Although sugar cane and cane syrup were the family's cash crop, they also hunted, kept livestock and bee hives, and had a substantial garden. Swamp settlers were self-sufficient and industrious people and used many of the plants growing in the area. Saw-toothed palmettos were used for making woven fans and hats, and the stalks were lashed together to make brooms, as seen on the porch.



Turpentine was also lucrative. The resin of slash pines was collected until the tree could no longer be tapped, when it then would be harvested for lumber.

11—Slash Pine Stand

Slash pines were planted here in 1965. Refuge foresters are now thinning the trees to make better habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers and other animals. Staff also create openings, plant longleaf pine seedlings and burn undergrowth to manage uplands.

12—Boardwalk and Observation Tower

The boardwalk winds through 3/4 of a mile of dense swamp growth, open prairie, and ponds, before reaching the fifty-foot observation tower overlooking Chesser Prairie and





Seagrove Lake. Pig frogs are perhaps the most vocal animal along the boardwalk, but are rarely seen. Birds such as northern parula and prothonotary warblers are warm-weather residents and may be seen and heard. Sandhill cranes may be spotted year-round, as can many species of egrets and herons.

For more information on the refuge, contact:

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