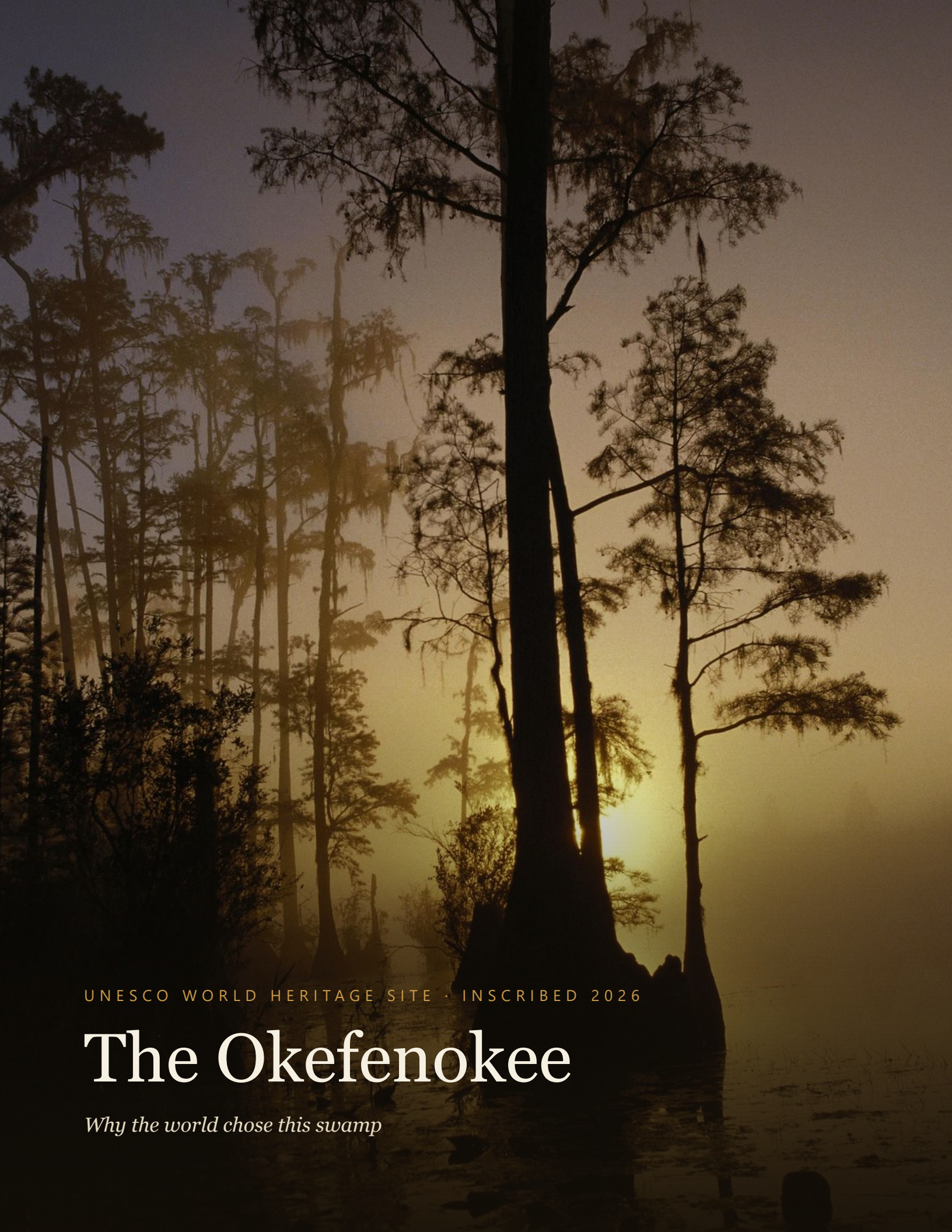




UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE · INSCRIBED 2026

The Okefenokee

Why the world chose this swamp

On July 26, 2026, the world said yes.

Meeting in Busan, South Korea, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge on the World Heritage List — the register of the places on Earth judged to hold "outstanding universal value" for all of humanity. The Okefenokee now stands alongside the Grand Canyon, the Great Barrier Reef, and the Galápagos.

It is **Georgia's first World Heritage Site**, and the **first National Wildlife Refuge in American history** to earn the designation. Fewer than 1,250 places on the planet carry this recognition; only 27 of them are in the United States.

The nomination was decades in the making — first proposed in 1982, formally submitted in 2024, and carried by the staff of the refuge, the nonprofit Okefenokee Swamp Park, and the communities that ring the swamp. This little book is drawn from the official nomination dossier: the case, in plain language, for why this blackwater wilderness belongs to the world.

407,000

ACRES PROTECTED — 164,565
HECTARES OF SWAMP AND
SAVANNA

1st

U.S. NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
EVER INSCRIBED

27

WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN THE U.S.
— THIS IS GEORGIA'S ONLY ONE

1937

PROTECTED BY EXECUTIVE ORDER
AS A WILDLIFE REFUGE

1974

DESIGNATED FEDERAL WILDERNESS
BY CONGRESS

2026

INSCRIBED ON THE WORLD
HERITAGE LIST



THE PLACE

The Land of Trembling Earth

The name came first. In the Muskogean languages of the people who knew it longest, *Owa-ka-fenokah* — "shaking water in a low place." Step off a boat onto what looks like solid ground and the ground moves: vast blankets of peat, buoyed by the gases of their own slow decay, rise from the swamp floor and float. Trees grow on them. The earth trembles underfoot.

The Okefenokee is the largest lowland peatland in the world's subtropics fed primarily by rain — not by rivers flowing in, but by the sky. That single fact shapes everything: water the color of steeped tea, stained by tannins and nearly as pure as rainfall; a mosaic of open "prairies," cypress forests, shrublands, and lake runs; and a wilderness that has kept its original footprint while nearly everything around it changed.

To the Creek Nation, whose ancestors rest here, it was and remains "a most blissful spot on Earth."

A wilderness built by water and fire

Most landscapes are shaped by one force. The Okefenokee is the argument between two. **Water** fills the basin — about 52 inches of rain a year — soaking the peat, flooding the prairies, setting the terms of life for everything that swims, wades, or blooms. **Fire** answers. Lightning storms ignite the dry margins, sweep the pine uplands, and in drought years burn across the swamp itself.

The two forces keep each other honest. Fire holds back the forest that would otherwise swallow the open prairies, clears the ground longleaf pine seedlings need, and bakes organic matter into charcoal that resists decay — one of the secrets of the peat. Water decides where fire can and cannot go, then refills what fire opened up. The result is a

shifting mosaic of seventeen distinct plant communities, none of them permanent, all of them ancient.

Around the wetland heart stand the refuge's pine savannas — over 27,000 acres of an ecosystem that once covered two-thirds of the southeastern coastal plain and of which **less than 4 percent remains on Earth**. The refuge is restoring its longleaf stands tree by tree, burn by burn.

Nothing here is managed into stillness. The refuge's founding wisdom, written by its own biologists in 1941, still holds: the single factor that controls life in the swamp is the rise and fall of water. The swamp is left to breathe.



Prescribed fire on the refuge — the tool that keeps a fire-born landscape alive. USFWS photo.



THE ARCHIVE

Five thousand years, written in peat

Under the dark water lies the swamp's memory. Peat — the compressed, waterlogged remains of everything that has ever grown here — has been accumulating on the swamp floor for roughly five millennia, in places many feet deep. Because the water is acid and starved of oxygen, almost nothing fully decays. Pollen, charcoal, seeds, the chemistry of ancient rain: it is all still down there, layer upon layer, in order.

Scientists read those layers the way historians read archives. The peat records which plants grew here century by century, when the great fires came, how climate swung wet and dry across five thousand years. Very few places on Earth hold so long and so legible a record of a living landscape — and fewer still where the landscape writing the record is itself intact and still writing.

One swamp, two rivers

The Okefenokee gives birth to two rivers that could not be less alike. From the swamp's southwest corner the **Suwannee** slips out through cypress and sand ridge and wanders 240 miles across Florida to the Gulf. From the southeast, the **St. Marys** runs the other way — a blackwater border river, curling along the Georgia–Florida line to the Atlantic.

Everything both rivers carry begins as rain over this basin. The swamp is their headwater, their filter, and their guarantee: because the Okefenokee is whole, two river systems and the communities along them inherit clean, naturally regulated water. Flat as it looks, the swamp's terraced basins step down just forty feet from rim to outlet — enough to keep the whole vast sheet of water slowly, permanently in motion.



Living water — a boat run through the swamp's interior. USFWS photo.

A stronghold in the numbers

The Okefenokee sits inside the North American Coastal Plain — one of only 36 recognized biodiversity hotspots on Earth. The refuge covers just 0.15 percent of that vast province. What it shelters, on that sliver of ground, is out of all proportion:

856

VASCULAR PLANT SPECIES

415

VERTEBRATE SPECIES

238

BIRD SPECIES ACROSS THE SEASONS

90

REPTILE & AMPHIBIAN SPECIES —
EXTRAORDINARY FOR THE
LATITUDE

59%

OF THE ENTIRE HOTSPOT'S
VERTEBRATE SPECIES, ON 0.15% OF
ITS AREA

41%

OF THE HOTSPOT'S ENDEMIC
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS
PROTECTED HERE

The refuge harbors threatened species that have vanished from most of their old range — the red-cockaded woodpecker, the eastern indigo snake, the wood stork — alongside black bears, sandhill cranes, carnivorous pitcher plants, and swallow-tailed kites. It is not a museum of survivors. It is a working ecosystem, complete.



Hooded pitcher plants — the swamp's nutrient-poor waters taught its plants to hunt. USFWS photo.



THE KEYSTONE

The engineer in the dark water

By the mid-twentieth century, hide hunting had stripped American alligators from most of the South; populations collapsed by 80 percent. The Okefenokee's interior — remote, roadless, nearly unreachable — was one of the strongholds where the species held on. From here it came back.

In the swamp the alligator is not just a resident; it is infrastructure. The "gator holes" it digs hold open water through drought, sheltering fish and inviting wading birds when the prairies go dry. Ecologists call it a keystone species and an ecosystem engineer. The swamp simply would not work the same without it.



THE FLYWAY

Refuge, in the oldest sense

The refuge was created in 1937 for exactly this: "a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife." Two hundred thirty-eight species answer the invitation — herons and egrets stalking the boat runs, ibis and wood storks working the prairies, sandhill cranes bugling over Chesser Prairie in winter, warblers pouring through the cypress in spring.

For a birder, the swamp offers what almost nowhere else in the eastern United States can: the birds, in numbers, in a landscape that looks and sounds as it did before the country around it was built.



The Milky Way over a dark wilderness treeline — National Park Service photo. On a moonless night at Stephen C. Foster, this is the sky overhead.

AFTER DARK

The darkest skies in the East

When the sun goes down, the Okefenokee offers a second wilderness. Ringed by refuge and timberland instead of city light, Stephen C. Foster State Park — deep inside the swamp's western entrance — was certified an International Dark Sky Park in 2016, one of the few in the eastern United States. The darkness there is described as nearly without parallel east of the Mississippi.

On a moonless night the Milky Way stands over the cypress like weather. Barred owls call across the water; alligator eyes catch red in a flashlight beam. The swamp at night is not the swamp with the lights off — it is another country, and it is three hours from six million people.

Four thousand years of belonging

People have lived with the trembling earth for at least 4,500 years. Permanent settlement in the swamp began around 2500 B.C.E.; the Deptford, Swift Creek, and Weeden Island cultures all left their mark on its islands. When Europeans arrived, the Oconi — a Timucuan chiefdom — held islands in the swamp's interior.

Contact was catastrophe. Within a century, disease and violence had reduced the native population of the Southeast by four-fifths. The survivors of many nations — Creek, Oconi, Yuchi, Hitchiti, joined by people escaping slavery — regathered in and around the swamp, and by the late 1700s the world knew them by a new name:

the Seminoles. For them the Okefenokee was what it had always been — a refuge. A Seminole town of fourteen or fifteen houses stood on Floyds Island as late as 1838, under oaks and laurels, until the wars of removal drove the people south into Florida and west on the Trail of Tears.

The story is not past. The Muscogee (Creek) Nation regards the swamp as a sacred landscape holding the remains of their ancestors, and in 2020 began the formal process — welcomed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service — to have the entire refuge recognized as a Traditional Cultural Property.



Chase Prairie, photographed for Popular Science Monthly, 1909 — the swamp as the first scientific surveys found it.

The swampers

In the nineteenth century a different people made the swamp's edge home — piney-woods settler families who ran cattle and hogs on open range, made cane syrup, hunted bear and gator, and asked nothing of the outside world. History calls them the swampers. They called it living.

In 1858 the Chesser family settled a 25-acre island on the swamp's eastern side that still bears their name. Their descendants lived on Chesser Island for a full century — the homestead that stands there today, hand-built of heart pine, still keeps its yard swept sand-bare in the old style. When the last Chessers left in 1958, they were the last of the swamper families to leave the Okefenokee. Their island joined the refuge in 1972, and their home is now one of its most beloved stops.

"Men and women possessed and fostered a self-sufficient lifestyle, a strong sense of independence in thought and behavior, and a commitment to family relationships and traditions."

HISTORIAN C.T. TROWELL, ON THE OKEFENOKEE FRONTIER CULTURE

The swampers' voices — recorded, photographed, and remembered — are one of the reasons the world knows what a life woven into this wilderness looked like. Their history is inseparable from the swamp's.

The swamp they couldn't kill

The Okefenokee survived two industrial assaults that remade the rest of the South. In 1891 the Suwannee Canal Company bought 238,000 acres of the swamp from the State of Georgia with a plan to drain it for rice, sugar cane, and cotton. Captain Henry Jackson's crews spent five years cutting a canal eleven and a half miles into the swamp with steam dredges. The swamp declined to be drained. The scheme failed, the company went bankrupt, and the canal its dredges left behind is today a canoe trail.

Then came the saws. From 1909 to 1927 the Hebard Cypress Company ran logging railroads on pilings deep into the swamp, and more than a

million cubic meters of timber — much of it thousand-year cypress — went out on the rails. A company town of six hundred people stood on Billys Island. When the cutting ended, the swamp took the island back; what remains of the town is a few brick piles and rusted iron found after a prescribed burn.

Yet the loggers could not reach it all. Ancient cypress still stands in the places the railroads couldn't go, and a century of recovery has closed the forest over the scars. The lesson the swamp taught is the one the refuge was built on: left alone, it heals.



The Suwannee Canal today — a failed drainage scheme, reclaimed as a wilderness waterway. USFWS photo.

How America saved it

The campaign to save the Okefenokee is nearly as old as American conservation itself. Scientific surveys beginning in 1902 — Cornell naturalists, the Audubon Society — carried the swamp's wonders to the wider world. The Okefenokee Society formed in 1919 to fight for its protection; the Georgia Society of Naturalists took up the cause in 1929; a U.S. Senate delegation came, saw, and recommended.

In 1936 the federal government bought the swamp from the lumber company, and on March 30, 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 7593 establishing the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge — set apart, in its

founding words, as "a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife."

In 1974 Congress went further, designating nearly the entire refuge as federal wilderness under the National Wilderness Preservation System — the strongest protection American law can give a landscape. No roads. No development. No mechanized entry. The swamp's water levels rise and fall untouched; its fires are allowed their ancient work; 94 percent of the entire Okefenokee Swamp lies inside the refuge boundary.

Ninety years of restraint is the reason there was something left for the world to inscribe.



The east entrance, Suwannee Canal Recreation Area near Folkston. USFWS photo.



FROM ABOVE

The mosaic entire: open prairie, cypress forest, shrubland and shining water, woven together across seven hundred square miles — the largest rain-fed subtropical peatland on Earth, whole and working.



"Outstanding universal value," in plain words

World Heritage inscription requires proof against strict criteria. The Okefenokee was inscribed under two of them — the same two that carry sites like the Everglades and the Galápagos:

Criterion ix — a masterpiece of ecological process

The swamp is the world's largest example of its kind: a lowland subtropical peatland fed by rain. More than that, it is a living demonstration of how water and fire together create and maintain biodiversity — building peat, sustaining the imperiled longleaf pine savanna, keeping a seventeen-community mosaic in perpetual, healthy motion. These processes run here at full scale, uninterrupted, as almost nowhere else.

Criterion x — a stronghold for life itself

On a fraction of a percent of the North American Coastal Plain hotspot's area, the refuge protects a majority of its vertebrate species and two-fifths of its endemic reptiles and amphibians — along with 856 plants, 238 birds, and recovering populations of species that nearly vanished, from the American alligator to the red-cockaded woodpecker.

And the committee's essential test — *integrity* — is the swamp's quiet triumph: original footprint intact, water unregulated, fires natural, water quality among the purest of any American wetland. The world did not inscribe a relic. It inscribed a wilderness still entirely itself.

Three doors into the swamp

East — Folkston: the wilderness door

The Suwannee Canal Recreation Area is the refuge's main entrance and the paddler's gateway: the historic canal, the Chesser Island Homestead, a boardwalk into the prairie with an observation tower, and the Wildlife Drive winding through restored longleaf savanna. About forty percent of all refuge visits come through this door.

West — Fargo: the deep swamp

Stephen C. Foster State Park sits on Jones Island in the swamp's western interior — the closest a road gets to the heart of it. Boat tours, cabins, camping, the darkest certified night skies in the region, and the launch point for Billys Island and the Suwannee's headwaters.

North — Waycross: the classic view

Okefenokee Swamp Park, run by the 75-year-old nonprofit that helped carry the World Heritage bid, is the swamp's northern welcome: boat tours, wildlife exhibits, and the gentlest introduction for first-timers and families.



Sunset from a canoe — the swamp's oldest and best way in. USFWS photo.

Knowing the swamp

When to come. Every season is a different swamp. Winter brings sandhill cranes, bare cypress, and the clearest paddling; spring is wildflowers and birdsong; summer is thunderheads, gator bellows, and long green evenings; fall is low water, golden light, and quiet.

On the water. More than a hundred miles of marked boat trails cross the wilderness. Day paddlers can reach the prairies and back easily; overnight expeditions cross the swamp on raised platforms — among the most remarkable backcountry trips in the eastern United States.

Overnight permits are limited and reserved in advance, which is why the wilderness stays wild.

What you'll see. Alligators, almost certainly — the refuge holds one of the healthiest populations anywhere. Herons, egrets, ibis and cranes; carnivorous plants blooming in the prairies; and at night, if you stay, a sky with no competition.

Respect the place. This is designated wilderness and a sacred landscape. Pack out everything. Feed nothing. The swamp has been taking care of itself for five thousand years; it asks visitors only not to interfere.



Canal Run camp at dusk — overnight shelters stand on pilings above the water. USFWS photo.

A region rising with its swamp

A World Heritage Site does not stand alone. The Okefenokee is ringed by the communities of three Georgia counties — Charlton, Ware, and Clinch — whose towns are its gateways and whose people have been its keepers, guides, and storytellers for generations.

Folkston, Waycross, Fargo, Homerville, St. George: these are the places where a visit to the swamp begins and ends — where the boats are rented, the guides are hired, the biscuits are hot, and the stories are true. The inscription has set the region in motion: local partners are working together to welcome the world the swamp now belongs to, from new visitor experiences in the gateway towns to the preservation of the culture — Native, swamper, and modern — that gives this landscape its voice.

Up to 400,000 people already visit the refuge each year, and the world is coming. The communities of the Okefenokee intend to be ready — and to make sure that what the world finds here is the real thing: wild water, old stories, dark skies, and a welcome as genuine as the place itself.



Chase Prairie at low water. USFWS photo.



"Shaking water in a low place." Five thousand years of memory in the peat. The world has now promised what the swamp always deserved: that it will be handed on, whole.

Who we are. Blackwater Outdoor Journeys is a documentary film company based in St. George, Georgia — Charlton County, on the Okefenokee's doorstep. Rodney and Tina Thompson film real canoe expeditions on the blackwater rivers of the Deep South — the Okefenokee, the Suwannee, the St. Marys, the Satilla — carrying cameras where the roads don't go. Find the films on YouTube and the free Blackwater Paddler's Guide at blackwateroutdoorjourneys.com.

Drawn from the official UNESCO nomination dossier (United States of America, 2024) and the public record of the July 2026 inscription; every factual claim is sourced. Photographs: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and National Park Service (public domain), including images by George Gentry and Ryan Hagerty, and a 1909 Popular Science Monthly photograph. This is an independent publication, not endorsed by or affiliated with UNESCO, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, or the World Heritage Committee.

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