



Okefenokee Swamp, a hidden treasure

Giant, ghostly figures dance with the wind above the inky black reflective water of the swamp. There is a stillness in the air. The ghost figures' reflections watch silently as the still water captures every nuance of their master's wind dance. Looking back up river, I see that the water's reflections are clouded. But it seems too warm for fog. I must look closely to distinguish that the water's reflections are clouded by the layer of pollen floating on the water's surface. Viewed from this distance, the effect is like a low fog.

As the sun rises further, my giant ghost figures are becoming less menacing. It seems they are not ghosts at all, just huge Pond Cypress trees carpeted with Spanish moss backlit by the sun. However, the additional light reveals that there are real ghosts in this forest. The ghosts of ancient goliath trees long since sacrificed for their wood; wood so valuable that an elevated railroad was built in the river just to carry it out of the swamp. But all of that is gone now. All that remains are the stumps of the ancient goliaths, lurking in the dark water. For true tree lovers, like myself, these giant stumps are reminders of what has been lost. But that judgment may be too harsh and too premature, as these stumps have found a new purpose. They have become what the locals call Cypress flowerpots, nurseries for new trees to catch hold and start growing.

Suddenly, the morning's quiet is interrupted by a loud clap and splash. An alligator has been disturbed. Looking up, then down river I see numerous alligators in the black water. As we approach in our canoe, each alligator slowly and silently disappears into the water. First the tail, then the back and finally the head slips out of



sight, once our canoe is almost on top of it. I'm not sure, but I think that last alligator might be sizing us up for breakfast.

Speaking of breakfast, I'm thinking it is nearly time to head back. As we turn our canoe around, I realize we've experienced an amazing morning, deep in the Okefenokee Swamp with just a canoe and a paddle between us and the alligators. But I am not afraid; I'm mesmerized. The raw beauty is breath-taking as the water takes on the brilliant sapphire blue color of the sky, while the vegetation becomes almost an emerald green. The whole place is a canvas for all the blooming wildflowers, Yellow Pond Lilies or Spadderdock, Swamp Iris, Wild Azalea and Virginia Sweetspire, to name a few. If I were braver I might try stepping out onto the peat to experience the "Land of the Trembling Earth", the other name for the Okefenokee Swamp. But in the end, I think staying dry and safe in my canoe is a better idea.

There is so much to see and explore at the Okefenokee Swamp, a huge area of land in Southern Georgia and Northern Florida. Most of the swamp is protected in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), which offers three entrances. We chose the western most entrance, just outside Fargo, Georgia. It allows entry into the Stephen C. Foster State Park, situated within the NWR, which provides boat tours and rentals along with camping and hiking. It's also a great place to star gaze, as it is devoid of light pollution being so deep inside the swamp.

There is an incredible variety of plants and animals in the region due to the numerous Okefenokee habitats, which vary from peat-filled bog to lakes and islands to wet prairies to the Suwannee River. During a normal year, all of these habitats can be explored at Stephen C. Foster State Park. Unfortunately, 2011 has not been a normal year, with the entire area experiencing an extreme drought. During our April visit, we were warned that the low water levels might cause the park to close. However, on April 28 a new threat did that, a wildfire sparked by lightning. I hope the conditions there improve soon. If not, it would be a terrible loss.

