

The Okefenokee Swamplands

By
Ernie Frank (Photos also by Ernie)

On an Okefenokee canoeing and camping trip on 2-4 April 2004, I joined the Apalachee Canoe & Kayak Club from Tallahassee at Okefenokee NWR. We enjoyed perfect weather, and although there were some mosquitoes, they were easily manageable; just swarming after sunset until the dropping temperatures slowed them. We put in at Kingfisher Landing and followed Trail 7 south to Bluff Lake chickee for our first night. Then we paddled through the narrows, where ski-poling experience from snow days in the Rockies was helpful, to Chase Prairie and Roundtop chickees for our second night's sojourn.



Finally, we paddled to the Suwannee Canal and its termination at the main park .



Dawn at Bluff Lake Chickee

A chickee is a wooden platform with a dock about a foot off the water and room to pitch about six free-standing tents. Also a mini-table and a composting toilet, at a far

corner, add to the local ambience, depending on wind direction.

Wind, while paddling the prairies, slowed progress causing some canoes to hug the shore crossing Bluff Lake. Gratefully, it was at our back while crossing Chase Prairie the last day.

Last December, I paddled the west waters and in February a cross-section east to west from the Suwannee Canal put-in to Stephen Foster Park take out. Every season and every visit offers a glimpse through a different window of the watery world that is Okefenokee. Winter was chilly with starry nights and clear crisp mornings. Though the mornings were still crisp, on this last trip, flowers were blooming.



Neverwet

Neverwet or golden club & pipewort were most abundant. A rare blue flag (the wild iris) and some pitcher plants also were in evidence.

It is nature's version of Venice; flooded prairies and stranded highlands built upon the sandbars of another time and place, when sea levels were higher and the place we call Okefenokee was prime beach-front property. But, time does not stand still, even in the tranquil interior of the refuge, and what begins as a soft breeze that plays upon the face, may soon swell into a relentless headwind that bends the trees and pushes and tugs the lily pads into wild array. It is a reminder that the swamp is a dynamic system,



and in time, it too, will change despite man's attempt to control drought and fire. Those of us who have experienced this magic swamp are privileged, and leave hoping that the return visit will come soon. So, I am heading back this weekend for a few day trips. The lilies and spatterdock, just beginning to show, should now be in full bloom.



Lillypad



Pitcher Plants



Fred the Gator