

Counting Alligators in the Okefenokee

by Megan Clendenan

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Alligators are sluggish in late winter. At least that's the advice offered to my husband and I by the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge park ranger when we asked about canoeing. Cold-blooded creatures, alligators spend winter days soaking up sunshine. With that in mind, we secure our rental, an aged aluminum canoe that looks a bit threadbare. Four metres from our canoe an alligator sleeps under a sign warning: "Be Aware: Alligators Present." We delicately push off the boat rental dock into tannin-tinged black water.

Located in sub-tropical southern Georgia, the Okefenokee spans 1,627 square kilometres of peat-filled marsh and forest in a basin that was once part of the ocean floor. The area offers countless flat waterways to explore by canoe and contains the ecological equivalent of a crowded downtown shopping area the day before Christmas, from armadillos to opossums, to bull frogs and black bears. And, of course, alligators. Since we don't flinch at hiking with bears, why not canoeing with alligators?

American alligators, a species more than 150 million years old and which can weigh more than 350 kilograms, managed to avoid extinction alongside the dinosaurs only to face endangerment due in large part to unrestrained hunting for hides and meat. Thanks to protected status given in 1967 they now thrive across the southeastern U.S., with a wild population of more than one million.

We paddle a few strokes and careen into the thickets of grass that line the narrow waterway. Canoeing in a straight line, even for two Canadians, is not that easy. We continue under blue sky, slowly passing through tiny waterways crowded with vegetation, to emerge in an expansive lake. A nutria — a giant swamp rat — munches shrubs along the shoreline. Turtles bask on floating logs. Skittish, they dive off as we glide past. A flock of white ibis perch in the cypress trees, their percussive honks harshly accenting the melody of the songbirds. I breathe in the not unpleasant scents of musk and earth.

The next alligator we see lies burrowed and silent in the water lilies. Popular culture likes to portray the Okefenokee as a mysterious refuge, and a dark, brooding swamp. From the dramatic fugitive manhunt of the 1941 film *Swamp Water*; to an episode of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* where the heroes battle a quartet of mutated Okefenokee frogs; to Pogo, a swamp-dwelling cartoon possum, the Okefenokee serves well as a semi-mystical sanctuary of imagination, one that keeps secrets.

Often, secrets might simply burn — fire is an important part of the Okefenokee ecosystem. The Okefenokee depends on rain, and droughts often bring wildfires. But the cyclical nature of fire and drought regenerates the swamp and allows its diversity to flourish.

By lunchtime, we have not seen another boat and we stop counting alligators. They splay on logs, nestle in lily pads and camouflage in thick shrubs. We try to keep our distance but as we turn into a wide waterway, an alligator that looks longer than my first car lounges on a felled cypress tree a few paddle strokes ahead. We keep our paddles up and remain still. That's when I remember that the waterway does have a current and it is slowly trending our canoe towards the alligator. I turn back to confer with my husband and see him rummaging for the camera. He motions for me to keep moving forward. I shake my head. With the first un-sluggish move we've seen all day, the alligator slips off his log and disappears under the dark water a canoe length from us. With a glance at our now flimsy-looking canoe we decide perhaps we're done for the day, pivot the boat and begin paddling back to the canoe dock.

As dusk darkens the sky, birdsong dwindles, replaced by a cacophony of bleats and grunts from toads and pig frogs. We pick up the pace, our ears sensitive to every splash of water and crackle of brush.

Smokes curls in the air from nearby campfires as we reach the dock. As we walk back to our campsite, I begin to wonder about alligators' nocturnal habits. In the dark that night, we hear a loud snuffle around our tent. A cautious investigation with a bright headlamp uncovers an armadillo, digging through the cypress leaves. We stomp our feet a few times and the creature bumbles off, encased in its suit of armour. We zip the tent closed.

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