

Tips for a Successful Paddle-Camp Trip to the Okefenokee

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge can be intimidating for most newcomers. I've been paddling, camping and exploring for decades, and it was even this way for me when I first started going to the Okefenokee. Over the years, I learned some tips and tricks along the way, and whenever I take others into the Refuge, I share these.

1. Wash your canoe or kayak before you leave for Okefenokee. This is to ensure you don't bring any evasive flora or critters along with you to Okefenokee's delicate ecosystem. And besides, you feel better when you paddle a clean boat!
2. Have a robust insect repellent plan. Personally, I treat my clothing with Permethrin, bring sprayable DEET, a Thermacell, and a head net. I even treat the head net with Permethrin. Don't take this seriously at your own peril. I do most of my Okefenokee trips in the dead of winter (December through February) and nearly every winter trip, there are mosquitos and other pesky bugs!
3. Bring rope that is not only thick enough to tie your canoe/kayak to the camping platforms, but also to pull your heavy boat with. Some of the trails could have low water (the Green Trail is notoriously low during the winter!); so low that you must get out and drag your boat. It's also a good idea to bring mechanic's style "work" gloves for this. "Muck" boots or tall waterproof hunting boots make this easier as well.
4. Bring a backup paddle. I've snapped two paddles in three decades (never in Okefenokee, thank goodness!) and seen it happen three other times being with others/groups. It is not fun to move your kayak/canoe with half your paddle. Just imagine being 10 miles from the boat ramp, in a loaded boat, in a strange water wilderness, with only half a paddle. I think everyone should carry a backup paddle, but at a minimum, have one for every 3 paddlers in your group. It's not a matter of *if* you'll experience a paddle failure, but *when !!*

5. A wide brim hat and sunscreen are very important. Most of your paddling at Okefenokee has little protection from the sun. Some of the trails are 100% water grasslands/prairies. You won't have any reprieve from the sun on these trails.
6. Bring a footprint or tarp to put under your tent. You'll be erecting your tent on wooden platforms that are uneven, maybe have splinters and are dirty. This will save your tent floor.
7. Non-freestanding tents will not work on the camping platforms. If you dare bring a non-freestanding tent, you'll have to get very creative in tying off ends that are traditionally staked out.
8. After you erect your tent, always have a good bit of weight in it. Expect high wind gusts on the camping platforms. I once saw a tent launched into the water from the high Big Water platform.
9. Let's talk about drinking and cooking water. First off, filtering and/or purifying Okefenokee's water is not recommended by the Refuge. This is due to the heavy sediments and high tannic acid. I've tried to filter the water with very high-end backpacking-style filters (both MSR and Katadyn). These filters failed in less than 2 liters! Bring more drinking and cooking water than you think you'll need. With that said, always bring an emergency water purification backup plan. For me, that's water purification tablets (my preference is MSR Aquatabs and a couple bandanas). You can drink chemically purified tannic color water from Okefenokee; I've done it twice when I ran out of water. It looks gross, tastes just fine, and it will get you out of the Refuge without risk of dehydration or sickness.
10. The trickiest part about camping at Okefenokee can often be getting out of your canoe/kayak and up on the platforms; and the same for getting back in your boat. I've seen more than one person tip their boat and go for a swim. Here's a tip I use on every trip: you know that tie down strap you used to strap your boat to your car rack and drive to

Okefenokee? Bring it with you. Most of the platforms have “dock cleats.” Use that tie down strap to wrap it around something in your boat, then to the dock cleat, and then tighten it down so your boat doesn’t move. This works remarkably well. So well, I’ve been able to stand up in my solo canoe and exit the boat. For canoes, wrap the strap around a thwart or yoke. For kayaks, wrap it around the seat support piece that attaches to your kayak. If the platform doesn’t have dock cleats, then wrap the tie down strap around a post or feed it through a gap in between two horizontal boards.

11. I’ve had cell phone service at every campsite except Mixons Hammock (the Stephen C. Foster/Mixons Hammock side of the Refuge is notorious for having no cell coverage). However, cell service can be fickle in Okefenokee. For example, I went on trips in 2023 and 2024 to most of the Refuge and had reliable coverage. But I went back in 2025 and didn’t have cell service at campsites I’ve had for many years. Bottom line: don’t rely on having cell service. If you must communicate with loved ones, a satellite communicator is a great option (and most of them also have a way of triggering an S.O.S. to Search and Rescue in the event of an emergency. E.g.: I use a Garmin InReach).
12. Be extremely careful walking around the wooden camping platforms in the morning. Overnight dew will make them very slippery. The worst is Canal Run, followed by Coffee Bay. Both platforms sit in narrow, shaded sections of the Suwannee Canal (Orange Trail) and it takes a while for the sun to dry them out. And if you’re camping in winter, plan on frost/ice being on the platforms.
13. Without fail, alligators are the number one concern asked about when discussing Okefenokee with newcomers. Let’s get one thing out of the way: you will see alligators. There are lots of them. However, after thousands of miles paddled in the deep Southeast and the Okefenokee, I can assure you that alligators are not a concern. Here’s the best advice I can give you: just don’t make a big deal about alligators. They don’t want anything to do with you. Use common sense. Treat alligators with the upmost respect. Never feed an alligator, or any wildlife! Never approach them on purpose, and just paddle on by, giving them the widest berth possible. You will be fine.



www.PaddleOkefenokee.com

Have questions about Okefenokee? I'm here to help. I just want to be an ambassador for the Okefenokee that I love. Reach out! I look forward to hearing from you.

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