

# Northern Florida and Okefenokee Swamp Winter Getaway

February 24<sup>th</sup>- March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Cost: \$2,295.00 based on double occupancy**

Join Sarett Naturalists Dianne Braybrook and Mike Mahler for a winter getaway to Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and Northern Florida. Okefenokee is one of the oldest and largest freshwater swamps in the United States and offers many wildlife viewing opportunities. From Longleaf Pine forests, scrub habitat, natural springs, marshes, swamps, and rivers, to the sandy beaches, Northern Florida has many different habitats and natural features to explore. Northern Florida is home to a variety of wildlife including black bear, river otters, manatees, bobcat, foxes, coyotes, a large variety of birds, reptiles, and insects. It is truly a nature lover's paradise. On this trip, we will explore by foot, van, and by boat to experience all that Northern Florida has to offer.

Saturday, February 24<sup>th</sup>:

We will meet at Sarett Nature Center at 5:15 am to load the vans and depart at 5:30 am to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Our flight will depart for sunny Florida at 9:05 am and should land in Jacksonville, Florida around 12:36 pm. We will pick up our rental vans, find a place for lunch, and then drive north into Georgia to Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. We should have time for a short hike to their elevated viewing platform, which will give us great views of the swamp. If time permits, we may also do the wildlife drive. After spending some time exploring the swamp, we will make the short drive to our hotel in the town of Folkston, Georgia.

Hotel: Western Motel

Sunday, February 25<sup>th</sup>:

Today we will make the short drive back to Okefenokee where we will take an early morning boat tour with Okefenokee Adventures. During this 90-minute boat tour, our guides will share their knowledge of the swamp's culture and natural history, identify plants and wildlife, and tell some interesting swamp stories. We will travel down the Suwannee Canal through a tangled forest of bay, cypress, pine and shrubs before emerging out into the open expanse of Chesser Prairie.



After the boat tour, we will eat lunch in the park café. When we are finished with lunch, we will load up the vans and travel to the Tallahassee area of Florida. Our destination is Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park. Wakulla Springs State Park is home to one of the largest and deepest freshwater springs in the world and the park plays host to an abundance of wildlife, which includes alligators, turtles, manatees, deer, and a large variety of birds. The park's nature trails wind past remarkable karst features and among rare and unusual plants in its old-growth forests.

The Lodge at Wakulla Springs is our home for the next two nights, which will allow us to explore the park and some of the other natural areas found near here. The Lodge was built in 1937 by financier Edward Ball and offers a full-service dining room, which overlooks the springs and has the world's largest marble soda fountain counter.

After checking into the lodge, depending on time, we will either hike one of the nature trails in the park or head over to St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge to do a little afternoon bird and wild life watching, check out the visitor center, and hike out to the lighthouse. The refuge borders Apalachee Bay and has extensive trails that explore salt and brackish marshes, hardwood swamps, pine flatwoods, and pine/oak uplands. The diked impoundments attract many species of birds like Bald Eagles, Osprey, Belted Kingfishers, Brown Pelicans, and shorebirds to name a few. We will also have chances to see American Alligators, River Otter, White-tailed Deer, and if we are lucky, maybe a Bobcat.

Monday, February 26th:

Today, you will have the option to start your day off with an early morning bird hike or sleep in a little. Our first official activity of the day will be a guided boat tour on the Wakulla River. The river runs through an old growth cypress swamp with abundant wildlife. The boat ride will



provide us with close up views of wading birds, Yellow-bellied Cooters (turtle), American Alligators, and we will also learn about some of the movies and tv shows that were filmed in the park.

In the afternoon we will head out and explore St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, if we didn't have a chance to do it the day before, or make a couple of stops in the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area. Within the management area, we will have a chance to explore the Hickory Mound Impoundment and/or Hagen's Cover as time permits. Hickory Mound Impoundment is a manmade brackish impoundment on the Gulf of Mexico, which is managed for wildlife and attracts large numbers of wintering waterfowl, wading birds, Bald Eagles, and Ospreys. Hagen's Cove will offer us panoramic views of the pine islands and shallow bays of the Gulf of Mexico. The unique natural beaches of Hagen's Cove are extremely rare along the Big Bend coast. Exposed mudflats in the bays are

excellent places to look for shorebirds and wading birds like plovers, Marbled Godwits, Willits, American Oystercatchers, egrets, and herons. After a full day we will return to the Lodge at Wakulla Springs for our second night's stay.

Tuesday, February 27th:

Today we say goodbye to Wakulla Springs State Park as we travel down the coast headed for Manatee Springs State Park and the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge. Manatee Springs offers excellent wildlife viewing along the boardwalk that winds through the cypress swamp from the spring to the Suwannee River. We will be on the lookout for manatees as they come up the river to the spring in the winter months to enjoy the warmer waters that the spring has to offer.



After spending some time enjoying the manatees, we will depart for the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge and stop and eat lunch en route. We will stop at the refuge headquarters to see their huge bat house, which houses 100,000 Brazilian Free-tailed Bats and to hike on their nature trail, which leads to the historic Suwannee River. The trail ends at an observation deck where we can see a variety of birds and maybe baby alligators. If time permits, we can take in the nine mile nature drive before heading to our hotel in the quaint village of Cedar Key.

Hotel: Cedar Cove Hotel

Wednesday, February 28th:

We will spend the morning exploring the Cedar Key area. We will take a walk on the fishing pier to look for dolphins, other marine life, shorebirds, and wading birds. Cemetery Point Park's 1,200 foot boardwalk will allow us to keep our feet dry as we take a leisurely stroll enjoying the sights and sounds of a thriving tidal marsh. We will also make a visit to the Cedar Key Scrub Preserve to check out the scrub habitat and look for the threatened Florida Scrub Jay and other wildlife.

After a full morning of activities, we will make our way over to the Gainesville area, which will be our home for the next two nights. We will stop to eat lunch on the way to Gainesville. After lunch, Devil's Millhopper Geological State Park is our first stop. The park features a bowl-shaped sink hole that is 120 feet deep with a boardwalk that descends to the bottom. Once inside the sink hole, you are transported into a miniature rain forest with small streams trickling down the steep slopes of the limestone sink hole and lush vegetation covering the ground.

The park is also a significant geological formation, Devil's Millhopper is a National Natural Landmark that has been visited by many travelers since the early 1880s. Researchers have learned a great deal about Florida's natural history by studying fossil shark teeth, marine shells and the fossilized remains of extinct land animals found in the sink. The visitor center offers exhibits explaining the formation of the park along with other interpretive displays.

Our hotel for the next two nights is the Double Tree by Hilton. Dinner tonight will either be at the hotel restaurant or at a nearby restaurant.

#### Thursday March 1: Gainesville Area

We will start out the day by visiting the Sweetwater Wetlands. The park consists of around 125 acres of wetlands and ponds, which were created to improve the water quality of wetlands in Paynes Prairie and the Floridan Aquifer. It is now a thriving habitat filled with a vast number of plants, birds, butterflies, alligators, and Florida Cracker Horses. The 3.5 miles of crushed gravel trails and boardwalks will provide us with an easy morning stroll as we enjoy views of the wildlife and plants. After a full morning here, we will stop for lunch at a nearby restaurant before making our next stop.



Paynes Prairie Preserve and State Park is our second stop of the day. It became Florida's first state preserve in 1971 and is now designated as a National Natural Landmark. Due to a variety of habitats, the park is home to alligators, bison, horses, livestock, and nearly 300 species of birds. You will have an opportunity to check out the visitor center before we climb the 50-foot-high observation tower to get a panoramic view of the preserve. After checking out the visitor center and the tower, we will go for a hike on one of the park's many trails. After our hike, we will head back to the hotel before heading out to dinner.

Hotel: Double Tree by Hilton

#### Friday, March 2nd:

Today, we say goodbye to the Gainesville area and head south and east to Orange City where we will stay the night. Along the way, we will make stops in the Ocala National Forest and Emerald Marsh Conservation Area. The Ocala National Forest features sandy soils of the Ocala central ridge and supports the world's most extensive scrub community. Threatened Florida Scrub Jays are commonly observed. Endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Red-headed, Pileated, Downy, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers are all found in the Longleaf Pine/Turkey Oak sandhills along with Bobwhite Quail, American Kestrels, and Wild Turkeys. It

is also home to several hundred lakes and major springs like Alexander, Juniper Run, Silver, Glen, and Salt Springs. Many hiking trails provide the opportunity to explore the area on foot.

Emeralda Marsh is roughly 3,000 acres of sawgrass and wet prairie. Restoration work is under way to restore it to 6,500 acres of its original 10,000 acres. It is known for large number of waterfowl that winter here, especially Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Wood Duck, Ring-necked Duck, and Fulvous Whistling Ducks. Bald Eagles are commonly sighted along with wading birds and the marsh is home to the highest concentration of alligators in central Florida. If we are lucky, we might spot a River Otter or Bobcat. Lunch will be en route at a restaurant between stops today and our hotel for the night is the Holiday Inn Express & Suites of Orange City.

Saturday, March 3rd:

Today is our last full day in sunny Florida. We will start the day off by visiting Blue Spring State Park. In the winter months, endangered West Indian Manatees leave the chilly water of the St. John's River and take refuge in the park's first magnitude spring. The spring produces 55,000 gallons of water per minute, which flows 2,200 feet down Blue Springs Run to the river. The park has a four-mile hiking trail, which runs through a variety of habitats including sand pine scrub, hardwood forests with moss-draped live oaks, and seasonally flooded swamps and marshes.



We will arrive at the park early to explore the spring, look for manatees, and go for a short hike on their nature trail. At 10 o'clock, we will take a two-hour guided boat trip on the St. John's River. After the boat tour, we will find a spot for lunch and begin our drive north to Jacksonville. Time permitting, we may make a stop or two at natural areas on the drive north.

Hotel: Hampton Inn and Suites Jacksonville Airport

Sunday, March 4th:

Today, we head to the airport for our flight home. Our flight leaves Jacksonville at 8:55 am and arrives at O'Hare Airport at 10:25 am. Sarett Naturalists will meet us at the airport and drive us back to the nature center.

**Trip Cost:** \$2,295.00 per person based on double occupancy for Sarett Nature Center Members. You must be a member of Sarett Nature Center to join this trip. Sarett membership is \$50/family or \$40/individual.

**Deposit:** A non-refundable deposit of \$150 is required to sign up and reserve your spot for this trip.

**A Second Deposit** of \$350 is due by January 12, 2018

**Final Payment Due:** Please have your final payment delivered to us of \$1,795 by February 12, 2018.

**Method of Payment:** Checks are preferred. Please mail your check to Sarett Nature Center, 2300 Benton Center Rd., Benton Harbor, MI 49022.

**Cancellation Policy:**

Any refunds are subject to what is recoverable.

**Travel Insurance is highly recommended.**

**Responsibility:** Sarett Nature Center reserves the right, at their sole discretion, to make any changes in the itinerary and hotels should that become necessary and is not responsible to any person for expenses, loss of time, money or happenings resulting from a change of tour scheduling. Sarett Nature Center reserves the right to accept, decline, or retain any person as a member of the tour, and is not responsible for any losses or damages of personal property, injuries, expenses or damages incurred or claimed by any tour member.

**Included in the cost:** Your tour includes airfare, transportation to and from Chicago/O'Hare, 8 nights lodging, all ground transportation in Florida, park entry fees, fees for guided boat tours, and services of Sarett Naturalist.

**Not included:** Meals, tips for local guides, and items of a personal nature.

**Contact Information:** Please include with your check, your e-mail address, phone numbers, and mailing address.

**Group Size:** We plan on 14 total people participating.

**Sarett Trip Leaders:** Mike Mahler and Dianne Braybrook will be excited to have you along.

**Questions:** Please call Mike at Sarett at (269)-927-4832 or e-mail [mikem@sarett.com](mailto:mikem@sarett.com)