



Sights and Sounds of Winter

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One of the most asked questions about the Okefenokee is “When is the best time to visit?” The best answer is “Anytime you are in the area.” That answer is true because there is always something interesting going on out here, which just begs you to stop, listen, and observe.

However, I must confess that my personal bias leans towards the fall and winter period.

For me it is the “natural sound track” that is so appealing. It reminds me of the exotic sound track heard in so many “Tarzan” or “jungle” movies that I used to watch as a youngster. Soon after moving to the Okefenokee and discovering this appealing natural phenomenon, I began to investigate the origins of the various noises I was hearing. It turns out that a major portion of the sound is produced by the variety of frogs that live in and around the swamp. Pig frogs, leopard frogs, green tree frogs, cricket frogs and chorus frogs are but a few. Add in some “scolding calls” of the great blue heron, the rumbling roar of a nearby alligator, and topped it off with the bantering back and forth of sandhill cranes, and what you wind up with is a symphony of sound worthy of Carnegie Hall or the Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts.

Fall and winter at Okefenokee also offer what I believe are unparalleled opportunities for wildlife viewing. This 700 sq. mile “Wetland of International Importance” is critical winter habitat for a number of migratory bird species. Chief on the list of these winter migrants is the greater sandhill crane. These birds spend their spring and summer months in the mid-western wetlands of Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as the Canadian provinces to the north. Early fall they congregate into flocks, and migrate south through Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky,

Tennessee, and into Georgia. Some continue further south into Florida. An estimated 3,000-5,000 birds in an area as large as the Okefenokee is truly a sight to see and to hear. Over the years I have noticed that the cranes normally arrive from the middle to the end of November and leave again about the middle to the end of February. You will probably hear the birds before you see their distinctive “deep-v” aerial formations. Their constant calling back and forth to one another is sometimes mistaken for that of the Canada goose, but the sound is actually quite different. A crane’s call resembles a shrill rolling *garooo-a-a-a*, while the Canada goose call is more of a *honk*.

Large numbers of songbirds such as robins have also made their way to this area. As a child growing up in Western Pennsylvania, I was always curious about why these birds disappeared in the fall (announcing the approach of cold weather) only to reappear in early spring (indicating the approach of warm weather). Now I know that they escape the long, cold winters of the north by heading south, to places like the Okefenokee. Along the refuge entrance road, you can often see hundreds of robins flying about or hunting along the ground in search of worms and insects.

As we prepare for the busy holiday season, we often find ourselves split between work, family commitments, and the arrival of Christmas. We become so busy that we literally lose track of time! But not “Mother Nature!” She has her own clock, which wildlife has followed since the dawn of time. You and your family can keep in sync with the beats of nature by watching the land and sky, and listening to the chorus of winter wildlife. The sights and sounds of wildlife are out there, you just have to be receptive to enjoy them.