

Swamped

Okefenokee Swamp, Georgia, U.S.

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April 10, 2017 by [Scott Gilbertson](#)

From Edisto we took a few back roads through the low country, headed south and west.



The winds left over from the storm made it a less than fully relaxed drive, which is to say I had both feet on the floor and both hands on the wheel. As always with wind my greatest fear wasn't the wind, but my own accidental over-compensation for the wind.

It was all fine in the end, except for the part of the drive we decided to do on the interstate — passing through Savannah. What a boring thing driving on interstates. And American drivers these days... curious bunch, I'm somewhat surprised they all continue to live doing what they do every day. Maybe I'm just old, but I swear hardly anyone knows how to drive these days. And truckers are the only people who understand how things larger than a car move¹.

There's actually a whole hidden communication system among truckers that I haven't fully deciphered yet, but I recognize it now. A headlight flash here, a brake there. Nods and hat tips. I don't pretend to know what it all means but it's out there, happening all around you, unseen because you're too low on the road. I get to see it, but I'm not sure I get to participate. The bus is big, but not that big. I'm twelve wheels short of that club.

We were headed for the middle of nowhere, but it was further than we wanted to go in a day. We've thus far kept our max driving under 200 miles a day. And frankly anything over two hours feels long. Just because we're living in an RV doesn't mean we want to spend all our time driving it. There's no hurry to get anywhere after all.

In fact our destination in the middle of nowhere was mainly to pass some time. We're not really reservations type of people, but sometimes you have to. And for Edisto we had to book way in advance. We also had to reserve the beach house we often rent in Florida ahead of time. The problem is that it worked out such that there were four days in between those two reservations.

This is a problem because, well, there just isn't much in the South Georgia/North Florida region. Its swamp and farm land. Sometimes both, remarkably enough. In a casual conversation about this a while back we discovered that some friends of our family had a "cabin" down just west of the Okefenokee Swamp and said we were welcome to stay as long as we wanted. Sold.

We spent an interim night in one of those parking lot style RV parks at the end of the Altamaha River, an experience I am not going to comment on, save to say that everyone we talked to was very nice. The kids quickly made friends and had fun anyway.

We left early the next morning and drove north, around the top of the Okefenokee and down the west side. It was one of those drives where there wasn't much traffic to begin with and then there was less and finally we drove at least 30 miles without seeing another car. Then we turned off that road onto a private dirt road where the only other *allowed* traffic was logging trucks. Several miles down that road we turned on an even smaller road, just two tire tracks really, and finally arrived at the cabin.

The middle of nowhere. Or the edge of the Okefenokee. Same thing really.



The cabin sat in the middle of a pine farm, backed up against a pond that was about a mile long and half a mile wide. I killed the engine and opened the door and it was... totally and completely silent. Still and quiet in a way I haven't heard since I went snowshoeing in the Sierra Nevada in the dead of winter — so quiet the silence really is deafening. Your ears sound like they're ringing even when they're not.

Once your ears adjust it's not quite so quiet. There are sounds in the swamp. The occasional calls of birds, a few cicadas chirping and every now and then a pig frog's staccato, almost digital sounding croak. But if you've been sitting atop a 1969 Dodge 318 V8 for three hours the difference is a silence that's nearly overwhelming. And even after four days in the cabin, there were still moments when you heard absolutely nothing.

It was glorious.



Except for the part where it was in a swamp. I find swamps interesting in the way I find stamp collecting interesting, which is to say I recognize that some people really enjoy it and I love to hear them talk about it for a while, but it's not really for me. I love to be in a swamp for a while, but by and large, I am not a swamp person. It is in fact the only ecosystem in which I find myself feeling distinctly ill at ease, out of place. Humans don't seem to fit in swamps and, for me, just being there at all feels like violating some fundamental law of nature.

Fortunately the cabin came with a couple of canoes. I never feel quite so much at home as when I'm in a boat — no matter how small — and so the two things balanced each other out. I spent a couple hours a day on the water, just paddling the pond with the kids. Trying to sneak up and get a closer look at the alligators or trying to edge ever deeper into the thickets of cypress and water grass in search of herons, egrets, anhingas and the two very elusive wood ducks that would come all the way up to the patio/dock area so long as no one was around, but would flee deep into the inner sanctum of the pond the minute a door opened.







Despite by best efforts and stealthiest paddling we never got anywhere near a gator, but I did manage to grab a feather left behind by one of the wood ducks.



And there was no shortage of other animals around, sleek blue-tailed five-lined skinks, green anoles, carolina wrens, tiny pig frogs, great egrets, snowy egrets, great blue herons, and a sharp shinned hawk

that screamed every time we went to the far side of the pond. There were supposed to be lots of snakes around too, we'd been warned to keep a close eye on the kids, but the only snake I saw was a tiny six-inch pigmy rattlesnake. Fortunately our close encounters with wildlife were limited to birds and mammals.





One morning the girls and I were out in the canoe, slowly drifting into the one of several narrow, thicket choked channels when we flushed some kind of large bird we couldn't quite make out.

I set the paddle down and we just drifted in silence for a minute until we slid deeper into the channel and came face to face with a black-crowned night heron. It stayed put, yellow legs wrapped tight around one of the upper branches of a dead cypress tree. It was no more than 10 feet from the canoe and it stood there, stalk still, studying us with its huge red eyes, black head cocked slightly to the side. We stared at each other for a good five minutes, no one moving, no one talking. Then I slowly lowered in a paddle and pushed us back out again.

The birds weren't the only close encounters we had either. White tailed deer came around regularly every day we were there. There was a trashcan full of dried corn on the back porch that served as feed for deer, raccoons, squirrels and anything else that wanted it. But the deer especially came around regularly at meal times looking for corn, which we'd fling out for them. They'd come around every morning while we ate breakfast and again in the evening when we ate dinner. We ate watching them, they ate watching us. Mutual admiration society perhaps.

Later I got to thinking that maybe they weren't watching us though. The cabin was really a hunting lodge, the vast majority of the decor was once living things shot, stuff and mounted on a wall.



I've nothing against hunting for food, but the whole notion of hunting as sport has always struck me as morally dubious. The most common dead thing on the walls of the cabin were deer and later I started thinking, maybe the deer were out there staring in, not at us, but at the heads mounted on the chimney behind us. Whatever the case, it certainly didn't stop the deer from eating the corn. There is no moral code of the wild that includes passing up easy calories.

Explaining guns, hunting, death and lots of related topics to the kids added a wrinkle I wasn't expecting to our time at the cabin, but we try not sugarcoat the world too much. The girls seemed mostly okay with the idea of hunting. They already know they're eating animals when we have meat for dinner, so it wasn't a great leap to explaining how that meat comes to be on your plate. I haven't yet told them how the current practices of industrial farming work, which of course makes hunting seem not just okay, but downright saintly, but we'll get there. Or we'll take up hunting.

The other nice thing about having a cabin to stay in is that we could work on and organize the bus without upending our entire living area. And yes, we've already figured out enough about what works, what doesn't and what we need to change and rearrange to warrant more or less unpacking the entire thing and re-organizing.



I also had time to finish up the plumbing so now the toilet flushes without needing to turn on the shower nozzle. And, much more exciting, we have, wait for it, hot water. Luxury living. The last bit of plumbing to do is tying the water tank we don't yet own and water pump into the city water system, but I won't be tackling that for a while.

I also went ahead and made the wiper blade work with the wiper arm. As much as I was looking forward to doing that in a hurry, at the side of the road, in the rain, I decided, meh, what the heck, I'll do it ahead of time. This trip is turning me into a regular boy scout. Now if only I could find the source of the transmission fluid leak.

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1. When you pass a truck and cut over right in front of them, it is only by the grace of whatever god you believe in that you continue to exist. There's no way the truck could stop in time if it had to; the way some people do it there wouldn't even be time to hit the brakes before the truck drove over you. [↩](#)