

International Dark Sky Association Report

Since being designated as an IDA dark sky park, Stephen C. Foster State Park has been able to share not only our unique natural resource but also the mission of the International Dark Sky Association. The official designation has allowed us to continue to present a new dimension of the Okefenokee to new and previous guests. This has allowed many of them to see a night sky they have never or rarely had the opportunity to see and allowed us to present why dark skies are important for more than just seeing a star full of skies. We hope to continue re-enforcing these ideas while expanding opportunities for our visitors to engage with the night as well as focusing on opportunities for outreach.

Park Visitation Overall (Fiscal Year 2017 = July 2016-June 2017) (Fiscal Year 2018 = July 2017-July 2018)

FY 2017 – 90,534

FY 2018 – 105,195

On Site Programming

We have focused on refining our night sky-based programs in order to have a couple core programs. These programs focus on astronomy, light pollution, and recreation at night.

“Swamper’s Guide to the Galaxy” is our most accessible program for visitors. This program takes place once a week most weeks of the year and is free to the public. It involves a talk about light pollution (effects on wildlife, sky visibility and potential threats to our area) as well as observation through a telescope, binoculars and naked eye.

Attendance

FY 2017 - 647

FY 2018 – 415

Night Paddle Programs allow our visitors to experience the environment at night and gain a little insight into what kind of activity our wildlife is up to after the sunlight disappears. Watching bats dart through the air in the last light of dusk, listening to owls call to each other while perched on a tree keeping a sharp eye out for prey or looking at the Milky Way stretched out overhead allows visitors the chance to have an intimate experience with the dark in the Okefenokee and it allows our guides to better interpret why dark skies are important. These programs can be public or private and can vary in name based on whether it’s based around sunset, the moon is up, a meteor shower is going on or if it’s simply a starry moonless night.

Attendance

FY 2017 – 339

FY 2018 – 326

Night Boat Tours provide an opportunity for those not interested or unable to paddle to have a similar experience to those who join paddle programs in a more accessible setting.

Attendance

FY 2017 – 150

FY 2018 – 305

Goals include expanding night-based programming to offer a wider array of experiences for guests to continue to experience and learn about dark skies. These include offering more night hikes, night photography programs and more specifically targeted paddle/motorboat programs (clarifying and focusing on full moon nights vs new moon nights rather than general program titles).

Media & Outreach

Since becoming a dark sky park we have given media interviews for radio and print that touch on the experience guests can have at our park related to the night sky. Find links below to several examples.

<https://atlantaplanit.wabe.org/2017/06/20/this-georgia-state-park-has-some-of-the-country-s-best-stargazing/>

<http://www.jacksonville.com/news/columnists/mark-woods/2017-12-23/mark-woods-bright-stars-are-right-our-back-yard>

<https://www.ajc.com/lifestyles/plan-your-trip-guide-the-okefenokee-swamp/Nz1GmOxouazur5yyScSi9H/>

Goals include reaching out to local government officials as well as community businesses to encourage better lighting practices that would help preserve the park's dark sky status as well as bring new ideas to the table for these communities they may not have considered. Communities in Georgia would include Waycross, Homerville, Folkston and Valdosta. Communities in Florida would include Jacksonville, Macclenny, Callahan and Lake City.

Guest Experience

We pay attention to guest comments and look for ways to improve their experience. We have removed two streetlights that were formerly located on our cottage road and addressed an issue with a Fish and Wildlife repeater tower that was blinking in bright daylight mode even at night due to a faulty light sensor meant to determine when it is day or night. We do still receive some negative feedback about

this tower even with the dimmer strobe at night. These things have helped to increase dark areas of the park grounds and make night sky viewing and programs even better. For some previous guests the decreased lighting on site has made them a little nervous and it has been up to us to interpret the benefits to the wildlife and humans of decreasing our light pollution. As one of just a few dark sky parks in the southeast we have seen some astronomy hobby groups and individuals visit the park to observe and photograph objects in space they can't see clearly from their own communities We see many positive comments both internally and externally. Below find some positive examples.



Brandt Webster

Local Guide · 312 reviews · 249 photos

★★★★★ 9 months ago · 📍

This is absolutely one of my favorite state parks I've been to. You are far enough out into the swamp that there are no street lights around, so it is the best place for star watching I've found in the state of Georgia. I've never gone without seeing several alligators and crains, and the Spanish moss all over the Cyprus trees is gorgeous. Definitely go if get a chance.



Jeff Z

4 reviews

★★★★★ a year ago

The night sky full of stars was amazing. Saw the milky way. The guided boating tour on the water was great. Rangers were great and helpful. Will come back for camping and longer stay



Debbie E

Tampa, Florida



Reviewed August 15, 2018

Great for stargazing

We stayed in a cottage on August 12-14th to watch the Perseid's meteor shower this year. We were very impressed with our cottage and the park. This park is a dark sky certified park, so the stars were very vivid in the night sky, and the park hosted a watch party, so there was a large telescope where we were able to see Saturn with it's rings, Jupiter and 4 of its moons, and Mars. The staff member was very knowledgeable about the stars, and it was a fun and educational experience. The cottage was very roomy, clean and comfortable, with a screened in porch, 2 bedrooms, full kitchen and living room with TV. Our cottage (#5) also allowed us to bring our dog. As a bonus we had a lovely deer family that showed up at our cabin several times. I highly recommend this park. We also took a boat tour of the beautiful Okefenokee swamp, and the tour guide was very knowledgeable and friendly. There was a small store, a playground, outdoor amphitheater, hiking trails, and boat and bike rentals available. We felt very safe while we were out at all hours of the night to view the meteor shower, and the staff were very accommodating to our requests (including bringing coal and lighter fluid to our cabin, so we could continue on to our hike). My only negative comments would be that we came during a bad time of year. It was hot and there were a lot of insects (mosquitos, spiders and gnats), and not as much wildlife as we would like because of the high temperatures. We would like to come back in a cooler month so we can see the river otters. There is no cellular signal or wi-fi, unless you go to the Ecolodge, about 15 minutes away.

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Summary

Moving into the next year we would like to expand existing night time programs to cover a wider array of topics related to the night sky. In addition to our paddle/boat tours and Swamper's Guide to the Galaxy astronomy program we would like to try and incorporate night photography and night hikes more significantly into our interpretive rotation in order to help people connect with the importance of dark places in even more ways.

We would also like to improve our outreach to local communities in order to educate and build interest in more efficient and less harmful types of lights that can create better developments for wildlife and people. We have focused a lot on our interpretive programming on site but would like to take that beyond the park more often.

Additionally, we will continue to find ways to improve the visitor experience on the park through education and identifying concerns. We will work on finding what options could be further pursued regarding the repeater tower strobe. We will also continue educating visitors on why keeping our park dark is great for the environment.

We have been building on the success of the designation and have had many curious and excited visitors pass through our gates seeking an experience that can be difficult to find. Listening to them and sharing with them will help us continue to be good stewards of this special place and hopefully send people away with a new appreciation and new ideas regarding how light can impact us, wildlife and our view of the night sky. By being available for questions, offering related programs and interpretation as well as providing a space for people to experience this park on their own we hope to continue to be an excellent destination for dark skies.